

Bowles **Rice** VIEWS **&** VISIONS

BOWLESRICE.COM

JANUARY 2020

Salt of the Earth



Nancy Bruns

J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works

Nancy Bruns is a Co-founder of J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works in Malden, West Virginia.

A seventh-generation salt maker, Nancy spent 25 years working in several different areas of the food industry before reviving her family's salt enterprise in 2013. Since then, J.Q. Dickinson has received national attention, including features in *Southern Living*, *Food & Wine* and *Bon Appétit* magazines.

You can't talk about the history of industry in the state of West Virginia without starting at salt. In the mid-1800s, the Kanawha Valley was the largest salt-producing region in the country. While salt is something most of us take for granted today, it was a vital resource before the advent of refrigeration. Salt has been an important commodity for centuries and, at one time, was even more valuable than gold. It has been used to preserve meats and vegetables, tan hides and has played a role in many religious ceremonies and rituals. Salt regulates the fluids in our cells and provides important minerals to our muscles and nerves. In other words, we cannot survive without salt.

South central West Virginia sits on top of one of the oldest salt deposits in the world. The continents came together nearly 400 million years ago to form Pangea in the Iapetus Ocean, trapping salt deposits deep underground. Over time, these deposits were re-dissolved by a fresh-water aquifer, creating a salty river between 300 and 1,700 feet below the Kanawha Valley. In several places, salty springs would push to the surface. Large animals would come for the minerals; Native Americans would come to hunt, as well as gather salt.

As the European settlers moved west across the Allegheny Mountains in the late 1700s and early 1800s, they, too, found this vital resource. The "Kanawha Salines" grew to be a large industrial area, with more than 50 salt producers boiling brine to create the valuable commodity. Cincinnati, known at the time as "Porkopolis" for being the largest pork-producing city in the world, was the major market. The river was covered with flatboats stacked with barrels of salt. The mountains were going bare from timbering to stoke the furnaces boiling brine. Once the timber was depleted, producers converted to

coal-burning furnaces, giving rise to the coal industry in central Appalachia. The Great Kanawha Salt was voted the "Best Salt in the World" at the 1851 World's Fair in London.

The Dickinson family, led by William Dickinson, was an integral part of the industry in the Valley. Along with the Shrewsburys, Ruffners and others, they were the pioneers who laid the groundwork for the development of business and industry here. The salt industry gave rise to the coal, natural gas and, later, the chemical industry in the state. Though the salt industry was destroyed during the Civil War, the Dickinson's rebuilt and continued to produce salt well into the 1940s, until it became apparent that boiling brine to produce salt could not compete with the Morton Salt Company, which mined it. The Dickinsons had learned to extract other minerals from the brine, such as bromides and calcium compounds, which kept the business going until the 1980s.

In 2012, as a great-great-great-great-granddaughter of William Dickinson, I began to learn more about my ancestors and their contributions to the Valley. I was awestruck by their perseverance and courage to grow a successful business venture in the frontier lands of a blossoming young country. They were risk takers. They were determined to be successful, and they left an impressive legacy for their descendants.

I had happily spent my career in the food business, living all over the country and working in different aspects of the industry. In the early 2000s, I had started to collect salts from around the world. I was fascinated by the various crystal sizes, textures and range of flavors due to the combination of minerals present. I began to pay attention to this growing industry. Turns out there was more to salt than Morton and Diamond Crystal. Artisan



producers were popping up around the world, but it seemed the United States was lagging in the industry.

This brought on the stereotypical “aha” moment: *“Why not revive the salt industry in the Kanawha Valley?”*

I tried to ignore this thought. I was living in North Carolina, for goodness sakes. I pushed the idea to the back of my mind and moved on with daily life. It wouldn’t go away, though. I succumbed by telling myself to write a business plan to see if such an undertaking was even feasible. When it was complete, the evidence was obvious. I had to pursue this.

I called my brother, Lewis Payne, who was living in Charleston, to share my idea. At first, he thought I was a little crazy, but then he came around, just as I had. We drilled a well in the spring of 2013 and started J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works on the same land our ancestors had utilized 200 years prior. While we use solar energy instead of burning timber or coal to evaporate our brine, the salt is remarkably similar in flavor. We feel our ancestors would be proud of what we are doing. The weight of their legacy is with us daily,




driving us to be the best we can be. I feel blessed to be able to uphold this heritage while keeping the history of the salt industry alive in the Kanawha Valley. 

Photo Caption 1 Dickinson Salt Works as seen from the opposite bank of the Kanawha River, circa 1910.

Photo Caption 2 Co-founders Lewis Payne and Nancy Bruns use solar energy to harvest J.Q. Dickinson salt from the brine.