



HISTORICAL SOCIETY
HISTORY TRAILS
• OF BALTIMORE COUNTY •

9811 Van Buren Lane • Cockeysville, MD 21030

ISSN 0889-6186

Layout and Editing:
ADAM J. YOUSSE and ANN BLOUSE

VOL. 40

SPRING 2009

Number 4

Rodgers Forge A Metal Works Survived By Its Tue Iron

John McGrain

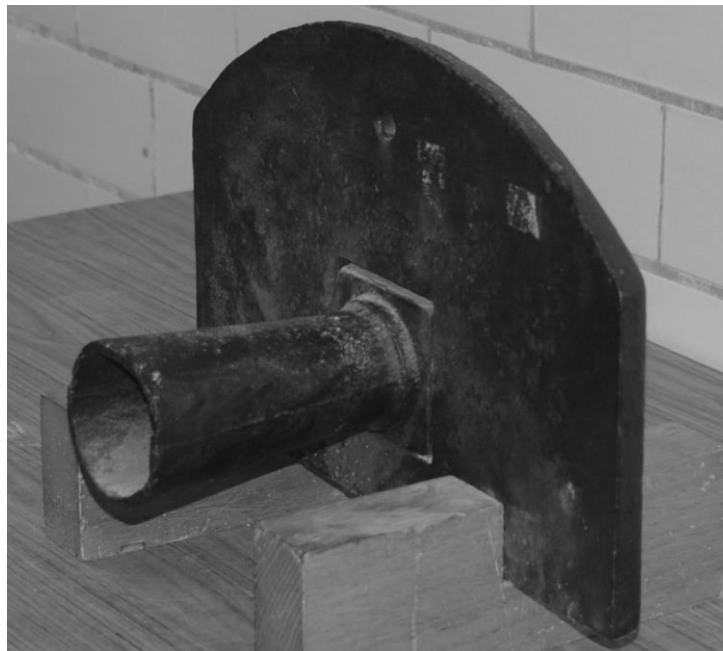


Figure 1. Tue iron.
Photograph courtesy of
Evert Cornell.

The Baltimore Sun of February 22, 2009, included an article about the “tue iron,” a remnant of the Rodgers Forge (**Figure 1**). The iron had long graced the library of Rodgers Forge Elementary School on Dumbarton Road and then was banished for a while to storage. A tue iron, as described by Edwin Tunis in *Colonial Craftsmen and the Beginnings of American Industry*, was a wrought iron nozzle that concentrated and accelerated a blast of air from a hand-operated bellows before entering the blacksmith’s hearth. The strong draft would raise the temperature of the fire to the point where iron would become easily malleable. Tunis noted that an entire ox hide was needed to fashion a very large bellows. A tue iron is similar to the nozzle in an iron furnace, a tuyère, which also concentrated a blast of forced air. Though a word processor’s automatic spelling checker will indicate there are no such words as tue iron or tuyère, printed and on-line dictionaries do contain the word. Moreover, tue irons and portable forges are still advertised on-line by Vaughn’s Hope Works, a British company located near Stourbridge.

Rodgers Forge - A Small Family Business

We have all grown up hearing about Valley Forge where Washington's army spent the winter of 1777-1778. That forge, also called Mount Joy Forge, was a big operation with many employees supervised by an Ironmaster. Valley Forge took bar iron made at an iron smelting furnace and reheated it and rolled it into flat plates to cut up into nails and horseshoes. It had elaborate machinery and many skilled artisans, some of them slaves. The Ironmaster's house was where George Washington stayed in that time of the struggle. Ironmasters were respected experts, and in colonial America they lived very well, usually in a sturdy stone house.

Contrasting Valley Forge, Rodgers Forge was considerably younger and was, at most, a two-man local blacksmith shop where horseshoes were formed and horses were shod. It was located at the southeast corner of the York Turnpike and Stevenson Lane, south of Towson, where an automobile repair shop stands today. The property was also home to a tire shop in the 1930s, an Esso gasoline station in the mid-1950s, and later an Exxon.

The long straight York Road looks like a development of the automobile age, but its unbending vistas were actually laid out by the privately chartered Baltimore and Yorktown Turnpike Company in an era when the State and County had no resources to build good roads. The old York Road was rather meandering, providing a link to York, Pennsylvania, as early as 1745. One surviving bed of the early route is the present Cedar Avenue which passes Towson High School. The road continued toward the crossroads of Towson's Town and possibly followed the present alley behind Wilden Drive in East Towson. The straight stretches of the turnpike probably date to 1808. Houses that are aligned exactly with the turnpike are obviously post-turnpike in origin, like the late Harry Patton's house at 7727 York Road south of Terrace Dale.



Figure 2. Rodgers Forge (before 1940)

Photograph courtesy of Baltimore County Legacy Web (ref. #3823C20).

The story of this small family business presents a morass of conflicting dates and confusing genealogical facts. Oral tradition has given the date of the forge as about 1800, which apparently is much too early. Rodgers Forge stood on a four-acre fragment of a large parcel of land originally called Drumquhazel or sometimes Drumcastle that had belonged to William Govane. Landowner Govane gave his name to the neighborhood of Govanstown or, in today's usage, Govans. On October 10, 1808, William Govane's executor, Philip Rodgers, sold the four acres to George Rodgers.¹ The deed reveals that William Govane, Jr., had agreed during his lifetime to convey the parcel but died before executing a deed. The 1823 Tax List of Old Election District 2 charged George Rogers [sic] with a four-acre lot on York Road and \$20 worth of improvements. In the 1833 list, the improvements were worth only \$60, the furniture \$15, and the only head of cattle was assessed at \$10.

The 1850 county map by Sidney and Browne, the 1857 county map by Robert Taylor, and the circa 1858 map by A. E. Rogerson show no smithy (forge), although a structure symbol and a symbol possibly signifying a garden or an orchard appeared in Thomas F. Chiffelle's 1853 map showing possible water supply sources.

A 1930 *Jeffersonian* story by feature writer G. Washington Williams was based on actual interviews with the family. This account stated that the first two generations merely resided and

farmed on the small parcel, and it was James G. Rodgers who went into smith work at age 19 in 1847.² However, contrary to *The Jeffersonian's* account, Rodgers would have been only twelve years old that year if the 1835 birth date on his tombstone is correct.

The third generation of the family became involved in a lawsuit in 1865, and trustee Lewis H. Wheeler, advertised in Towsontown's weekly newspaper, the *Baltimore County Union*, that the four acres were scheduled for a public sale on February 7, 1865. James Rogers, as it was spelled, was complainant while George Rogers and others were defendants. Wheeler advertised:

*The said property binds on the York Turnpike and is situated between the fifth and sixth milestones on the corner of Stevenson's Lane. The improvements consist of a dwelling, barn, and blacksmith shop. There are many valuable fruit trees on the place in good bearing order.*³

Lewis H. Wheeler conveyed the property to James Rodgers on April 19, 1865.⁴ *The Jeffersonian's* story of 1930 reported that James Rodgers enlarged the shop in 1865. The 1870 census listed James P. Rodgers as a blacksmith, age 34, born in Ireland, and his wife was a native of Maryland. The couple had five children ranging from 5 months to 8 years. The 1876 Tax Ledger showed James Rodgers as owner of a tract of land on the east side of York Road at the 6 mile stone, four acres worth \$250. The improvements consisted of a frame dwelling (\$1500), a stone dairy (\$50), and a stable and shop (\$250). The furniture was assessed at \$50, two cows worth \$25 each and three hogs worth \$10 each.

G. M. Hopkins' 1877 Atlas of Baltimore County, Maryland shows a small black symbol for a structure and the name Rogers [so spelled]. Stevenson Lane was marked "Private Road." The 1878 State directory listed James Rodgers under Govanstown.

The *Maryland Journal* of Towsontown reported on November 5, 1881, that Mr. James Rogers [so spelled], blacksmith, 1 mile south of Towsontown had built a comfortable two-story frame dwelling

house that summer, having torn down one built on the area in front by his grandfather in 1800.

The Jeffersonian's story of 1930 reported that James Rodgers totally rebuilt the shop in 1895.

The same *Jeffersonian* story noted that James G. Rodgers specialized in "light horse-shoeing" for racehorses, and thoroughbreds. The ex-Confederate cavalryman Harry Gilmor was a steady customer. Gilmor's invaders had galloped past the smithy in July 1864 while chasing a Federal cavalry unit back to Govanstown. The *Baltimore County Union* of September 22, 1871, had noted that Colonel Gilmor was still using a sorrel horse he had acquired in 1861. Another story held that Rodgers shod the nationally famous trotter *Flora Temple*, who was discovered pulling an ordinary wagon on York Road before being snapped up by a wealthy horse breeder and put on the track. *Flora Temple*, the "bob-tailed mare," was actually born in New York State in 1845 but indeed competed at Herring Run Racecourse when owned by Billy McDonald.⁵ The so-casually mentioned owner was General William McDonald who owned the estate of Guilford, where *Flora Temple* resided in a stable, only three miles from the forge. Thus, the story is not necessarily absurd.

The Sun of September 9, 1896, published an advertisement, "For Sale—One Fresh Jersey Cow. Apply at Rodgers' Shop, 6 miles on York road."

The Sun of February 2, 1898, noted that "Rodger's" [sic] Shop was a "fixture", presumably a gathering point, for the Overland Hunt Club. Later that same year, on November 14, 1898, *The Sun* also stated, "Mr. James Rodgers of Rodger's Shop on the York Road, about a mile south of Towson, raised a second crop of raspberries."

Raymond A. Seitz of West Towson owned a bill presented by James Rodgers' Sons to the Independent Ice Company on September 30, 1909, a total of \$6 for shoeing two horses (**Figure 3**). The shop lacked even a printed business form. The neatly written document was reproduced in Behm and Hahn's *Towson: A Pictorial History of a Maryland Town*, and is also available online through Baltimore County Legacy Web.⁶

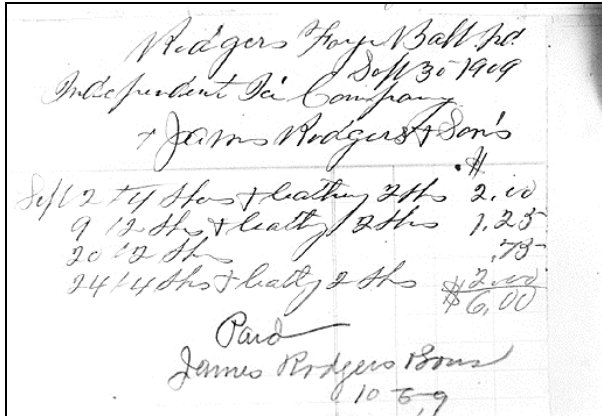


Figure 3. 1909 Billhead for Rodgers Forge.

Image courtesy of Baltimore County Legacy Web (ref. #3861B29).

James G. Rodgers lived until 1913, and his obituary contained some valuable facts:

James G. Rodgers, one of the best-known men along the York road and for many years conducting a blacksmith forge at the York road and Stevenson lane, died Wednesday morning at his home of Bright's disease.

Born in Ireland, Mr. Rodgers was brought to Maryland when a child and was a member of a third generation of his family to live at Rodger's Forge, the name given to his home and shop. His grandfather moved there in 1800.

"Mr. Rodgers conducted the forge until 20 years ago, when he retired and the business was continued by his sons, George and William R. Rodgers. Fourteen years ago a postoffice was established at the Forge for the convenience of persons living between Towson and Govans, and is still known as Rodger's [sic] Forge Postoffice.

Mr. Rodgers was a member of Mount Moriah Lodge of Masons, of Towson, and was a life member and elder of the Govans Presbyterian Church. He was 78 years old and is survived by his widow, who was Miss Elizabeth J. Robinson, and five children, Miss Mary E. Rodgers, George, William R., James G., Jr., and Robert S. Rodgers. He also leaves two grandchildren.⁷

A tombstone at Govans Presbyterian Church gives Rodgers's date of birth as January 18, 1835 (**Figures 4 & 5**). If James Rodgers was 78 years old in 1913, the question arises as how he could have been born in Ireland if his grandfather and father were in Maryland by at least 1808. Yet all three Towson papers as well as the 1870 census said he was from Ireland.

Bromley's 1915 County atlas, Plate 17, showed five small structures owned by James Rodgers & Son, including "the Rodgers Forge P. O." The property stretched 950 feet along Stevenson Lane.

In May 1916, Mary Elizabeth Rodgers and other heirs conveyed the property to James G. Rodgers [Jr].⁸ The same day, James G. Rodgers and his wife conveyed it back to Mary Elizabeth Rodgers, William Rodgers, and George Rodgers.⁹

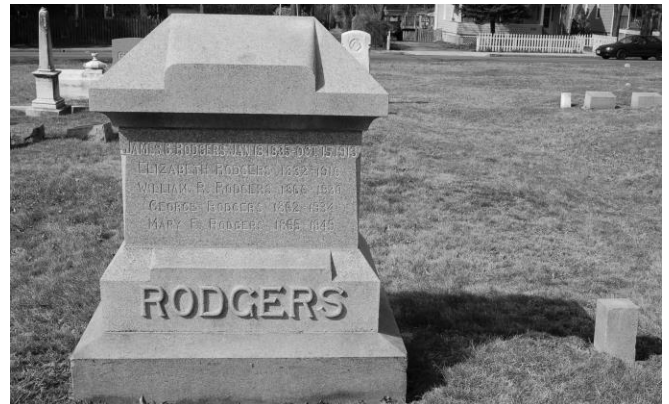


Figure 4. James Rodgers' Tombstone.

Photograph courtesy of John McGrain.

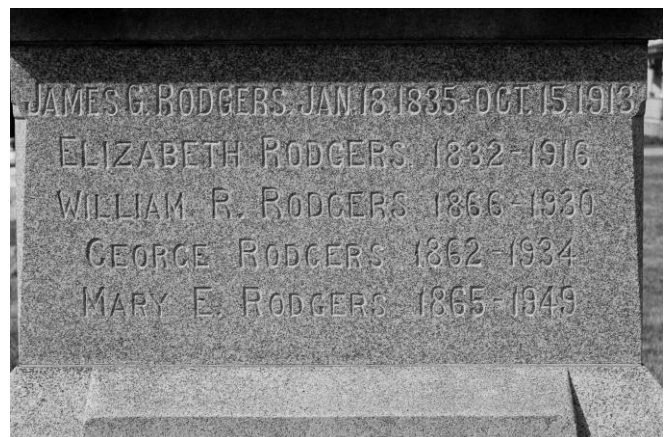


Figure 5. James Rodgers' Tombstone.

Photograph courtesy of John McGrain.

The forge was still going great guns when the *Evening Sun* featured it with an article and photograph on January 5, 1929. The nearby golf course was, at that time, named the Rodgers Forge Club (**Figure 6**). That article, titled “Old Rodgers Forge Smithy Still Busy,” described the partners as the fourth generation of horse-shoers on the same site. They had once been kept busy by Wilton Greenway who would try several different types of shoes on the same horse the same day. One of the photos showed George Rodgers with his two cats “Yum Yum” and “Blackie.”



Figure 6. The 13th green at the Country Club of Maryland, formerly known as the Rodgers Forge Golf Course. c. 1930s. Photograph courtesy of Baltimore County Legacy Web (ref. #6948068).

The Post Office at Rodgers Forge

The *Maryland Journal* reported on December 18, 1897, “A post office has been established at Rogers’ shop on the York road, which is served by the postal car and is known as Station 220. James Rodgers has charge of the station.” The post office was little more than a closet. The mail was delivered to the forge twice a day by the trolley car (**Figure 7**).

The forge was apparently not an independent post office, probably had no postmark, and is not found in the National Archives among the Appointments of Postmasters record group.

The Sun reported on July 1, 1926, that after more than 30 years, the residents of the Stevenson Lane area could no longer see the “flaming forge” on

their way to the post office because that agency had been removed to a drugstore in Stoneleigh. The post office returned to the forge only two months later per the *Jeffersonian* account.

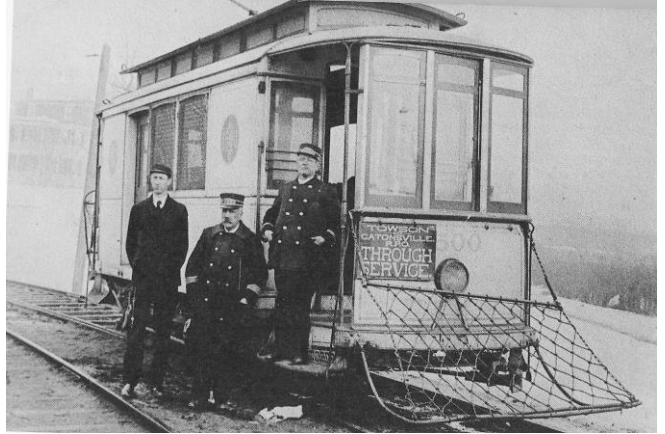


Figure 7. York Road trolley line

Photo reproduced in *Towson: A Pictorial History of a Maryland Town* (p. 174), courtesy of Robert Cardwell.

Personal Accounts

During the writing of *From Pig Iron to Cotton Duck* in 1985, the author spoke to Joseph Rieman McIntosh, former owner of the Dumbarton farm on the opposite side of the York Road from Rodgers Forge.¹⁰ Mr. McIntosh, in the early 20th century, had taken horses to be shod at Rodgers Forge by the two Rodgers brothers, Will and George. It was a fascinating place.

Mr. McIntosh lived at Dumbarton before it was broken up into the Rodgers Forge development and he took the concrete gate posts from Dumbarton to his new estate in Harford County. James Keely, the developer, agreed to save four posts for the McIntoshes, but only two survived the process. The development was named Rodgers Forge rather than Dumbarton, although none of the smithy property was part of the project. Tax Ledgers show James Keely, Inc., in possession of the old estate as early as 1929. The first houses were advertised for sale in 1934. The tax ledgers showed 323 to 329 Hopkins Road as existing in 1934. Dr. Thomas F. White once remarked during World War II that all those rows of houses would look like barracks to enemy bomber pilots.

Alonzo G. Decker, Jr., was “Man of the Year” at a dinner on November 16, 1966, and he noted that as a boy he had lived on Stevenson Lane, which in 1917 was a “rough, rock-strewn lane leading to the Stevenson farm.” His home at was only a fifth mile from York Road, where stood “one of the most fascinating activities ever visited by a nine-year-old.”

An honest-to-goodness blacksmith shop, operated by two mammoth smithies, the Rodgers Brothers, George and Bill. Thus it was named Rodgers Forge. This was a very necessary activity in those days as there were quite a number of horses in the area, riding horses, racing horses from the stud farm in Wiltondale, and horses for fox hunting from the Elkridge Kennels.

There was a very unusual feature about this particular forge in that it housed a post office. It was all of four feet square, filled with pigeon holes for the different residents. It was a bit incongruous to see this small post office nestled amid piles of discarded horseshoes, manned by a small giant with a thick leather apron, his big hands capable of containing the most awkward of horses at one minute, and handing out mail or stamps the next.¹¹

Mr. Decker expanded his remarks in an “I Remember” article in the *Sun Magazine*, dated September 27, 1970:

The Rodgers men put it up in 1845. Its beams and uprights were peeled but unfinished timbers. Its big-inch, rough sawn oak siding was nailed on, board and batten in the style called ‘yankee fashion.’ It had a cedar-shake roof.

As far as I knew, the old building never knew paint, although, I believe it did get an occasional coat of white wash. . . . When it was torn down in 1947 to make way for new business—there’s a filling station there now—its planking was salvaged as tough and still usable lumber, because it looked good for another 100 years.¹²

Mr. Decker stated that the second smith shop was put up by George Rodgers and his son James in

1845, making only three generations of the family on that corner. The brothers were the third generation by his count.

The two brothers and a sister lived in a big frame house close by the forge. I don’t believe any of them were married, although I seem to recall there was a married brother living in Baltimore. There was a barn. Like most families in the area, the Rodgers kept chickens and a cow or two, cultivated a kitchen garden and had scattered pear and apple trees. Every boy in the neighborhood knew the Rodgers grapes were the best around.¹³

Once a day, the young Alonzo G. Decker, Jr., walked in his bare feet the short distance to pick up the family’s mail at the post office.

After all these years, the smells of the place come back to me. There was coal smoke from the forge, the sharp smell of scorched hoof, the smells of hot metal and axle grease, new wood, leather aprons and sweat, both horses’ and men’s.

George Rodgers, I believe, was the older brother. Bill, who was 6-foot-3 and weighed over 200 pounds, was bigger. They were both pleasant men, but different. George was quiet. Bill was out-going and he was the one who handled most of the business and served as postmaster.

The forges were brick, squat and square, and each man had his own. George used an old fashioned hand pumped bellows which he also could operate through a spring and treadle arrangement, with his foot. Bill used the ‘modern’ blower which he cranked by hand.¹⁴

Apparently, the primitive tue iron was part of George Rodgers’s machinery.

The two smithies would fix a piece of farm machinery now and then, make or repair a wheel for a farm wagon, but their principal business was shoeing horses, and they were good at it. There were many big estates up and down York Road—the McIntosh, Rieman, and Wiltondale farms and others—and all of them kept fine riding and

carriage horses. The brothers were so busy keeping these animals shod that they had little time for the heavy draft horses, and farmers nearby had to take their working teams to other shops.¹⁵

The brothers managed to shoe Mr. Decker's Chincoteague pony "Jeanette" with a rubber cushion between the hoof and the shoe.

The End of the Horse Era

The forge endured for a long time during the waning of the horse era. William R. Rodgers died at age 64, and the *Union News* of January 15, stated that it was uncertain that his brother would continue the business, started by his grandfather (not his father as other accounts had it). The death notice and an extensive obituary in *The Sun*, January 1, 1931, stated that he had died on the last day of 1930. *The Jeffersonian* of May 12, 1933, reported that the shop was demolished leaving "only a black square of vacant space." It had been closed since the death of William R. Rodgers. Oddly enough the shop had not been demolished, although there are no 1933 issues of the *Union News* to double-check.

A tire business operated on the property for some years. On February 9, 1946, the tire building took fire, and a nine-year-old boy, Charles Heisterman was trapped on the second floor and died.¹⁶ That account seemed to conflate the tire shop with the old forge building. The smithy never had a complete second floor although photographs show a sort of loft with a gable peak window. The *Union News* also reported that the two-story "plant" was the actual smith's shop.¹⁷ *The Sun* of February 10, 1946, even presented a pre- and post-fire photograph, demonstrating that it was indeed the same old building the *Evening Sun* photographer had recorded 17 years earlier. *The Jeffersonian* of May 30, 1947, reported that two caddies from the nearby golf course had admitted to setting the ruins of the burned-out building on fire a few weeks before. The paper actually named the two juveniles who had been remanded to their parents in the city.

Ms. Mary Elizabeth Rodgers acquired a zoning change in 1947 to have a gasoline station on the corner over the protests of hundreds of local residents. Judge John B. Gontrum ruled in her favor per data posted on the web by the Rodgers Forge Community Association. Ms. Rodgers died on July 29, 1949.

The various Rodgers heirs sold the corner lot in 1955 to Associated Carmax Corporation. Cranston Realty bought the property the next year, subject to a lease to Standard Oil of New Jersey previously executed by Mary E. Rodgers. In those days the brand name of Standard of New Jersey was "Esso," which of course spelled "S. O." The corner is still involved with transportation related activities, changing from smithing in 1847, to tire repairs in the 1930s and early 1940s, to gas pumping in the later 1940s, and to foreign car repairs in the present under the foreign sounding name Autobahn.

By the end of the 1920s, the automobile was here to stay and business was dropping off. The smiths could take in draft horses by then. Bill Rodgers died in 1931, per Mr. Decker, and his brother soon retired and died in 1934 as inscribed on his grave marker.¹⁸ After that, the old building next served as a tire shop and candy store. Mr. Decker did not have the story of moving the post office to Purdum's drug store in 1926 nor did he mention the fire of early 1946. He did give 1947 as the date of final demolition.

How the Tue Iron Came to Rodgers Forge Elementary School

Gwinn Owens, writing in the *Sun Magazine*, April 28, 1957, stated that the old iron object was to be dedicated that week in the library of Rodgers Forge Elementary School. It had been rescued ten years before by art professor Bernice Brouwer of Towson State Teachers College. The college never found a place to display it, so she took it home when she retired, keeping it there until principal C. Edward Hamilton accepted it for the grammar school. The Owens account listed two generations of George Rodgerses, then James, and James's sons Will and George, four generations in

all. Owens claimed that the first George started the business, which also included “cartwrighting.” At the time of the tue iron donation, the gas station was already in place, possibly ten years old.

Arin Gencer writing in *The Sun*, February 22, 2009, reported that the iron artifact once used as a doorstep at the elementary school was being offered to the Maryland Historical Society. School volunteer and parent Deirdre Barone was concerned about the item. “This is an original, unique piece from 1800, and if we don’t do something now, it’s going to get lost.” Ms. Barone recognized the object as not an anvil but a tuyère. “It’s a part of the history of Maryland, and it represents Baltimore County,” said school principal Susan L. Deise. “Anything like that really needs to be shared with the public,” she said.

Alexandra Deutch, deputy director for special projects at the Maryland Historical Society, stated, “The historical merit of it is unquestionable. It is unusual and important to the story.” *The Sun* noted that an unnamed art professor at what is now Towson University had noticed the iron object when it was about to be pushed into a hole by a bulldozer and kept it for a while before donating it to the Rodgers Forge Elementary School. The present principal discovered that no one knew what the artifact was but believed that some history was attached to it. “She pushed it into a closet for better protection.” There had even been suggestions to scrap the piece. “While the intention to donate it to the school was genuine . . . I think for final safekeeping, it should be in a museum and not put in a closet,” said Ms. Barone.

At the time this *History Trails* was published, the Maryland Historical Society had not made a decision whether to accept the iron. If they decide not to accept it, the iron may be offered to the Historical Society of Baltimore County.

The Rodgers Forge Club was formed in 1923 when the charter members bought a 164-acre tract between Stevenson Lane and Hillen Road. It went into receivership in January 1934. The Roland Park Homeland Company bought it for \$15,000. Its name was changed to the Terra Mariae Country Club on February 22, 1940, because the nearby forge was no longer in operation. The Sun of May 2, 1945, reported that the 160-acre property was to be called the Country Club of Maryland (Sun, May 21, 1934; February 23, 1940; May 2, 1945; Jeffersonian, March 1, 1940). Today, the forge’s name survives in three institutions, Rodgers Forge Elementary School (1951), Rodgers Forge United Methodist Church, and of course the Rodgers Forge Community Association.

NOTES

¹ Baltimore County Deeds WG 100:147.

² *The Jeffersonian*, July 26, 1930.

³ *Baltimore County Union*, January 7, 1865.

⁴ Baltimore County Deeds, JHL 45:186.

⁵ “A Famous Race Course,” *The Sun*, February 11, 1893.

⁶ Carl Behm, III & H. George Hahn, *Towson: A Pictorial History of a Maryland Town* (Norfolk, Va.: Donning Col, 1977), p. 43; Baltimore County Legacy Web, image no. 3861B29.

⁷ *Baltimore County Democrat*, October 18, 1913, p. 8.

⁸ Baltimore County Deeds, WPC 461:426.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John McGrain, *From Pig Iron to Cotton Duck: A History of Manufacturing Villages in Baltimore County* (Towson, Md.: Baltimore County Public Library, 1985).

¹¹ Hilda N. Wilson, *Towson Bicentennial 1768-1968* (Towson, Md.: Towson Business Association, 1968), p. 33.

¹² *Sun Magazine*, September 27, 1970.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *The Jeffersonian*, February 15, 1946.

¹⁷ *Union News*, February 15, 1946.

¹⁸ *The Jeffersonian*, July 6, 1934.