

DAVIES, RHYS (1795 - 1838), engineer and industrialist

Name: Rhys Davies
Date of birth: 1795
Date of death: 1838
Parent: Rhys Davies
Gender: Male
Occupation: engineer and industrialist
Area of activity: Engineering, Construction, Naval Architecture and Surveying; Business and Industry
Author: Vivienne Sanders

Rhys Davies was born in Llangynidr, Breconshire, in January 1795. His father was an ironworker, and might have been the Rees Davies of Llangynidr who constructed three furnaces for the Tredegar Company in Monmouthshire from 1800 onwards.

Rhys Davies worked in the Tredegar Ironworks from the age of 11 years. At some time in the 1820s, he joined the Corps of Royal Engineers. He helped construct rolling mills in France in the late 1820s and early 1830s, including one ordered by Louis-Philippe I. In the early 1830s, Davies emigrated to the United States and supervised the construction of the Samsondale Iron Works in Haverstraw, New York. In 1832, he and his wife and five children (about whom nothing is known) moved to Richmond, Virginia, where he had been asked to establish a foundry and ironworks. Along with his father and several other ironworkers from the Tredegar area, Rhys Davies masterminded the construction of the first mill for rolling iron for the Virginia Foundry Company's ironworks in Richmond. Davies was the mill's first superintendent. In 1837, the Tredegar Forge and Rolling Mill began operation in Richmond. On 6 February 1838, the *Richmond Enquirer* noted that the 'works are admirably constructed under a most skillful engineer, Mr Reese Davies... The iron is of excellent quality, and is in demand in different markets in the United States.'

The president of the Richmond works had written to the Mayor of Tredegar asking if he could use the name of Tredegar for the Richmond works. The mayor agreed to the request, which might have been to honour the Welsh iron town, or to exploit its name and fame, or to honour Rhys Davies. In 1890, the owner of the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond explained that a former owner had so named it 'in compliment to Mr Davis who was educated at the celebrated Welsh establishment'.

Within weeks of beginning work on a new rolling mill for the Belle Isle Manufacturing Company, near Richmond, Rhys Davies was stabbed to death by a fellow worker. On 18 September 1838, the *Richmond Compiler* newspaper recorded, 'He gave way to his passion and fell its victim.' The killer was 'examined and discharged', which suggests that Rhys Davies was considered culpable. According to the *Hereford Times* he died on 9 September 1838.

The *Hereford Times* obituary (where his birth is dated to January 1795) for Rhys Davies described him as a 'mechanical genius'. In conjunction with other Welshmen who had emigrated with him, Davies used Welsh expertise to set up what had become the largest producer of iron in the United States by 1840. This ironworks made a particularly important contribution to the burgeoning railway system that was revolutionising American settlement, communications and industry, and played an essential part in supplying the Confederacy during the American Civil War. Ironically, given the Welsh contribution to its establishment, this was one of the American ironworks that ended the supremacy of the Welsh ironworks.

Author

Vivienne Sanders

Sources

Hereford Times, 24 November 1838, p.3, obituary of Rhys Davies, entitled, 'From a Richmond Paper'

Evan Powell, *History of Tredegar: subject of competition at Tredegar 'Chair Eisteddfod', held February the 25th, 1884* (Cardiff 1885), reprinted by Andesite Press, 2017

Nathan Vernon Madison, *Tredegar Iron Works: Richmond's Foundry on the James* (Charleston 2015)

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Published date: 2022-04-22

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