

Gen. Braddock may be long dead, but stories of his exploits  
— and his treasure — live on

By John Kelly Columnist March 8, 2014



This cannon, from British Gen. Edward Braddock's stay in Alexandria in 1755, is part of a memorial at Braddock and Russell roads in Alexandria. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)

For a man who has been dead for 258 years, Edward Braddock still exerts a powerful pull. Answer Man's readers continue to weigh in on the British major general, who spent a few boozy weeks in Alexandria in 1755 and then marched to his death in the French and Indian War.

Jack Burrows wondered if the Braddock memorial at Braddock and Russell roads in Alexandria contains stones that were ballast from English ships, a story he heard as a boy growing up in Falls Church.

No, said Rod Simmons, natural resources specialist with the city of Alexandria. They are river cobbles, naturally occurring stones polished by river action. The same quartzite cobbles were used to pave streets in Alexandria and Georgetown.

Rod said the flat landscape around the cannon-topped memorial is studded with bog iron, a sedimentary stone formed when water leaches iron from the soil and a common source of iron in Colonial times. City horticulturist John Walsh and his staff maintain the memorial's garden, which, with its drought-resistant plants and cacti, is a study in low-water xericulture.

Finally, Rod said that Braddock Road's original name — Mash Pot or Mush Pot Road — probably didn't refer to a moonshine still but to the routinely muddy and sloppy condition of the thoroughfare itself. (And reader Jay Cherlow pointed out that the Braddock Road in Alexandria is different from the other Braddock Road — State Road 620, which runs through Fairfax and Loudoun counties.)

Heading over to Maryland, reader Clare Kelly notes that there's a plaque in Clarksburg commemorating Braddock's passage through Montgomery County. His troops camped near a tavern called Dowden's Ordinary. The building was taken down in 1924, but a "ghost structure" in its shape is the centerpiece of a park there.

Rocks, cannons and taverns are all very nice, but really shouldn't we talking about gold? Or, rather: GOLD!!!



British General Edward Braddock, who died in 1755 as he was leading troops in a fight against the French at Fort Duquesne in Pennsylvania. (Fairfax County Public Library)

There are several legends about Braddock's lost gold, enough that shovel-wielding treasure-hunters have pockmarked bits of the countryside where the general is said to have trod.

In one version of the story, Braddock's troop train was carrying the payroll for his men when the wagons became bogged down in sticky clay. Braddock ordered the load lightened. That included taking the gold coins, pouring them into a cannon, sealing the mouth and burying it.

But where is this heavy metal piñata? Some accounts place the treasure near Centreville, in Fairfax County. But in a 1982 article available on the Historical Society of Fairfax County Web site, Douglas Phillips and Barnaby Nygren demolished that myth. Braddock traveled through Maryland, you will recall, and they argued that the forces he sent south of the Potomac, through

Fairfax, did not travel near Centreville.

Another version holds that British troops hastily retreating from the ambush near Fort Duquesne ditched a chest full of gold and silver. Jim Binsted remembers hearing that one. His mother's family settled in the area around Comus, in Montgomery County, in the mid-1600s. As a boy in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Jim would visit relatives who lived at the base of Sugarloaf Mountain.

"Many of the elders would tell tales of the Colonial days," Jim wrote. "I didn't pay much mind to most but I was always wide-eyed when the old-timers would start having serious discussions about 'General Braddock's Treasure.'"

The story went that Braddock's troops beat a retreat through Comus and camped along the high ridge in the deep woods off what is now Peach Tree Road, just south of Comus Road. It was in those woods that they buried a sizable treasure.

"My relatives still believed in this story," Jim wrote. "I would listen to tales of how generations of locals would dig for that treasure and through time had named the area Braddock's Woods."

Other versions put the treasure across the border in Pennsylvania or closer to Cumberland, Md. It was this account that retired Frostburg State University history professor Gordon E. Kershaw explored in 2001 in Maryland Historical Magazine.

Through careful parsing of original accounts, Kershaw found that Braddock wasn't carrying a chest full of payroll gold, just the money he'd need for incidental expenses. And in any event, when the French and Indians

attacked, the general's chest was safely distant from the fighting. Though many cannons were lost to the enemy, the most believable witnesses said the chest was recovered.

Kershaw tied the spread of the rumor, at least in Western Maryland, to J. William Hunt, a columnist for the Cumberland Evening Times. Between 1945 and 1957, Hunt wrote no fewer than 20 articles about the gold, including exhortations to his readers to go out and find it. He even mentioned that it was said to be guarded by a leprechaun — not surprising, given that Irish troops were among Braddock's men.

And so this appears to be the case of a columnist obsessing over Braddock and his treasure just to sell newspapers. Astonishing.