

The following article by the late Harold L. Scott, Sr. originally appeared in the "Journal of the Alleghenies", Vol. XXI – 1985. It is reprinted here courtesy of the Journal of the Alleghenies.

How Pompey Smash/Vale Summit Got Its Name

by Harold L. Scott, Sr.

The village of Pompey Smash/Vale Summit is located two miles southwest of the National Pike on Route #55 between Clarysville and Midland. In the mid and late 1800's and early 1900's it was a thriving mining community of approximately 70 families. Most of the residents were Scotch/Irish miners who, along with some of the men of the nearby village of Loartown, worked in the Pompey, Montell, Hoffman, Shaft, and other mines in the Georges Creek area.

There are many stories about how the village of Pompey Smash/Vale Summit got its name. Most of the stories have been passed on by word of mouth, but a few have appeared in print over the years. Each differs slightly, but most center around a Negro slave by the name of Pompey who had the misfortune of smashing his cart or wagon in the town.

Following is one story I heard as a youth growing up in Pompey Smash during the 1930's and 1940's about how this coal mining community came to be known by such a colorful and unique name. Pompey worked on the Vale Farm, which was located near the small mining community. On one occasion he was sent to the village to pick up a load of coal which he was to deliver back to the farm in a hand cart. While in the village, Pompey stopped off at one of the local taverns to quench his thirst. It is not clear whether he lingered too long at the tavern or whether his descent down a rather steep incline known as Bunker Hill was too much for his physical strength, but one thing is fairly clear: Pompey's cart got away from him and crashed at the bottom of the hill. Henceforth, people of the village referred to their community as Pompey Smash. Later the name was changed to Vale Summit.

Another version of how the village of Pompey Smash came by its name is contained in a copy of a newspaper article someone gave to me. I have no record of where the news article came from or when it was printed. The account in its entirety follows:

† *Vale Summit, just west of Clarysville on the road to Midland, used to be known as Pompey Smash. And according to an old poem written by a former George's Creek coal miner, the 'Smash' was more literal than figurative.*

It is the work of Richard J. Creamer, who was born in London, England in 1864, migrated with his Irish parents to America when he was just a boy, settled in the George's Creek area (as so many Irish did) until he moved with his family to Washington, D. C. in 1922, where he died that same year; the poem relates the story of how a Negro slave wagon driver named Pompey failed to set the brakes on his vehicle while descending Parker's Hill into the village with a load of logs, with the result that the wagon ran away, spilling the logs all over the landscape, and finally winding up with a terrific crash against a stout tree. Hence, although it is not known whether Pompey survived the crash, the villagers honored the memory of his spill for years by referring to their little town as nothing but 'Pompey Smash'.

Confirmation of the story of Pompey's mishap, and the subsequent naming of the town, comes from the Rev. William E. Kelley, D. D., pastor of St. Martin's Catholic Church, Baltimore. Father Kelly, whose ready wit and proficiency in the art of ad-libbing make him a favorite dinner speaker in Allegany County, seldom fails to include an anecdote about Pompey Smash, his old home town, in his speeches.

'The story of Pompey's crack-up is well known to the oldtimers of Vale Summit,' says Father Kelly, and 'the tale is so well-founded in tradition that there is every reason to believe that it is not a mere legend.'

(And Vale Summit is still 'Pompey Smash' to many residents of Allegany County, in spite of its new-fangled name.)¹

Still another slightly different version of how Pompey Smash was named is contained in Chapter 6, pages 79-80 in Katherine A. Harvey's books, **The Best Dressed Miners**, published in 1969. Her account with some other interesting facts about Pompey follows:

Pompey Smash, unlike many of the other early mining villages, did not consist mainly of company houses. It was laid out in 1851, and was owned by miners, who bought the lots and built the town. . . . Some of the coal was hauled in wagons and sold to the neighboring blacksmiths by a Negro slave named Pompey, who, on one occasion, had the misfortune to smash his wagon on the spot where the village was afterwards laid out, and it was named Pompey's Smash. Years afterward the miners became ashamed of the name and had it changed to Vale Summit.²

There are many who would dispute her final statement that the name was changed from Pompey Smash to Vale Summit because of shame.

A fourth, and again slightly different version concerning the naming of the town, appears on page 13 of the booklet entitled, "A Look at the Beginnings of Allegany County." The booklet was compiled by Norma Nelson, teacher, and used by her third grade class at Gephart School. It was later printed by the Allegany County Board of Education, for use with all the elementary school children who study Allegany County, as part of their social studies curriculum.

*Once there was a slave named Pompey. He was owned by some people who lived in Vale Summit. One day Pompey was driving a wagon of molasses in barrels. When the horses got away from him, the wagon was smashed. Today some people still call Vale Summit, Pompey Smash or just Pompey.*³

A fifth written explanation of the naming of the town centers on the mule of a slave from the Vale Farm. This version is found in the book, **Colonial and Historic Homes of Maryland**, published by the John Hopkins University Press in 1975. The book contains etchings of one hundred (100) colonial dwellings of Maryland by the famed Baltimore etcher, Don Swann, Sr., with accompanying text by Don Swann, Jr. An etching and history of the Vale Farm is found on pages 86-87 and is one of three (3) homes included in the book from Allegany County. That part of the text dealing with the naming of the town is recounted below.

*It seems that a slave worked a mule named Pompey which had a habit of running away. The animal regularly came back to it's master, but one day wandered into Vale Summit and proceeded to wreck everything in it's path. Consequently, when the slave found the mule, he gravely commented, 'Pompey smash', and the name was taken up by all who heard the story.*⁴

John Williams (Bill) Hansel, who resides in Romney, West Virginia, but who grew up and lived most of his life in Pompey Smash told me in an interview how the village later came to be known as Vale Summit. The village is located in the vale just below the summit of the land's highest point on the road between Clarysville and Midland. Hence, it came to be known as the town in the vale below the summit, Vale Summit.⁵

Although the village is known today as Vale Summit, most of the older residents and former residents still proudly refer to their place of birth as POMPEY SMASH.

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