



Tredegar Ironworks Richmond – Photograph, Kevin Phillips

A news item contained in the “Hereford Times” newspaper dated November 24th 1838 did much to explain a connection between Tredegar Iron Works, in Wales, and another of identical name in the USA. The “Times” carried a short report taken from “A Richmond paper” concerning the death of one Rhys Davies whose “*father and many friends*” were still resident “*in Tredegar Iron Works*”, clearly not the Monmouthshire iron town but another similarly-named in the USA.

Although many developing US settlements adopted British names, the iron-making character of both Tredegars’ suggested more than mere coincidence. Even in Wales, where the name’s true meaning has been lost, it appears once for the Morgan Family mansion near Newport, and again for the early 19th century iron-town that developed on its northern estate. Some reason had to exist why iron works on either side of the Atlantic possessed the same title but, until the Hereford Times report came to light, they were linked only by speculation and folklore.

Local minds had long been exercised by the matter and, on April 18th 1957, David Perry, a school headmaster of Tredegar, Monmouthshire, wrote to London’s US Embassy querying if any information existed concerning the Richmond plant, and whether his town in Wales might have played some part in its foundation? In a reply dated March 15th 1957 the Embassy would state:

“The Tredegar Iron Works were established in 1836 at Richmond, Virginia....noted for supplying the Confederate Army with munitions. There is now in existence a Tredegar Company, South Sixth Street, Richmond, described as manufacturers of projectiles, iron castings, steel bars,

railroad joint bars, spikes, horseshoes etc. and we think you will probably find it useful to write to this company."

As a result Mr. Perry then wrote directly to Richmond's still-extant Tredegar Company, but its reply of April 18th seemed to dismiss any possibility of a Welsh connection:

"Our company was not founded by emigrants from Wales....during the war between the States the company was known as 'The Arsenal of The Confederacy' and produced much cannon and shot. It also rolled iron 8 by 2 inch plates for the 'Merrimac' the first iron-clad vessel of the Confederacy...."

Yet, in fact, both Embassy and Tredegar Company replies contained inaccuracies regarding both date and founders. Even though the Richmond plant's founders were indeed American citizens, US historians have acknowledged that its design and construction had been due to imported skills provided by *"a number of workers from the Welsh Valleys' town"*, i.e. Tredegar. Yet, with Mr. Perry taking this information at face value, his enquiries ending disappointingly and the matter all-but forgotten until the 19th century Hereford Times report was uncovered. But even that was intriguing.

Headed *"From Richmond Paper"* - probably the "Compiler" or "Chronicle" of that town, the short extract obviously referred to events that had taken place some time earlier since all news then had to arrive by ship.

"Died at Richmond, Virginia USA early Sunday morning in consequence of having been stabbed a fortnight ago – Rhys Davies. The deceased was born in Breconshire, S. Wales. At the age of 11 he was apprenticed as a mill-wright and pattern-maker in the service of the Tredegar Company and there obtained a thorough knowledge of mechanics and iron-manufacturing. He subsequently joined the Corps of Royal Military Engineers in capacity as an artificer and, after serving a few years, went to France to be employed by its government and the celebrated Marshal Marmont in erecting iron establishments. He came to the US five years ago (N.B. 1833) and has been constructing furnaces and rolling mills amongst which are the Tredegar and Belle Isle works of this place.

To a warm and generous temperament Mr. Davies added an uncommonly plain practical and clear understanding, and had so much mechanical genius that improvements continued suggesting themselves to his mind. The community is deprived of a most-valuable member and five young children have lost a tender and affectionate father.

His funeral was most-numerously attended. He was buried according to his wishes at a pretty spot in Belle Isle. His father and many friends now reside in Tredegar Iron Works."

Clear evidence now existed for a connection between the two ironworks, and also explained how the Welsh Tredegar's Rhys Davies had affected United States history. Much can be construed from this "Hereford Times" article. Rhys Davies is recorded as having died five

years after his arrival in Richmond, making 1833 possible date for the creation of its Tredegar Works rather than 1836 claimed by the US Embassy. Born in Breconshire, Wales, he had, like many others from the rural districts, journeyed to Tredegar to find work. New iron-making settlements were springing up along the coalfield's "Outcrop", a narrow twenty-mile-long strip of land where immensely-rich coal and iron seams supplied furnaces that, for more than eighty years would make it literally iron-making centre of the world. Rather old to be starting work – normally this began at about at six years of age – the boy would be apprenticed as mill-wright and pattern-maker under Tredegar's engineer Thomas Ellis senior, his family almost certainly paying a premium for the privilege. Even so it would have been money well-invested because Tredegar Iron Works were amongst the most advanced of its period, under its ironmaster Sam Homfray sen. Homfray also operated Merthyr Tydfil's Penydarren Works nearby where, in 1804, "Old Ellis" had assisted Richard Trevithick's construction of the world's first steam locomotive to run on rails. Some years later the renowned engineer Daniel Gooch – who incidentally supervised laying the first operational Transatlantic telephone cables - would also receive training under Ellis senior, recording his years at Tredegar as *"the most important of my life."*

It appears Rhys Davies had proved to be a brilliant and talented pupil, similarly learning all there was to know about iron-making and steam power, developing skills that would lead him firstly into military engineering, and then to assist Napoleon's former Marshal Marmont to modernize the French iron industry. The reputation acquired by the young man must have inspired Richmond, Virginia's commission to design and construct its iron works that would be carried-out by Davies and other skilled Tredegar men.

Richmond had possessed an arms manufactory since 1797 that produced swords, muskets, rifles, powder horns and other weaponry, but new technology imported from the Welsh Tredegar would take US iron-making and armaments into a new era. So successful was Rhys Davies with his project, and so delighted were his employers with what he had produced, that they decided to name their new plant "Tredegar" in his honour. A later manager would record *"The preliminary works were founded in 1836 (sic)....given the name of the celebrated works in Wales by permission of their proprietor (i.e. Sam Homfray, junior) in compliment to Mr. Davies the engineer who built them and who was educated at the Welsh establishment..."*

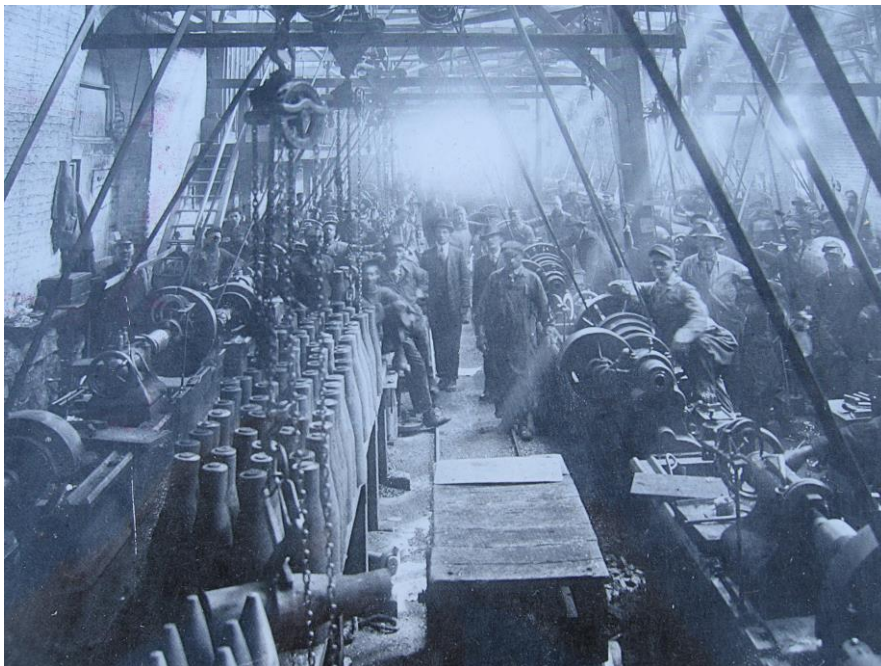
The only puzzle remaining concerned the still-young engineer's death five years later. But this may also be explained by the Hereford Times' mention of *"Belle Isle"* with its probable indication that the fatal stabbing had, in fact, resulted from a duel. Such "affairs of honour" were endemic throughout the Southern States, to the extent that no man of position could ignore any real or imagined insult without incurring social contempt and opprobrium. Tredegar Iron Works stood near Belle Isle in the James River, a notorious duelling venue whose evil reputation would later be enhanced by its becoming site of a Civil War prison where many thousands of Northern prisoners would suffer appalling conditions of near-starvation. The fact no duel is recorded in the 1838 report must arise from such acts being forbidden by law,

and subject to very heavy penalties. No Richmond newspaper would have dared made direct reference to what was a criminal activity, but in this case “*stabbed*” might have acted as a code-word understandable to all. Also significant is the fact no mention of “murder” or “murderer” was made.

It is easy to assume Rhys Davies may have unwittingly or otherwise caused offence to some Richmond firebrand, for this appears to have been an easily-offended society. Five years later lawyer Mordecai Cook would object to a “Richmond Chronicle” article, both challenging and then shooting dead its editor Meltzer Gardner. Inspecting his handiwork Cook declared “*Let him die there – I am satisfied!*” In his contemporary work “Pistols at Ten Paces” the US author Stevens’ could state: “*duelling and slavery are the South’s two ill-favoured sacred cows*”, although another contemporary would proclaim, “*It (i.e. duelling) will be persisted-in as long as manly independence and lofty personal pride in all that dignifies and ennobles the human character shall continue to exist!*” Coming from an industrial Wales where fists usually settled disputes, Rhys Davies might not have stood a chance.

Yet, this Tredegar man left as memorial a Tredegar Works at Richmond that would have impact upon both United States and world history. Its very existence led to Richmond becoming capital of the Southern Confederacy, producing much of the South’s weaponry, all stamped “Tredegar”. Not only did the works allow the Confederacy to continue fighting longer but, paradoxically in a slave-economy South, was the first to appoint black men to positions of responsibility.

Through Rhys Davies, Tredegar in Wales did more than inspire a new works, but helped mould a new nation.



Making artillery shells, Tredegar USA



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Peter Morgan Jones.

LOCAL MILLSTONE MANUFACTURE