Mining for Victory

Daniel Roberdeau's lead mine and fort

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Photography by Heather Mull
The founding fathers of the United States, men like Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin, are well-known for their prominent roles in the Revolutionary War and the country's formative years. But there were many more leaders who did not make the history books but were important nonetheless. Daniel Roberdeau was one of these men: a wealthy Philadelphia merchant who risked his reputation and fortune to help free the colonies from the grip of the king.

Roberdeau's name is never heard by the average American. Schoolchildren do not learn of the sacrifices he made or the risks he took. Few major articles have been written about his service to the country. Yet his activities had an impact on the Revolutionary War and the birth of the United States. Among his contributions was the creation of a lead mining facility and fort in Western Pennsylvania; his efforts to mine lead on the frontier offer interesting insights into the period.

**FROM MERCHANT TO REVOLUTIONARY LEADER**

As a prominent merchant in Philadelphia, Roberdeau carried on extensive trade with the Caribbean and England. Ads in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from 1752 – 1762 indicate he dealt in a variety of goods, from wheat and flour to linens and hardware. Roberdeau was worried about deteriorating relations between the mother country and her colonies not only because of his trading business, but because he had a wharf and a distillery in Alexandria, Va. Roberdeau and partner David Jackson first advertised their rum in a 1775 issue of the *Virginia Gazette*, and it remained Roberdeau's chief pursuit after the war.

While hostilities intensified between England and her colonies, Roberdeau's investments continued to increase. Those concerned
with maintaining favorable trading conditions had two choices: support efforts to maintain the peace, or help free America from the control of England. Roberdeau chose to support the Revolutionary cause.

In 1775, when he was 48 years old, Roberdeau was elected to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, made up of prominent men of the colony like Benjamin Franklin and Robert Morris. When the Revolution started, the committee served as the state’s wartime government plus handled tasks such as the defense of Philadelphia.

Roberdeau is often referred to in the minutes of the Committee of Safety as Colonel because of his rank in a local militia, the Second Battalion of the Associates of Philadelphia. Due to his dual role, Colonel Roberdeau facilitated communications and cooperation between the committee and the Associates. Roberdeau helped secure ordnance for the Associates, and in 1776, he was appointed to oversee the construction of three fortifications.

Roberdeau also contributed to the American war effort at sea. His business ledger contains numerous entries concerning the privateers Congress and Chance. Privateers were privately-owned ships allowed to attack enemy vessels, both to incapacitate them and to seize their cargoes. The first ledger entry, from April 2, 1776, indicates Roberdeau paid £100 for a one-eighth share in the ships. The next entry two months later indicates Roberdeau also was paying expenses for the ships. An account from the June 21, 1776, Virginia Gazette reported that one trip yielded some $23,000 cash and a variety of goods such as sugar, rum, cocoa, and hides.

The following month, the two privateers captured more than £6,000 plus five bags of silver coin and plate from British ships. Roberdeau saw a handsome return, but just as importantly, the interdiction of British shipping by these privateers helped the American war effort by depriving the enemy of money and supplies. Most tellingly, Roberdeau and the other investors donated the captured silver to Congress.

Less notable and celebrated than the Congress and Chance was Roberdeau’s investment in the brig General Mifflin. This 12-gun sailing ship prowled British waters where it took several valuable vessels, one of them being a ship with a large cargo of wine. This victory is significant because most of the day’s privateering was done in the far-less-dangerous waters just off of the North American coast.
By the summer of 1776, Roberdeau and the Associators were on the march to New Jersey to aid General George Washington and the Continental Army. Roberdeau's military leadership skills were well respected by the men of the Associators, for on July 4, 1776, they elected Roberdeau to the post of Brigadier-General, the group's highest rank.

Roberdeau was known as an eloquent speaker, though some of his oral prowess may have been the result of a collaboration with his volunteer secretary, Thomas Paine. Roberdeau's inspirational style is exemplified by this excerpt from an address printed by the Virginia Gazette on September 14, 1776:

> If we can leave peace and freedom to our children and posterity, we leave them a fortune more valuable than gold...think of your country's good — look but across the water, and for your honor sake never let it be said that an army of sixpenny soldiers picked up from prisons and dungeons, fighting in the worst of causes for the worst of Kings, bore the fatigue of war with stouter hearts than you.

Despite General Roberdeau's efforts, the Associators were disbanded that September for reasons now unknown, and he lost Paine's services. Many former Associators went on to fight with Washington at Trenton and aid in his Delaware River crossing, but Roberdeau couldn't. In the fall of 1776, he contracted a fever and was taken to Lancaster to recover. His wife, Mary, contracted the same sickness and died in February of 1777, leaving him to raise five children, ages 2 to 14.

**LEAD MINING ON THE PENNSYLVANIA FRONTIER**

In 1777, Roberdeau was elected to the Continental Congress as a representative from Pennsylvania, and was soon appointed to a committee dealing with the scarcity of provisions for the Continental Army. Because of his experience as a political and military leader, Roberdeau was acutely aware of the constant lead shortage in North America. As a member of the Council of Safety (reorganized from the Committee of Safety in July 1776), Roberdeau often sat on subcommittees dealing with ordnance, military supplies, weapons, and fortifications, all of which brought him into contact with the lead supply problem.

Roberdeau set out in April 1778 to work his own lead mine northeast of Altoona in Sinking Valley, Pennsylvania. Roberdeau sent correspondence that month from the Western Pennsylvania frontier reporting that the "discovery of a new vein promises the most ample supply..."

Roberdeau's interest had been spurred by a letter by a General Armstrong to Congress about lead in the region and how it could be mined successfully with an experienced foreman and a few men.

But success did not come so easily. Roberdeau had to find the lead, mine it, smelt it, and send it east, but on the frontier, it was a struggle just to procure supplies. Worse was the problem of finding
workers on the frontier, a brutal place made more dangerous by local Tories and their Indian allies. Roberdeau was forced to build a fort to protect his lead mine and what few workers he had. As he stated in a June 4, 1778, letter to George Washington, the fort would also provide a haven for settlers.

The construction of the fort was no simple task either; the limestone beneath was too close to the surface to use conventional construction methods. Normally, the logs that formed a fort’s walls were placed vertically into a trench in the ground. Instead, the walls of this 50-yards-square wooden structure were pieced together horizontally, a technique used often in areas of stone or sand.

Workers, food, ammunition, and soldiers for protection were all necessities for construction. Seventy militia from Cumberland and Bedford counties built the fort in one month. By June 1778, two months after starting, Roberdeau requested that the state reimburse him for his expenses. He had not been ruined by the expenditures but was still forced to borrow from a friend. In the 1778 – 1779 session, Congress ordered, “that the board of war estimate the expense of the fort lately built by Mr. Roberdeau in [then] Bedford County in Pennsylvania, and report the same to Congress, with their opinion by whom the same ought to be defrayed.”

Roberdeau’s mine did produce; in 1778, he made a formal request of the Supreme Executive Council to pay him for 1,000 pounds of lead. The Council responded by offering to pay him when an official receipt for the delivery of the lead was produced, and that they had no knowledge of such. Roberdeau could not document the delivery and so was never reimbursed.

Things were not looking much better in 1779. Roberdeau was still facing a lack of workers, and so requested more smelters and miners from a Major-General McDougal. Also, raids into Sinking Valley by Indians and Tories continued to threaten the fort. In a letter that year, Roberdeau noted
that Tory threats had driven away Andrew Hubbard, the last remaining smelter — this despite “exorbitant wages” and a $100 bonus for work that could have been completed in two or three days.¹⁹

Fortunes improved late in 1779 when 2,200 pounds of lead were produced and delivered to Water Street, a landing on the Juniata River 12 miles east of the fort.²⁰ Unlike the first delivery, this shipment seems to have been paid for without a problem. But continuing problems caused another 5 or 6 tons of lead ore to sit, as there were no skilled workers to process it.²¹ Finally, Roberdeau closed the mine; in a letter to the Supreme Executive Council, he faulted Congress for not supplying “the necessary defenses.”²²

Congress of course had more pressing concerns, which could also account for the delays and disagreements over payments and defense. The French joined the Revolution on the American side in February 1778, just before mining began, alleviating the lead shortage. Ever the patriot, Roberdeau had donated $18,000 to Congress to send diplomats including Benjamin Franklin to France to achieve the alliance.²³

While Roberdeau searched for a buyer for his struggling mine in 1780, he invested in another mining venture, the Bald Eagle Company.²⁴ The company was owned by Thomas James, John Cockey, and Nathaniel Owings, Roberdeau’s silent partner in the Sinking Valley endeavor. In 1777, the
three had received the approval of Congress to mine for lead in Virginia and Maryland.

In 1780, Roberdeau and his new partners tried to revive the Sinking Valley mine only to face a new problem: its mining equipment was gone. How it was lost is unknown, but Roberdeau sent Thomas James to find it. The equipment had to be found before operations could resume. By 1781, the company had still not found all of its equipment, so Roberdeau decided to sell what equipment had been recovered or stored at Huntingdon, and liquidate the Sinking Valley company.

On March 6, 1781, Roberdeau petitioned the State Assembly for reimbursement of his mining expenses. When no compensation was made, he brought a suit against the state of Pennsylvania. The suit lasted until February 1783, when it was defeated and reimbursement denied, based on the fact that Roberdeau never produced an official receipt for some of the lead he delivered (mentioned previously). The state's interpretation of the initial agreement was that the company would be reimbursed only if its losses were caused by the enemy. Roberdeau claimed that the losses were due to the enemy's constant threats, preventing the lead mine from being worked to maximum potential, but he could not prove this beyond doubt. After all, no fighting took place at the fort and the enemy never destroyed the mining operation by attack. Although the Tories may have stolen the equipment, there was no proof. Instead, Roberdeau wrote that the British bribed the lead workers to leave.

Roberdeau then attempted to get his partners to share the financial burden of the failing company; when they refused, he sued. He settled for £813 plus interest until the principal was paid.

On February 23, 1783, Daniel Roberdeau acknowledged the sale of Bald Eagle equipment at an auction in Huntingdon, Pa., thus bringing his lead mine operation to a close. Exactly how much money Roberdeau lost in the lead mine endeavor is not clear, but the Sinking Valley operation was not a complete loss. In its few years of sporadic operation, Roberdeau's mine produced more than 1.5 tons of lead as well as the 5 to 6 tons of unprocessed ore. This is not as much lead as was hoped for, but it did help the cause. The lead produced near Fort Roberdeau and other small mines in 1778 and 1779 was an important stop-gap measure until lead could be received from France. Like many of General Daniel Roberdeau's long-forgotten efforts, the mine had an impact far beyond its apparent results.
For example, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 9, 1752.
2 *Virginia Gazette*, April 2, 1775.
3 *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, v. 10 (T. Fenn, n.d.), 297.
5 Daniel Roberdeau Ledger, Fort Roberdeau, Altoona, Pa.
6 *Virginia Gazette*, June 21, 1776.
8 *Virginia Gazette*, Sept. 14, 1776.
10 Buchanan, Roberdeau. *Genealogy of the Roberdeau Family* (Fort Roberdeau Assoc., 1986), 75.
11 *Pennsylvania Archives*, v. 6 (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1976 [hereafter PHMC]), 446.
12 *Pennsylvania Archives*, v. 6 (PHMC), 293.
13 This is commonly repeated as the reason for the fort's distinctive construction at the fort today.
14 Daniel Roberdeau, York Town, June 6, 1778, letter to Mr. Bryan, Jenkins Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
16 *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, v. 12 (T. Fenn), 162-163.
17 Daniel Roberdeau Papers (Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress [hereafter LOC]), 23.
18 For detailed information on Indian and Tory raids on the Pennsylvania frontier, see U. J. Jones, *History of the Early Settlement of the Juniata Valley* (Telegraph Press, 1940).
19 Daniel Roberdeau Papers (LOC), 244.
20 Daniel Roberdeau Papers (LOC), 23.
21 Daniel Roberdeau Papers (LOC), 244.
22 *Pennsylvania Archives*, v. 8, (PHMC), 5-6.
23 Daniel Roberdeau Papers (LOC), 239.
25 He bought his share in July 1779.
26 Daniel Roberdeau, April 19, 1782, letter to Jasper Yeats, Dreer Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
27 Daniel Roberdeau Papers (LOC), 301.
28 Author Bob Emerson notes that a line of 4,800 men, firing a volley (allowing for 25% misfires) would use approximately 250 – 300 pounds of lead in one shot. The lead produced at Fort Roberdeau would allow 4,800 men a dozen shots each. The Continental Army rarely had 4,800 men in any one battle making even one and a half tons a significant supply for the army.