

## Shedding light on the Digges Copper Mine

Recording the early history of Carroll County, at least one chapter should be dedicated to the Digges Copper Mine and Digges Wagon Road. Hours of research into old records have uncovered many stories worth telling.

In 1742, John Digges (also spelled Diggs) petitioned Maryland's colonial government for permission to have up to 50 men working at his copper mine in western Carroll County (then eastern Frederick County) relieved from paying levies (taxes), clearing roads, building bridges, or serving in the militia except under extraordinary circumstances. What was the nature of this industrial operation at a time when that area stood on the edge of Maryland's frontier? Digges justified his request by saying the mine would benefit the colony as well as trade with Great Britain. The legislature in Annapolis must have agreed because it passed "an act encouraging the raising of copper ore, erecting of stamping mills and copper works and making of copper."

Little information about Digges's success or failure appeared over the next 200 years, but an article in the June 1952 newsletter of the Historical Society of Carroll County shed light on what remained of the mine by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It was located on land about one and one quarter miles south of Middleburg. "According to the statements of the present owner, Mr. Charles Diehl, this was a very extensive operation judging from what he had seen several years ago when he was able to enter the mine and explore it. He was then able to penetrate some of the tunnels as far as two hundred yards. The entrance to the mine is now closed, and apparently the tunnels are caving in in several places as large funnel shaped impressions are to be found in the woodland above the mine." From this description it would seem that John Digges's operation must have been successful.

In the 1740s, narrow Native American trails still crisscrossed this portion of central Maryland and were widely used by the first settlers. Operating the mine could only succeed if the ore reached Baltimore or another location for further processing. Thanks to Digges, by 1748 or 1749 the primitive trails were wide enough to allow heavy wagons pulled by horses or oxen to haul ore to a warehouse near present-day Eldersburg. The long route became known as Digges Wagon Road and is often mentioned in old land records as it wound toward Baltimore. Traffic of all kinds eventually used it, not just ore wagons.

Two maps show the route of Digges Wagon Road – one produced in 1794 by Dennis Griffith, the other by Grace Tracey in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Griffith map does not name the roads, you can clearly see much of the Digges route. Tracing it today, a traveler would begin at the mine along Little Pipe Creek in western Carroll County. Note: the Griffith map does not show the mine in the correct location. The road ran southeast toward Union Bridge – called "Farquhers" by Griffith. From that settlement, which dates to the mid-1700s, a cart loaded with ore would have followed the flat valley created by Sams Creek until Dr. Stitely Road (current name) intersects Sams Creek Road. Multiple grist mills powered by the stream operated along Sams Creek beginning in the late 1700s.

Dr. Stitely Road leads away from the stream to intersect Marston Road (also current name). Marston ends at today's Rte. 27. This was a high point along the 1748 boundary separating Frederick and Baltimore counties. When surveyors drew that line they mentioned the Digges Wagon Road.

Heading further southeast toward Baltimore, the wagons would have traveled along present-day Baker Road where William Hardigan's tavern stood by the 1790s. Man and beast might have rested there before climbing Salem Bottom Road (current name), on to Arthur Shipley Road (also current name), then to Bushey Road. That is the last one recognized today before Digges Wagon Road turned east, running parallel to what we now call Rte. 26. Other taverns sprang up along that flat stretch including one run by the Welsh/Welch family built about 1769. Tradition says Welsh's Tavern was a meeting place for local patriots during the Revolution. The warehouse for Digges's ore stood east of that tavern in what is now Eldersburg.

Grace Tracey's map is more helpful in tracing the route of the wagon road in some ways, but less in others. It names Digges's road wherever it appears but not the taverns. The road extended east beyond Welsh's Tavern and would have crossed the North Branch of the Patapsco River, quite an obstacle during those early days. Travelers on Rte. 26 today are unaware of the river because it now lies under Liberty Reservoir.

In the late 1790s a new road was laid out, passing from Liberty (now Libertytown) in Frederick County through current Taylorsville and Winfield, then on to Eldersburg. This became known as the "New Liberty Road" while much of the Digges Wagon Road became the "Old Liberty Road." The "old" and "new" routes joined east of Winfield. In 2024, old records and old maps are the only places you will find references to Digges Wagon Road. Curious readers can study the Griffith and Tracey maps as well as the Otis Shearer 1863 Military Map of Carroll County. All of them can be found on the website of the Carroll County Genealogical Society.

Modern travelers wanting the fastest route between Frederick and Baltimore would take Interstate 70 and never pass through Carroll County at all, but they would miss a lot.

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*Image 1: Credit: Submitted photo    Caption: In the late 1700s this was listed as Hardigan's Tavern and served travelers along Digges Wagon Road. Today it is a private home at the intersection of Baker and Salem Bottom roads.*

*Image 2: Credit: Historical Society of Carroll County/Jean Hershberger    Caption: Welsh's Tavern stood west of Eldersburg along one of the earliest transportation routes to cross Carroll County. Note the influence of Tidewater Maryland architecture in the western portion with its sloping roofline. Only a few examples can still be found in Carroll County.*

