

## The History of Danville, Virginia

By: Asher Brandon Caplan\*

“The history of Danville is the history of its river. A river makes a town what it is; molds its life and the life of its people, the kind of work they do and the kind of pleasures they enjoy. From the first beginning the Dan has made Danville what it is, for businesses were brought here, or influenced in some way by the fact that a rapid little river made a horseshoe bend in a green and fertile valley.” - L. Beatrice Hairston, *A Brief History of Danville* (1955)

While there is currently no way of knowing the exact date that the Dan River region was first inhabited by humans, archeological evidence indicates the steady presence of settlements along the banks of the Dan River since at least the Early Woodland and Middle Woodland Periods which occurred from 1000 BCE to 800 CE (“The Woodland and Mississippian Periods in North Carolina”). The existence of post-holes - marks left behind from the timber walls and shelters of indigenous settlements - indicate the presence of villages throughout the Dan River basin (Eastman 14-16). Early European accounts also mention the presence of Native American settlements within the current city-limits of Danville, with a 1753 account alluding to an extant tributary of the Dan “beginning at a branch below the old Indian Fort running up Rutledge's Creek” (Qtd. in Hairston 4). Although there is little recorded history of this period today, Native American communities continue to live in Virginia and North Carolina. In particular, the Sappony and Monacan tribes still persist as the present descendants of the Dan's indigenous people (*Sappony; Monacan Indian Nation*).



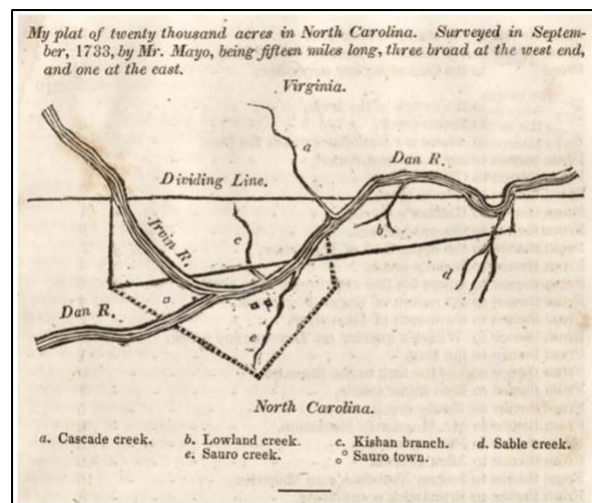
Archeological documentation of European trade goods and circular postholes from the Upper Saratown site on the Dan River (Courtesy of the UNC Research Laboratories of Archaeology)

Motivated by the fur and deerskin trade and the quest for land, Europeans gradually moved into the Piedmont of Virginia, bringing enslaved labor with them. War and famine decreased the numbers of the native populations, especially after European retribution in response to the Native American raids of 1644 (Hagan 2). Over time, indigenous groups either settled in restricted areas or were forced westward (Hagan 2-3).

In 1728, during an expedition to map the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina, William Byrd II provided an early description of the land and gave the flowing river its earliest recorded name: the Dan, a Biblical reference to the northern boundary of the land of Canaan (Hagan 3). By the mid-18th century, William Wynne established a plantation on the south banks of the Dan (Hagan 4). The site known as Wynne Falls, grew due to its fishing and trading opportunities and from the cultivation of tobacco (Hairston 5). Later, in 1793, the site was officially chartered as Danville (Hagan 5).



Portrait of William Byrd II  
(Courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society)



Map of the Dan River published in Byrd's *A Journey to the Land of Eden*

From roughly 1830 onward, Danville's status grew specifically as a result of its tobacco industries (Hagan 13). The region garnered particular fame through the local invention of a particular kind of flue-cured tobacco called "Bright Leaf" ("Bright Leaf Tobacco"). This strand was accidentally discovered by an enslaved man named Stephen near the Virginia border in Caswell County, North Carolina ("Bright Leaf Tobacco"). His master, Abisha Slade, further refined the process for the next twenty years and brought increased profits to the area as a result ("Bright Leaf Tobacco"). By the mid-19th century, Danville's role as a center for tobacco

production led to the establishment of the Richmond and Danville Railroad, which began construction in 1848 (Wright).

The Richmond and Danville Railroad line not only grounded Danville's surging economy, but it also shaped Danville's role in the American Civil War. By the onset of the Civil War in 1861, Danville had roughly 6,000 citizens (Robertson 329). However, this number would drastically increase as the railroad shipped not only goods and materials into Danville, but also prisoners of war. Notoriously, starting in October of 1863, several of Danville's larger warehouses - including the tobacco factories of J.W. and C.G. Holland - were converted to house incoming Union prisoners of war (Robertson 330). Once the prisoners arrived in Danville, the conditions they faced in these makeshift prisons were harsh. Prisoners were housed up to 650 per floor (Robertson 331), and the resulting cramped spaces created a hostile environment which facilitated the spread of smallpox, fleas, and lice (Robertson 332). Additionally, prisoners faced malnutrition from lack of stable rations. Over a period of roughly one hundred twenty days, one Union officer documented the meals he received while confined; this included:

"1) enough corn-cob meal to make a daily loaf of bread measuring 7 X 3 x 3 inches, 2) 43 portions of meat, each weighing no more than three ounces and containing eyes, brains, intestines "and nameless portions of the animal economy;" 3) 62 rations of soup so thin that if the contents varied, the men did not know it; 4) 7 potatoes, none of which was over one inch in diameter; 5) 5 salted fish; and 6) 3 small issues of sorghum syrup." (Robertson 338)

By the end of the war, many of the prisoners were reduced to near-skeletons, facing conditions not unlike those at more well-known Confederate prisons such as Andersonville and Libby (Robertson 338). Of the 7,000 total prisoners sent to Danville, only 3,000 would survive to the end of the war (Robertson 345).



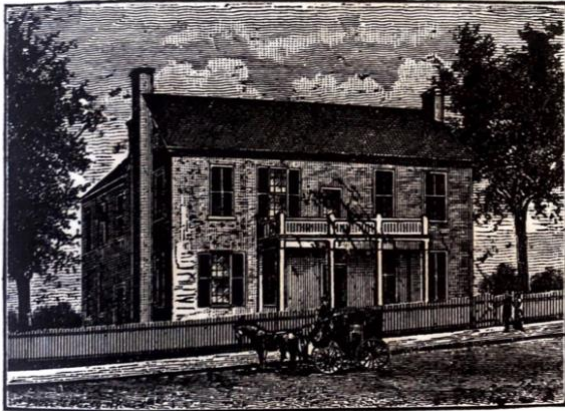
Danville's Prisons (Courtesy of the Library of Virginia)



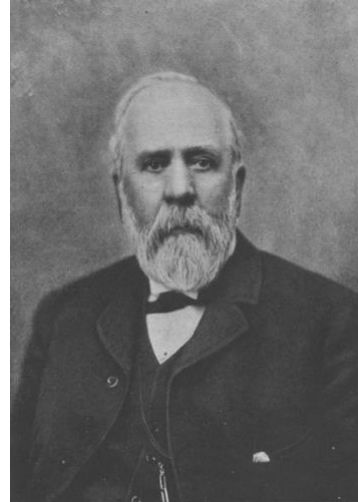
Interior of Danville Prison (Danville Museum Collections)

Danville's notoriety during the war was not only due to its role as a prison town. As a result of the railroad connection, by the middle of 1862, Danville had been designated by the Confederate government as the site of refuge in the event of Richmond's fall as the capital of the Confederate States ("Danville Va., The New Rebel Capital"). Nearly three years later, in April of 1865, with Richmond in ruins from a Union offensive, this evacuation plan was set into motion. Confederate President Jefferson Davis evacuated the city, arriving in Danville on April 3 (Davis 675; Wright). Upon arriving in Danville, Davis was housed in the home of Major William T. Sutherlin, a wealthy plantation owner and a Quartermaster for the Confederacy (Pollock 52; Wise 444). The office of the Confederate executive was housed on Wilson Street in what has come to be called the Benedict House (Hagan 15; Pollock 59).

In Danville, Davis wrote his last proclamation as president of the Confederacy on April 4th (Hagan 16; McFall 88), and on the evening of April 8th, he held a cabinet meeting in the Sutherlin's home (Wise 444-445). However, the official word of General Robert E. Lee's surrender to Union forces at Appomattox eventually reached Danville by April 10th (Hagan 15; McFall 93; Pollock 59-60). Fearing capture, Davis and the remnants of his cabinet fled south to escape the approaching Union forces. And thus, the cabinet embarked on the very train from which they arrived, marking the end of Danville's brief run as the capital of the Confederacy (McFall 95; Pollock 60).



The Benedict House as it appears in Pollock's 1885 Sketchbook of Danville



Photograph of William T. Sutherlin

After the Civil War marked the period of Reconstruction. This period hosted massive social and cultural shifts in the city. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments - ratified in 1865, 1868, and 1870 respectively - had emancipated Danville's enslaved population and granted them the right to vote and to serve in the legislature and on juries.

By 1879, the Readjuster Party, a biracial coalition, won both houses of the Virginia General Assembly and elected former Confederate General William Mahone to the US Senate (Wolfe). The Readjuster's radical platform and their openness to establish an alliance of Black voters and Republicans prompted controversy among a white populace that had been humiliated by the war over a decade before.

In October 1883, a group of prominent businessmen signed the Danville Circular, a pamphlet which outlined the various supposed injustices imposed on the whites and decried the inclusion of Black residents in various roles of local government (Wolfe). The Circular stirred controversy among the population with its racially-charged language and accusatory tone:

“The market once occupied in all its stalls by polite white gentlemen, with their clean white aprons, and the most enticing [sic] meats and vegetables upon their boards, is now the scene of filth, stench, crowds of loitering and idle negroes, drunkenness, obscene language, and petit [sic] thieves.” (“Staunton Vindicator-Coalition Rule in Danville”)

On November 3rd, a racially charged street scuffle broke out in downtown Danville over sidewalk etiquette (Dailey 556). As a crowd of Black citizens came to the scene, a group of whites fired into the crowd, leading to the deaths of five people including four Black men (Wolfe). The result of this incident shocked the local Black population. On election day, the following Tuesday, very few Black citizens voted and Democrats seized this opportunity to take the government out of the hands of the Readjuster Party (Wolfe). The causes of this so-called "Danville Riot" were hotly debated. In Danville, a local Committee of Forty was brought together to offer an investigation of the incident. Led by Major Sutherlin, the committee blamed the incident on William E. Sims, a Readjuster, who they claimed incited the violence by publicly reading aloud the Danville Circular (Committee of Forty 4). They wrote that "on the morning following the night of Sims' speech, the excitement of the blacks and whites alike was most virulent and acrimonious, and among the Negroes there was an evident expectation of a conflict" (Committee of Forty 4).

However, a further investigation held by the Republican-led US Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections concluded that the event was more likely caused by white citizens as a form of reactionary violence (Wolfe). While the Committee of Forty had included testimony which claimed that Black citizens were armed and therefore presented an immediate threat, the Senate Committee found no such evidence (Dailey 583). They instead found that this testimony was fabricated by the Committee (Dailey 583). Instead of a riot, Republicans deemed the event a politically-motivated massacre (Wolfe), though some of their early claims, which argued that the violence was premeditated by Democrats, are disputed (Dailey 581-582). Ultimately, perhaps in lieu of conflicting accounts, no recourse was taken and justice did not prevail for the deaths of the innocent (Wolfe). The incident all but wiped out the Readjusters and established the Democrats as the major political party in Virginia's legislature for almost 80 years. While Reconstruction had opened many doors for formerly enslaved people, many of the progressive strides made since the war were lost as Jim Crow reached fruition in Danville.

Just as white citizens reasserted their control over perceived Northern dominance, the economy of Danville was reignited, reaching the heights of its pre-Civil War levels. In 1882, the first mills were established in the city as a means to provide skilled industrial labor for white workers (Minchin). By the end of the decade, through several instances of conglomeration, Danville's Riverside Cotton Mills would become one of the largest mills in operation in the entire south (Minchin). Riverside further secured its dominance when it merged with the neighboring Dan

River Power and Manufacturing Company to become Riverside and Dan River Cotton Mills (Minchin). Through the first half of the twentieth century, the Mills would bring prosperity and growth to the city.

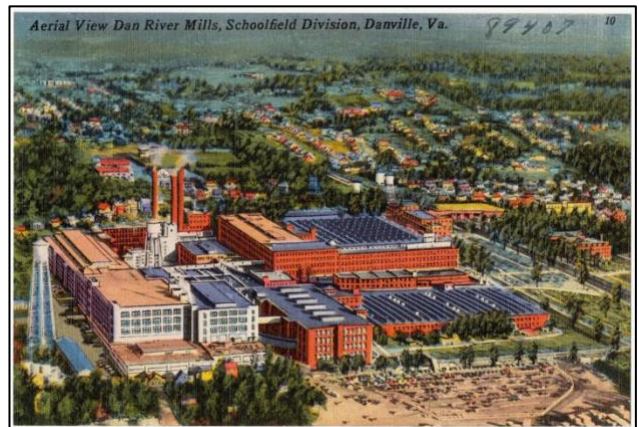


Photograph of a tobacco farmer and his crop  
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)



The looms at Dan River Mills  
(Courtesy of the Danville Historical Society)

The Mills would grow even more prosperous in the mid-20th century, spurred by wartime manufacturing during the Second World War and the subsequent post-war economic boom (Minchin). By this point, the mills employed almost 14,000 people (Minchin). In combination with its tobacco market, the mills cemented Danville's role as a bustling southern city.



Postcards of the Riverside Division and the Schoolfield Division of Dan River Mills (Courtesy of the Boston Public Library)

Despite the prosperity that the Mill offered, not all was well in Danville. The city was still a haven for some of the more malicious ideologies of its southern heritage. By this time, the house of Major Sutherlin had fallen into the hands of the City and served as Danville's whites-only library, as well as its "Confederate Memorial" (Hagan 19-22). The Black citizens of Danville were

delegated to the Grasty Branch Library on Holbrook Street, whose materials were considered insufficient compared to the main branch (Powell 6).



The Danville Public Library and Confederate Memorial (Danville Museum Collections)



The Grasty Branch (Danville Museum Collections)

Sparked by a series of sit-ins at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, on April 2, 1960, exactly 95 years after Jefferson Davis' flight from Richmond, a group of sixteen African American high school students engaged in their own sit-in at the very site of Davis' refuge (Edmunds). As a result of the sit-in, library services in Danville were closed within twenty minutes, as was Ballou Park, where demonstrations were held shortly after (Powell 5-6).

Though these events initially seemed brief and uneventful, they served as the spark that ignited the Civil Rights movement in Danville.

A few days after the first sit-in, another group of African Americans were restricted from library services due to newly issued specifications concerning library cards (Powell 8). Despite this response from the city, a lawsuit from five members of the African American community reignited the controversy (Powell 9). As a result of the suit and its legal effects, on May 19, 1960 the City council voted 9-0 to close both the Main Street and the Grasty libraries to the public in an effort to stop integration ("Danville Closes Public Libraries"). However, these actions did not go unchallenged. In September 1960, following a federal court ruling, the city reopened both libraries as integrated institutions, but in a partial defiance of the protestor's efforts, the libraries were designated to be "vertically" integrated, meaning all chairs would be removed and all patrons would have to stand (Creswell 559; Edmunds). The incident was regarded as shameful and ridiculous by outside observers and gained national notoriety (Creswell 570).



The Richmond *News-Leader* even sarcastically wrote a piece where they asked “Have members of Danville's City Council, doing research on a term paper, ever read a book standing up? Have they ever read a book?” (Qtd. in Creswell 570).

The Main Street Library sit-ins were just the beginning of a larger resistance brewing among the city's Black residents. Three years later, inspired by the televised protests of Birmingham, Alabama, on June 5, 1963 a march of over 125 people occurred at City Hall (“125 Negroes Demonstrate in Danville”; Burgess 68; Edmunds). The next day, the size of the demonstrations grew to two hundred people, an act which prompted Judge Archibald M. Aiken, to launch grand jury proceedings in an attempt to curb integrationist efforts (Burgess 69). The jury indicted three leaders of the protests for inciting to riot: Rev. A.I. Dunlap, Rev. Lawrence Campbell, and taxi driver Julius E. Adams (“Jury Indicts Three”). These men had been the founders of the Danville Progressive Christian Association, an affiliate of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Holt 69). M. Conrad Martin, the president of the First State Bank, was the only African American on the grand jury and the only member to dissent to the indictment (“Jury Indicts Three”).



Photographs of the demonstrations in downtown Danville (Danville Museum Collections)

In light of the national press coverage that Danville was receiving, various civil rights organizations poured into Danville. Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee flew into Danville to help organize demonstrations; this included Avon Rollins, Bob and Dorothy Zellner, and Ivanhoe Donaldson (Burgess 72; “Protests in Danville, Virginia”). They were joined by lawyers Len Holt and Ruth Harvey (Holt 6). With the help of the Danville Progressive Christian Association and some financial support by the NAACP, the SNCC coordinated

nonviolent resistance training and prepared young protestors to protect themselves against police clubs and attack dogs (Miller 8).

However, no training could've prepared the Danville movement for what was to come. On June 10, 1963, violence erupted during a vigil, led by Rev. H.G. McGhee, for jailed protestors. The Danville police dispersed the crowd with clubs and fire hoses, injuring at least forty-seven in a day that would come to be known as "Bloody Monday" (Burgess 73; Lyon 63). The events of that evening are best presented in the courtroom testimony of Mrs. Campbell, the wife of Lawrence Campbell:

"At this time I saw a fire truck pull up the street about fifty feet and I saw fire hoses being unwound out in the street. It was a most horrible moment to wait for the water to hit us. All of a sudden a great force of water hit me from my back and I was thrown to the pavement. Water was shot up my clothes. I was lying out on the pavement with my dress over my head. As I tried to get up I was beaten on my back by a policeman. [...] I saw bodies washed under parked cars just as trash runs down a street after a hard rain [...] I heard horrible sounds. Screams like people were being burned up in a fire, the sounds were." (Qtd. in Holt 24)



Rev. Lawrence Campbell holds a sign which reads "Chief McCain Beat My Wife" (Danville Museum Collections)



Photographs of the injured (Photography by Danny Lyon)

Bloody Monday was viewed as a significant development in the civil rights effort in Virginia. On July 11, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. visited Danville, hoping to draw attention to the movement (Holt 205). In a televised speech, King criticized the police force's actions as some of the worst he had ever seen, stating:

“We have certainly been with you in spirit and we have agonized with you as you have faced the brutality and the ruthlessness of a vicious police force. I have seen some brutal things on the part of policemen all across the south, in our struggle, but very seldom, if ever, have I heard of a police force being as brutal and vicious as the police force here in Danville, Virginia. And you have stood up amid this with great courage. You have done it with great discipline and great dignity. And I want to commend you for it and to bid you Godspeed...” (“Martin Luther King, Jr., Speech, Danville, Virginia”)

Despite Kings’ public appearances, he and the SCLC did little to help the movement continue its traction (Holt 227). His July 11th speech prompted efforts to instigate a “jail-in,” where demonstrators would focus their efforts on crowding and over-burdening the city’s criminal justice institutions (Holt 207). However, by the end of the summer, this effort proved too much for the movement. The demonstrators had yet to meet their main goals of equal civic involvement and an end to racial discrimination in employment (Edmunds). While King and the SCLC could have brought full force to Danville, their efforts ultimately were directed to the Deep South (Burgess 92-93). Without enough outside support, the movement died down by the end of the summer (Holt 218-219).

For the Danville movement, the greatest impediment was the excessive brutality that the demonstrators faced, combined with the legal hurdles set in place to halt picketing and public assembly (Ely 965). By the end of the summer, many began to share King’s sentiments regarding Danville’s unusual hostility towards integration. In an interview, SNCC’s Dorothy Zellner remarked on the movement:

“We were all surprised that Danville was so terrible. Here was Virginia, this relatively Northern Southern state, and the reaction was so vicious. They responded and it could have been in the heart of Mississippi. They deputized everybody, all these white men. It was a license to really beat up on people. They were intending to hurt us on those City Hall steps. [If] we had not left when we did, there would have been unbelievable bloodshed.” (Qtd. in Burgess 79)

However, not all was lost. The demonstrations did lead to some small strides towards equality. The city hired the first Black policeman since the Readjuster days (Edmunds) and integrated Black students into whites-only schools (“Danville Starts Integration Plan”). Yet these steps

were achieved at the same time as a growing conservative sentiment swept among Danville's white population - they voted in a segregationist local government the following year (Edmunds).

Just as the entrenched legacy of white supremacy had been partially destabilized by Danville's Civil Rights movement, so too did Danville's once-booming mill economy suffer from the rapid changes of the late-twentieth century. In the 1980s, cheaper overseas manufacturing prospects enticed the Mills to begin outsourcing jobs, an action that increasingly debilitated Danville's economy (Minchin). After more than 20 years of continuous degradation, Dan River Mills filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy (Minchin). Two years later, in 2006, under the new mantle of Gujarat Heavy Chemicals, the mill shut its doors for good (Minchin). The last remaining jobs were shipped overseas. Of the buildings that were not immediately demolished, their bricks and other valuable materials were stripped from their shells to be recycled in other building projects or refurbished into consumer goods (Thibodeau). Other buildings were simply left to decay.

However, Danville has been resilient despite its hardships, and new prospects have arrived in the last two decades which promise to redefine Danville for the 21st century. The Danville Institute for Advanced Learning and Research has opened up Danville as a site for applied research and manufacturing opportunities, in addition to providing local STEM education (Fallows; "Inspiring Pre K-12"). Downtown revitalization projects have also transformed the once-vacant tobacco warehouses into a bustling center for new businesses and restaurants (Fallows). Finally, in 2020, plans for a new casino have been approved at the site of the old Schoolfield division of the Dan River Mills (Crews). Combined, these additions to Danville demonstrate the constantly evolving nature of the city's history.



The Institute for Advanced Learning and Research  
(Courtesy of the City of Danville)



The proposed casino at the site of the Schoolfield Division  
(Courtesy of Caesars Entertainment)

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