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**Where the Bonsacks Settled**  
by Deedie D. Kagey

The origin of the Bonsack family in America begins with the immigration of Johann (John) Jacob Bonsack and occurred at the end of his apprenticeship as a master joiner (cabinetmaker) in the city of Stuttgart, Germany, March 17, 1786. Since it was customary for apprentices to travel from place to place learning their trade, the guild in Stuttgart was the last known guild to which Johann Jacob belonged.

Setting sail on a ship called the Herman and Jacob on April 22, 1786, he disembarked at Portsmouth, Virginia, from which he traveled to Frederick County, Maryland, where there was already a growing element of Germans, especially German Baptists, brethren in his faith.

Johann Jacob's reasons for emigrating to America were two-fold: 1) Religious adjustments were being forced on the people to adhere to the Catholic, Lutheran or Calvinist faiths. Reportedly, Johann Jacob "had been in France and returned to Germany because there had been an order to fight for the pope, die, or leave France". 2) A competent craftsman, he would have the opportunity to pursue his trade in America. Whatever other reasons for emigration existed, they were comparatively insignificant. Religious freedom was, by far, the primary motive, a fact that is recurringly evident in letters among family members during the late 18th and early 19th century.

Having been born in the tiny village of Eisenach, a town in the Duchy of Wurtemburg in 1760, it is believed that Johann Bonsack's family resided at one time in nearby France, or perhaps a Saxon neighborhood where French was spoken, due to French entries in the family bible.

Shortly after his arrival in Frederick County, Maryland, he metMarya (1771), the only daughter of John and Magdelena Shallenberger Hockman, and wed her in 1787. Legend says he met a weaver in Baltimore named Shallenberger who took Johann to his home in Frederick County and introduced him to his granddaughter, Marya. Of this union there were five children: three sons—John (1790 or 91), Jacob (1795) and Nathaniel (1789), and two daughters—Salome (1793) and Elizabeth (1788). At the age of 35, Johann Jacob died, only nine years after his emigration to America.

Son John migrated to present Roanoke County in March 1816, where he wed Susannah Harshbarger on June 4th of the same year. In August they purchased a 300-acre farm in Bonsack for $6,000. Three years later John's brother, Jacob, arrived in Roanoke County and took up residence on Carvin's Creek (about four miles away). Jacob
wed Catherine Harshbarger, Susannah's sister, whose father was already a successful farmer and miller at the forks of Tinker and Carvin's Creek.

**Catherine Harshbarger Bonsack, wife of Jacob Bonsack**

**Susannah Harshbarger Bonsack, wife of John Bonsack**

Jacob died in late 1823 or early 1824 leaving his wife, Catherine, and two daughters. In 1825 Catherine married Joseph Brubaker and eventually bore ten more children. In 1836, the Brubakers moved to Tennessee, and then moved to Iowa (1853), where they remained until death. Since Jacob remained in Roanoke only three years, he had little to do with the Bonsack community directly, although it is believed he helped his brother start the woolen factory.

When John Bonsack left Frederick County, Maryland for Glade Creek, Botetourt County, Virginia, the elders of Pipe Creek Church (Dunkard) sent a letter of recommendation to Virginia. Translated from the German, it reads as follows:

**Frederick County, Md.**

**March 17, 1816**

Grace, love and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ with all that is best for you in time and eternity and also we include our hearty greetings.

As at present our beloved brother Johannes Bonsack desires to go from here to establish a new home with you, we wish to inform you that we are all at peace with him and he is in fellowship with our community and they with him, and we hope that you also
will receive him as a brother.

In the name of our community we commend him to you and [p61] your community. We are

Wilhalm and his Co Brothers
Philip Englar
Christoph Jansen Johannes Garber
David Wampler Jacob Snader
Samuel Pfautz
Jacob Switzer

It is apparent from this letter that John Bonsack had received news of the rich, fertile soil that was available in the Roanoke Valley and Glade Creek community, probably via his former neighbor, Daniel Stoner, who had been established in the area for fifteen years.

Of John and Susannah Harshbarger Bonsack's union there were nine children. The first child, Samuel, died in infancy. The remaining births were those of Jacob (1819), Elizabeth (1821), Mary (1824), Nathaniel (1826), Salome (1829), John Harshbarger (1832), Susan (1834) and Catherine (1836-39). John became a successful farmer and established a woolen mill in 1822. When the railroad (Virginia and Tennessee) began laying tracks in 1852, he gave the part of his land for this purpose to the railroad. In so doing, the railroad called the depot, Bonsack's Station. John died in 1859.

John's son, Jacob, carried on the family business established in 1822 by his father, along with the operation of the flour mills (registered under the name of Bonsack and Kiser in 1856), and the store once run by the Stoners. Correspondence relates that Jacob was a merchant who dealt in "Foreign and Domestic Dry Goods, Groceries, Boots, Shoes, etc." at Good Intent, (an early name for the Bonsack post office). In addition, he served as postmaster for twenty years at Stoner's Store and Bonsack's (before and after the Civil War). In 1844, he married Sarah Whitmore of Mount Meridian in Augusta County. She came from a family of means and of their union were born eight children—four boys and four girls. One of these children, James Albert, became the inventor of the cigarette rolling machine, an invention that led to the formation of the Bonsack Machine Company. The invention of the cigarette machine created wealth for father and son along with many others in the tobacco industry. By the time Jacob Bonsack died in 1889, he had amassed approximately 1,000 acres of land in Bonsack along with the mills, held $236,000 stock in the Bonsack Machine Company and owned estates in Augusta County and Rome, Georgia.

Jacob Bonsack was known to be a man of great charity, having donated the land to the Baptists for the construction of a church. This structure is presently used as the Youth and Family Development Center, child-care facilities, but it is for sale. Bonsack Baptist Church has relocated on Rt. 221 about one quarter of a mile from Rt. 460. In addition, farmers of the area entrusted Jacob with all their excess monies when they accumulated more than they wished to keep in their immediate possession. During the [p62]
Civil War, Jacob defied the command of General Hunter's troops to supply the North with cloth. His denial resulted in the burning of the Bonsack Mills and Depot, which he witnessed. By 1870, Jacob Bonsack had rebuilt the woolen mill and was in business once again.

Susan Bonsack, sister to Jacob, married Dr. Benjamin Jeter of Bedford County in September of 1853 and reared eight children on their Bonsack farm which they inherited from her father. Today, Richard Bonsack Jeter, a grandson, operates one of the largest farms in the Bonsack area.

Mary Bonsack, another sister, married David Plaine October 8, 1848 and they too took up residence in Bonsack (1849) on her father's property. The Plaine family remained on this property until 1902, at which time the descendants moved to Salem. David Plaine was of English descent and met his wife, Mary, while she was visiting relatives in Frederick County (now Carroll) Maryland. He became a zealous Dunkard preacher, ultimately
preaching at Bethel Church in Bonsack. Letters indicate he often made long trips for the purpose of preaching. In 1869 David Plaine served as the postmaster of Bonsack's. Furthermore, in the 1870's, he was the schoolmaster in the old Bonsack neighborhood school near Bethel Church (later it was part of the Big Lick District, Roanoke County Schools). He was also the first station agent at Bonsack's Station when the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad began operating in 1852. David Plaine wrote many letters until his death, many of which are on file at Duke University, Perkins Library, "Bonsack Papers".

The last Bonsack to reside in the community was the grandson of Jacob, son of John William, also named Jacob. He worked for the Norfolk and Western Railway for 52 years (in later years as a telegrapher) residing near the Bonsack Depot in a white frame house which still stands and is presently owned by the Pack family. Jacob Bonsack passed away in 1955 leaving the village of Bonsack with no descendants carrying the Bonsack name.

Samuel Elliott Bonsack III (1918), recently retired president of Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone, remembers nostalgically his boyhood days spent on the farm of his grandfather, Samuel Bonsack, in Bonsack. In 1980 a branch office of Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company, located one mile east of 604 and 460, was appropriately named the Bonsack Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone office.

The Bonsack family has played a major role in the founding, development, and prosperity of this tiny community. The pioneers brought with them many skills that benefited both the residents and the area. They were industrious, ambitious, and religious people who attained the respect of those who resided within the community and without.

Many Bonsack family members are interred within the walled-in plot of the Bonsack cemetery that was once behind Bethel Church but now borders the property of Alvin R. Kagey and Mrs. Vivian Blake.

**Farming at Bonsack**

What were the people of Bonsack doing in the early nineteenth century? We know that Botetourt County was primarily agricultural. Pioneer Bonsack families, along with others in Botetourt County, were farming, creating economically independent units.

The records in Fincastle indicate nearly everyone was growing hemp. The British [sic] placed a high value on hemp because of its uses in shipping — "providing ropes, cloth used as bagging and as sails, and the short fibers (oakum) being used to caulk vessels."

Wheat ranked second in production. Frequently, grist mills would be operating on large farms, spawning the growth of a settlement around them. Flour eventually was marketed on a large scale in and out of Virginia. The Valley became known as "the granary capital".

Corn ranked third in production, followed by a variety of root crops, and hay, oats, barley, and beans. Livestock (cattle, horses, pigs) were also raised and marketed in the eastern cities. In addition, flax was grown extensively in this area for the purpose of weaving linen cloth.

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