

Taken with a grain of salt

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—What do George Washington, Daniel Boone, Samuel I. Cabell and Booker T. Washington have in common?

The first answer: the Kanawha River Valley of West Virginia near the state capital, Charleston.

You may have heard this area referred to as, Chemical Valley, or more adversarially as Cancer Valley.

Since the early 1920s, a stretch of about 30 miles from Belle to Nitro has been a major producer of many types of chemicals and products—chlorine, explosives, rayon, ethylene glycol, vinyl chloride, ammonia, polymers, synthetic rubber, Agent Orange and methyl isocyanate, the chemical involved in the 4,000-fatality Bhopal disaster.

Until the 1970s, the Valley's air, land and water were polluted in the absence of any meaningful regulation. Enforcement since then has been mixed. State politicians are reluctant to burden large, high-wage employers when they are suffering a competitive decline. Also when they did well.

Chemical Valley has an abnormally high number of cases of cancers and other pollution-related diseases. Defenders of the industry blame these anomalies on bad lifestyle choices, particularly obesity and cigarette smoking.

The second answer: salt.

Salt is a mineral, mainly sodium chloride (NaCl). The Kanawha Valley began processing it from brine in 1797 when Charleston boasted 137 residents and seven dwellings. For a while in the 19th Century, the Valley was America's largest salt-producing area.

Kanawha salt was prized initially for its preservative value, red color and strong taste. The brine contained iron carbonate, which oxidized when boiled into unpurified salt crystals. Valley salt found a

home-use market on the frontier and, later, in the pork-packing plants of Cincinnati.

The third answer: slavery.

George Washington, Boone and Cabell owned slaves; Booker T. Washington was born a slave.

I worked in the Kanawha (pronounced Ka-naw) Valley and lived near it for five years in the mid-70s. For several years, I was an academic administrator at West Virginia State College in Institute, about nine miles west of Charleston and adjacent to the huge Union Carbide plant that was the twin of the company's facility in Bhopal, India.

On my second day of employment, a smelly cloud of something drifted over the campus. I ran into the office of the Dean, my boss: "What's that awful smell? Is it dangerous?" Everyone looked at me like I had lost my one still-rolling marble: "It's only Carbide."

You get comfortable being treated like a mushroom if you stay in the cave long enough.

I've set some of the fictional festivities of my novel, The Point of the Pick, in the Kanawha Valley. So I decided to dig a bit into its history.

George Washington acquired four tracts -- amounting to more than 23,000 acres -- in the Kanawha Valley for his service during the French and Indian War and the Revolution. His Kanawha holdings represented about one-third of his total.

The largest Kanawha parcel was 10,990 acres on the north bank of the River in rich, fertile bottom land, west of Charleston. On this land, you find today the now Bayer-owned chemical plant leased back to Union Carbide (now Dow Chemical), the unincorporated village of Institute and the City of Dunbar.

The federal government built the original plant in 1943 to produce synthetic rubber. It was sold to Union Carbide after the War.

Institute became the home of what was to become West Virginia State College in 1891. Now a University, it began as a high school for black students. I was told that Union Carbide successfully opposed the

incorporation of Institute, because it did not want the predominately black village to impose a property tax. This, of course, may or may not be true.

George Washington died in 1799 without reaping the speculative profits he anticipated from the sale of these lands. He failed to interest rent-paying tenants to homestead in his wilderness. His efforts to sell these properties also failed, because his buyers never paid him.

Washington acquired a 250-acre tract east of Charleston, called the Burning Spring. This was less a spring and more a pool that collected rain and surface water through which natural gas vented. He, like others, was intrigued by the trick of igniting water.

Burning Spring was close to the Great Buffalo (salt) Lick, used by wildlife, Indians, settlers and the father of our country.

Daniel Boone settled across from the Burning Spring on the south bank of the Kanawha in 1789. He was fleeing Kentucky over many property disputes and title controversies involving his first surveys.

Boone built a two-unit cabin on 500 acres, hunted and trapped beaver in this sparsely populated frontier that the first residents were still contesting. Boone boiled brine to salt in his family's iron kettle.

When Boone left in 1799, Kanawha County records show that he owned 500 acres, two horses and one slave—a meager accumulation for a prominent 65-year-old.

Samuel I. Cabell came to the Valley in 1850 and bought 967 acres of the Washington tract in 1853 in what is now the Union-Carbide-Institute-Dunbar area. He leased the slaves he brought with him to saltmakers near Malden, east of Charleston and close to the Burning Spring.

Cabell built a plantation -- Piney Grove -- and lived there with Mary Barnes until his death in 1865. He fathered 13 children with Mary. He lived in his mansion with her openly, lovingly, defiantly but not legally as husband and wife. Mary was Sam's slave.

Both Virginia and West Virginia (founded in 1863) permitted slavery until 1865 and had statutes prohibiting marriage between blacks and whites, both broadly defined.

Cabell wrote four wills that freed Mary and their children upon his death and provided for an equal division of his estate among them.

When the Civil War broke out, Cabell sided stridently with his native Virginia and the Confederacy. When several of his sons joined the Union Army, he revoked his promise of freedom for them in a codicil to his will.

In July, 1865, Cabell was killed when seven local, Union-oriented landowners paid him a visit with the purpose of convincing him to change his opinions. During their murder trial, the seven claimed that he attacked them with a knife. They were acquitted.

Local courts upheld Cabell's will. Mary and several of her children sold West Virginia 80 acres from the Washington-Cabell land for the establishment of the West Virginia Colored Institute.

Booker Taliaferro Washington was born a slave on the small, James Burroughs' tobacco farm southeast of Roanoke, Va., in 1856. His mother was a slave; his father, a white planter—perhaps a Taliaferro (pronounced locally as Tolliver). In slavery, Jane had three children—one black and two mulattos, probably by the same neighbor. Washington gave himself his surname when he started school.

Shortly after the Civil War, his stepfather, Washington (Wash) Ferguson, sent for his small family to join him in Malden, the locus of the Kanawha Valley salt industry. Wash had been leased to a saltmaker as a slave and stayed on as a wage worker even though Kanawha salt was rapidly losing its market to cheaper sources.

Washington lived in Malden for about six years. His mother who was in poor health took in washing. She bought him his first book, a speller, which he could not decipher.

Saltmaking and coal mining were hard, dangerous primitive jobs that destitute and desperate people did to survive.

Washington recalled that the cabins and shanties in Malden were jammed together without sanitation or refuse removal. The village was

racially integrated. He described the whites crowded next to his family as “the poorest and most ignorant and degraded people; drinking, gambling, quarrels, fights, and shockingly immoral practices were frequent.”

In 1869, he witnessed a set of fights and gunplay between blacks in Malden and nearby Ku Klux Klansmen. The Klan wanted the blacks to leave; the blacks stayed.

Wash Ferguson immediately put nine-year-old Booker and his brother, John, to work helping him pack salt into wood barrels. Packing was the least skilled and lowest-paid job in the saltworks. It was 12 hours of shoveling salt and then tamping it tight so that the barrel met the required weight.

Soon, Ferguson sent the boy to work in a nearby mine that supplied the bushels of coal for the steam engines and salt evaporators. He loaded coal and helped mules draw their carts the mile from the face to the portal. In his autobiography, Washington writes that he nursed a grudge against his stepfather for never giving him any of the money he earned for his dawn-to-dusk labor.

Booker worked for several years in salt and coal. Then he got a break.

General Lewis Ruffner, a local saltmaker who lived in a hillside mansion above Malden, and his second wife, Viola, an upright Vermont schoolteacher, took him in as their houseboy. She taught him academics as well as the conservative New England values that he applied throughout the rest of his life. His preference for wealthy whites came, he acknowledged, from his experience with Viola Ruffner, a woman who did not fit in.

George Washington, Daniel Boone, Samuel I. Cabell and Booker T. Washington.

All are connected to West Virginia’s Kanawha Valley, to its first industry, salt, and to slavery, the ghost that shadows us still.