

BIOGRAPHY OF RUFUS ADOLPHUS AYERS  
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Big Stone Gap, Virginia

No man has had greater impact on post-Civil War Virginia, and especially the counties of Washington, Lee, and Wise than Rufus Adolphus Ayers. He was born in Bedford County in 1849, the grandson of a minister, and the descendant of Andrew Lewis, the commander of the Virginia Militia at the Battle of Point Pleasant.(1,2,3, 4). In 1855 his family decided to move to Texas. They had relatives in Goodson (now Bristol, Virginia). His mother's brother, Judge G. A. Wingfield, had lived there for a while. The Ayers liked Goodson so well that they decided to settle there. Rufus attended the Goodson Male Academy from 1856-1861. His father died in 1857, putting the family into poverty. Rufus had no more formal schooling the rest of his life. He joined the Confederate Army in Tennessee in 1864 at age 14.



RUFUS A. AYERS

In 1868 he moved to Gate City, then known as Estellville, as a common farmer. He devoted himself to an intense self-directed study of the classics. In 1869 he began to read law under Henry S. Kane. Practicing in Estillville, Kane was one of the most prestigious lawyers in this part of the country. Raised in Duffield, the son of Patrick Kane, who owned the largest store in Scott Co. in 1820, which was located at the main intersection in Duffield. In 1870 Rufus married Victoria L. Morrison.(4). They had seven children, one dying at birth, and a second soon thereafter. Rufus was admitted to the bar in 1872. However, he continued reading law under his uncle Judge G. A. Wingfield in 1873. Rufus became Scott County's Commonwealth's Attorney in 1875, a post he kept until 1879.

He took his first fateful step into local industrial development in 1876. That year he formed a partnership with former Confederate General John Daniel Imboden to build a narrow gauge railroad from Bristol to Big Stone Gap. Ayers obtained the corporate charter from the General Assembly. It is hard to tell where their capital came from. They bought and graded the right-of-way as far as the North Fork of the Holton River between Phillips and Mendota. They did not have the capital to proceed further.

In 1875-1879 he became the Reading Clerk of the House of Delegates, and Clerk of the House Committee of Finance. These events started his career in Virginia politics, an event that proved to be momentous. Note the key field of involvement – 'finance'.

In the meantime in 1880 he became District Supervisor of the Census. Imboden and he plunged deeper into industrial development in Southwest Virginia's coal, coke, and iron

industries as he became a founding member of the Tinsalia Company, which became the nation's largest independent coal company.

We need to back up and pick up another thread of Virginia's history. The produce of Virginia's rich interior valleys – the Shenandoah, Potomac, and Greenbriar – could not be economically transported to Virginia's eastern ports at Alexandria and Richmond due to the unnavigability of her rivers that cut through the Blue Ridge Mountains. This was seen early on by Virginia's intelligentsia, including George Washington. A corporate venture to dig canals into the interior of the Commonwealth was begun in 1785. It went bankrupt several times. A new urgency was given to this project when New York State completed the Erie Canal in 1825. Prior to that Virginia's various ports on the Chesapeake Bay were the most significant in the country. New York rapidly began to gain economic ascendancy over Virginia at a rate that alarmed Virginians. Even more alarming was that that part of Virginia that lay west of the rivers flowing into the Chesapeake Bay, especially those that flowed into the Ohio, were beginning to think of breaking away from Virginia. In order to defend its economic dominance, and to insure the loyalty of its western regions, Virginia reorganized what was to become the James River and Kanawha Canal Company. The canal was to be paid for by selling corporate bonds guaranteed by the corporation. However, investors were reluctant to buy these bonds until the Commonwealth cosigned them as the ultimate guarantor. The canal by the time of the Civil War was completed as far as Buchanan, with significant construction having been started as far as Eagle Rock. The plans were to take it across the mountains to the headwaters of the Kanawha River. The Civil War not only destroyed the canal, but also the economy which had supported it. By that time it had become obvious that railroads were the technology of the future. (6)

After the Civil War Virginia found itself in an economic quandary. Its tax base was in rubble. A third of the territory of the Commonwealth had been turned by the Federal Army into West Virginia, taking that tax base with it. Virginia did not have the tax revenue to pay off the canal bonds at face value, and to simultaneously pay for a public school system. The bonds had been originally bought by loyal Confederate Virginians, who after the war had sold them to



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AUTHOR  
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RETAINING  
WALL OF  
THE UN-  
FINISHED  
LOCK  
BETWEEN  
BUCH-  
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ROCK



THE UNFINISHED LOCK  
WITHIN THE ABOVE RE-  
TAINING WALL

THERE WERE TO BE  
MASSIVE WOODEN  
GATES TO CONTROL  
THE WATER LEVEL AT  
EACH END OF THIS  
COMPARTMENT

THE BOATS WOULD  
FLOAT UP AND DOWN  
BETWEEN THE GATES

Yankees at an average of ten cents on the dollar. The debt, when combined with that incurred by some railroad ventures, amounted to \$45,000,000. Virginia's old line First Families of Virginia felt that 'honor' was involved, and insisted on paying off the debt at face value. This political faction was called "the Funders". In 1870 Governor Walker prevailed in a very acrimonious fight in the General Assembly in getting 'The Funding Act' passed. Its provisions were that Virginia would pay seventy cents on the dollar of two thirds of the total debt, leaving the other one third to West Virginia. People supporting this legislation were called 'Readjusters'. A repeal was passed, which was vetoed by Governor Walker. Ayers, in his position of Clerk of the House Finance Committee found himself in the center of this fight.

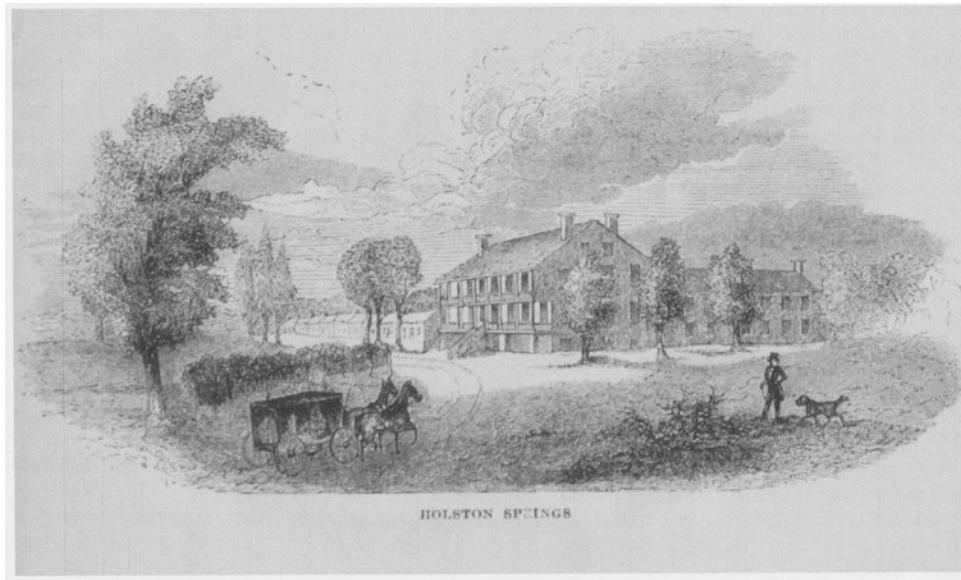
General Billy Mahone, Confederate hero who had led the counter attack at the Battle of the Crater, became the leader of the Readjuster party. At first these two parties were splinters of the Democratic Party. As the political fight progressed, however, the Readjusters split off to form their own party. They soon joined with the Republican Party. Ayers was elected Attorney General of Virginia in 1885. By this time the Funding Act had been implemented by selling new bonds, which had attached coupons which were to be detached and could be used as negotiable instruments, and for the payment of taxes.<sup>(7,8)</sup>

As the chief legal officer of the Commonwealth Ayers was responsible for implementing the Funding Act. The old bond holders sued the Commonwealth, and Ayers specifically by name. The case was tried in a Federal court in Maryland, and the bond holders won. The Federal judge ordered Ayers to stop issuing the new bonds. Virginia (its Attorney General Ayers) said that that Maryland court had no jurisdiction, and appealed to the Federal Supreme Court. The Federal judge ordered Ayers to be jailed for contempt of court, and Ayers was imprisoned in Richmond for six days in 1887.<sup>(1)</sup> Ayers later wrote that he joyously spent his time in jail "clipping coupons",

which would suggest that Ayers had bought them at a discount in his own behalf from people who had first bought them, and now expected them to be worthless. After the five days were up, the Supreme Court ruled that the Maryland Court had had no jurisdiction in the case. Ayers was released, the implementation of the Funding Act proceeded, and the citizens of the Commonwealth lionized Ayers. He also likely had made a fortune in the process.<sup>(9)</sup>

Ayers remained a Democrat despite having become the chief implementer of the Funding Act. The leader of the Readjusters became Col. C. B. Slemp, who left the Democratic Party, and became a Republican. Ayers and Slemp were good friends, as were Rufus's son Harry and the Col's son C. Bascom Slemp. In 1899 Ayers resigned as Attorney General and joined Slemp in Big Stone Gap as leaders of the kingpins of the economic development there. This had actually begun in 1885 before Ayers had resigned. On the surface it would appear that Ayers and Slemp were political opponents. This was not the case. Ayers' job was to corral the Democrats into supporting the industrial development, and Slemp's to do the same with the Republicans. The best example was when they both ran for the same congressional seat against each other. There was no campaign. It did not matter who won, just as long as one of them did. Slemp won, which seemed to please Ayers.<sup>(10)</sup>

About 1885 Ayers bought Holston Springs located between Weber City and Yuma. It was



THE OLDER  
HOLSTON  
SPRINGS  
(14)

a 2500 acre estate that had first had a spa built on it by 1809. Warm Sulfur springs supplied healing water that attracted guests. Before the Civil War a large frame building was erected to house a Woman's College. Ayers remodeled the building and added porches, transforming the former 24 room hotel into his private residence. The building burned in 1914.<sup>(2, 11)</sup>

Ayers' economic and industrial enterprises in Southwest Virginia form an intimidating list, and even at that the list is incomplete. The following list is not arranged in chronologic order, nor in any order of significance. Some of it has been mentioned above. It includes law offices in Bristol and in Big Stone Gap, one of the founders of Penn-Virginia Corporation and of its



THE HOLSTON SPRINGS  
OF RUFUS AYERS

(GOOGLE IMAGES)



THE AYERS MANSION  
ON POPLAR HILL IN  
BIG STONE GAP; NOW  
THE SOUTHWEST  
VIRGINIA MUSEUM  
AND HISTORICAL  
STATE PARK

(GOOGLE IMAGES)

predecessors, steel fabrication and smelting facilities in Bristol and Big Stone Gap, the railroad from Bristol to Appalachia, the Dummy Line in Big Stone Gap, a tannery and brick kiln in Big Stone Gap, several other short railroads in the Wise and Norton area, the colliery at Glamorgan, coal lands in Tazewell and Buchanan Counties, the Mountain Park Association that bought 7,000 acres

on High Knob and built a luxury hotel there, banks in Gate City and in Big Stone Gap, Associate Council of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. He owned the "Big Stone Gap Post", and a plaining mill. He raised cattle at Holston Springs. He built the dominant structure in the area, the Ayer's Mansion – now the Southwest Virginia Museum and Historical State Park.

This mansion sits on Poplar Hill, dominating the downtown area. Designed by a Philadelphia architect, who also designed the Episcopal Church in Big Stone Gap as well as the two dominant Victorian houses in Wise, the mansion was built of lime stone by Italian stone masons. The stone was cut from Little Stone Mountain's southwestern slope.<sup>(13)</sup>

He gave generously to send students to college. He gave to the Methodist Church in Big Stone Gap, and he gave the land for Ayer's Chapel in Big Stone Gap.<sup>(1, 2, 3, 4)</sup>

Ayers died in a Radford hospital of multiple complications of old age in 1926. He is buried in the Estell Cemetery in Gate City. His mansion was bought by C. Bascom Slemp to house Slemp's collection of artifacts, which were willed to the Commonwealth of Virginia after Slemp's death in 1943. There is nothing in Big Stone Gap or Wise County named after him.



THE OLDER RUFUS A. AYERS

(GOOGLE IMAGES)

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