

A Tour of Turn-of-the-Century Buena Vista

By Reed Belden



THE HISTORY BOOKS tell us Buena Vista was incorporated as a city in 1892. That's as far as they agree. Seems the property that would become Buena vista had many owners before it became a city. It was apparently owned by a man named Silas Hart, a veteran of the Revolutionary war. This 900 acres became known as Hart's Bottom. Afterwards, it was reported to have been owned by B. C.

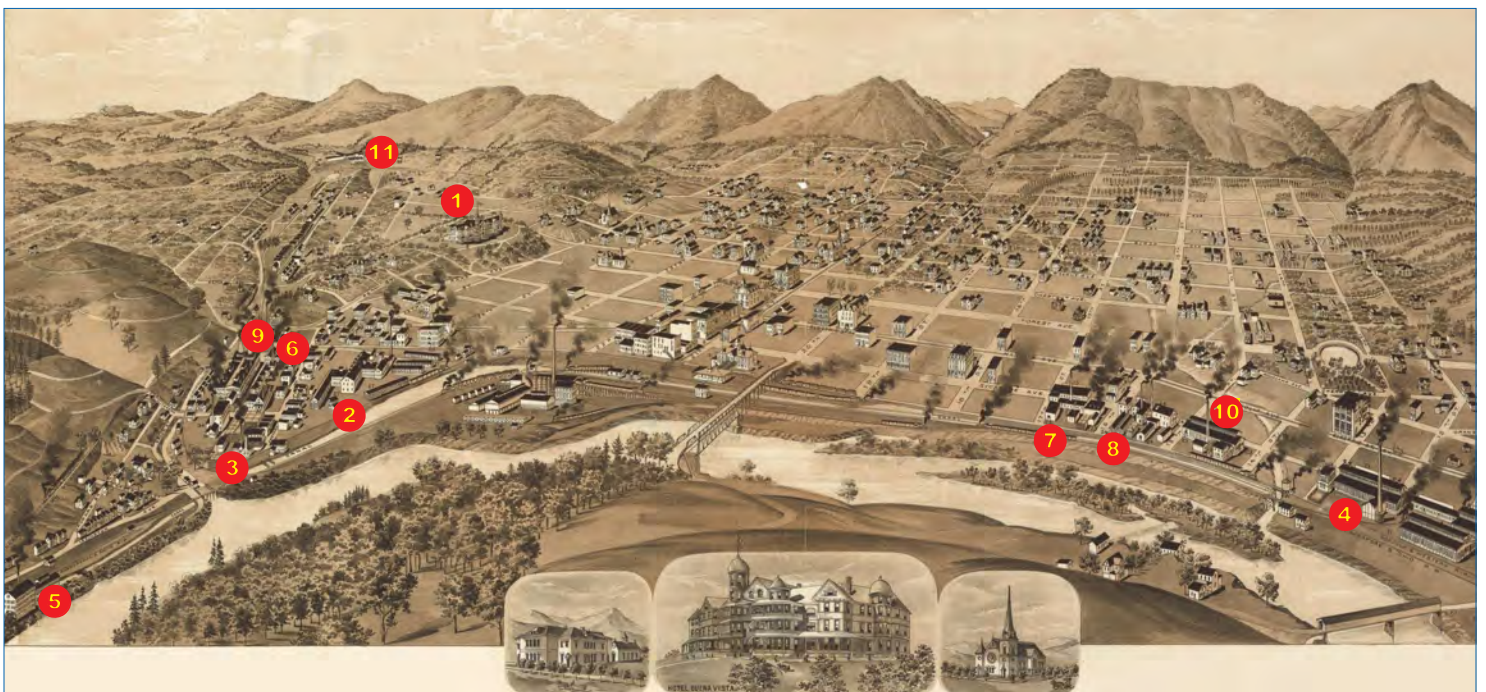
Moomaw, S. F. Jordan and a Mr. Gurney of New York.

Those of you who have an interest in the economic history of the country know that there were several boom periods in the 19th century, each followed by a bust. Buena Vista was a part of that sequence. In 1890 the property was purchased by the Buena Vista Development company, whose president was J. T. Barclay. To show how the Boom Fever affected Rockbridge County, there were development companies in Lexington,

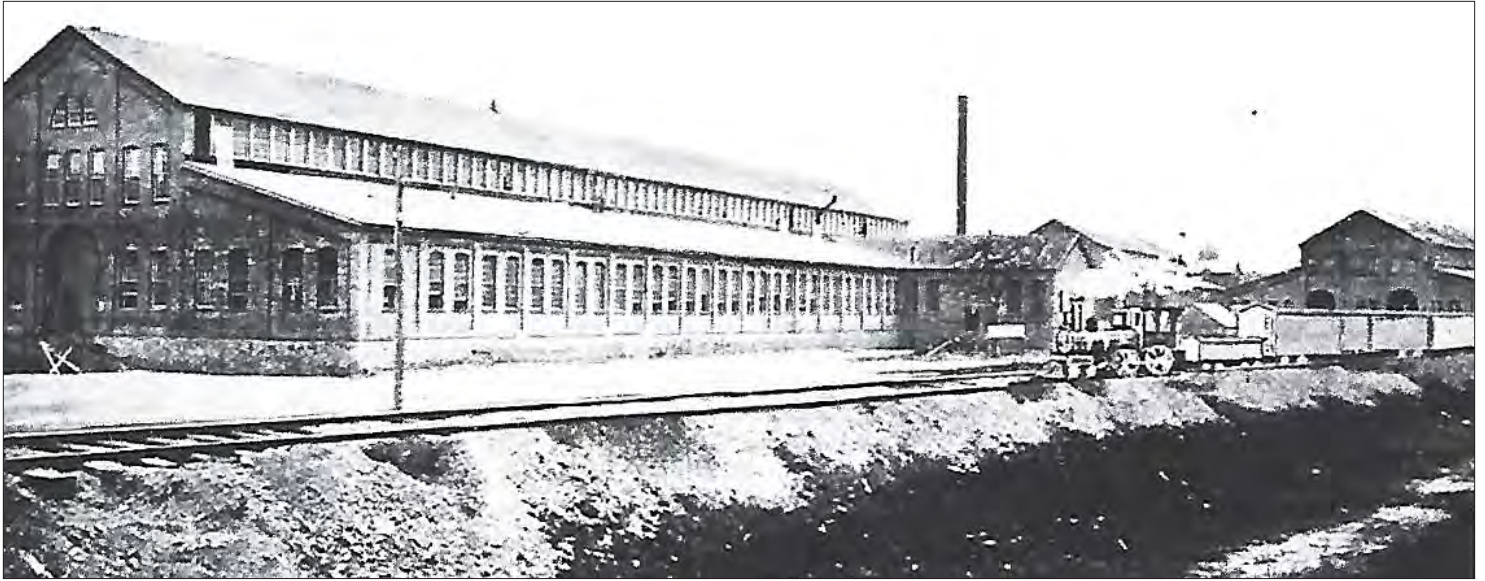
Glasgow and Cornwall. All built hotels to accommodate potential customers. The two in Lexington and Glasgow burned while the hotel in Cornwall was dismantled and repurposed repairing a building in Buena vista. Only the boom hotel in Buena Vista survived. **1**

Now, you might ask: What was the source of the boom in Buena Vista?

Before all the feverish building there were three industries already in business:



Buena Vista, 1891



Rarig's Foundry & Machine Works was located between 10th and 14th Streets. It had frontage on both major railroads, the Chesapeake & Ohio and the Norfolk & Western, and on the James River Canal as well.

- The Appold Tannery, 2
- An extract plant (it extracted a tanning solution from boiling chestnut bark), and
- A planing mill. 3

Before long there were factories from 10th street to 29th, situated along the Norfolk & Western and Chesapeake & Ohio Rail Road tracks. Behind today's Hardees stood an iron furnace which operated until 1923. The Alexander K. Rarig Company 4 used iron from the furnace to fabricate boilers, engines and furnaces. This factory employed 100 workers at any one time.

Beyond the Rarig fabrication plant we encounter what was the industrial center of Buena Vista.

Easily visible, but no longer in operation, is a former paper and cardboard plant. 5 Built in 1889 by the Mead Paper Company, it went through a number of hands before being sold to an Asian company, Bontex, that fabricated insoles for shoes. The plant ceased operation in 2009.

Then one encountered the Buena Vista Saddle & Harness Company, 6 makers of the famous Wilbourne saddle. Next, The Wise Wagon Works, 7

capable of producing 1,000 wagons per year. Next was the Marr Egg Crate Company, 8 which manufactured the owner's patented invention designed for the safe transportation of eggs.

Still further south one would encounter the glass works, 9 where bottles were made. Not much further was the cassimere mill, 10 where wool was woven into a fabric mainly used for men's suits.

A factory making glass brick used to line iron furnaces was located on 29th Street. 11 You can still see the chimney used to cure the brick.

Reed Belden has lived in Rockbridge since 1993 and has been a leader in both Historic Lexington Foundation and the Rockbridge Historical Society. He is a historian interested in the "lost villages of Rockbridge."

The Rockbridge Historical Society holds its collection of artifacts in a temperature-controlled storage facility in Buena Vista. RHS plans to renovate the gallery spaces in its museum in the Campbell House in Lexington, in order to rotate and share more of those objects. Modernizing this more accommodating "Rockbridge History Center" will require funds. I will be making a donation and would appreciate your consideration of the same.

— Reed Belden