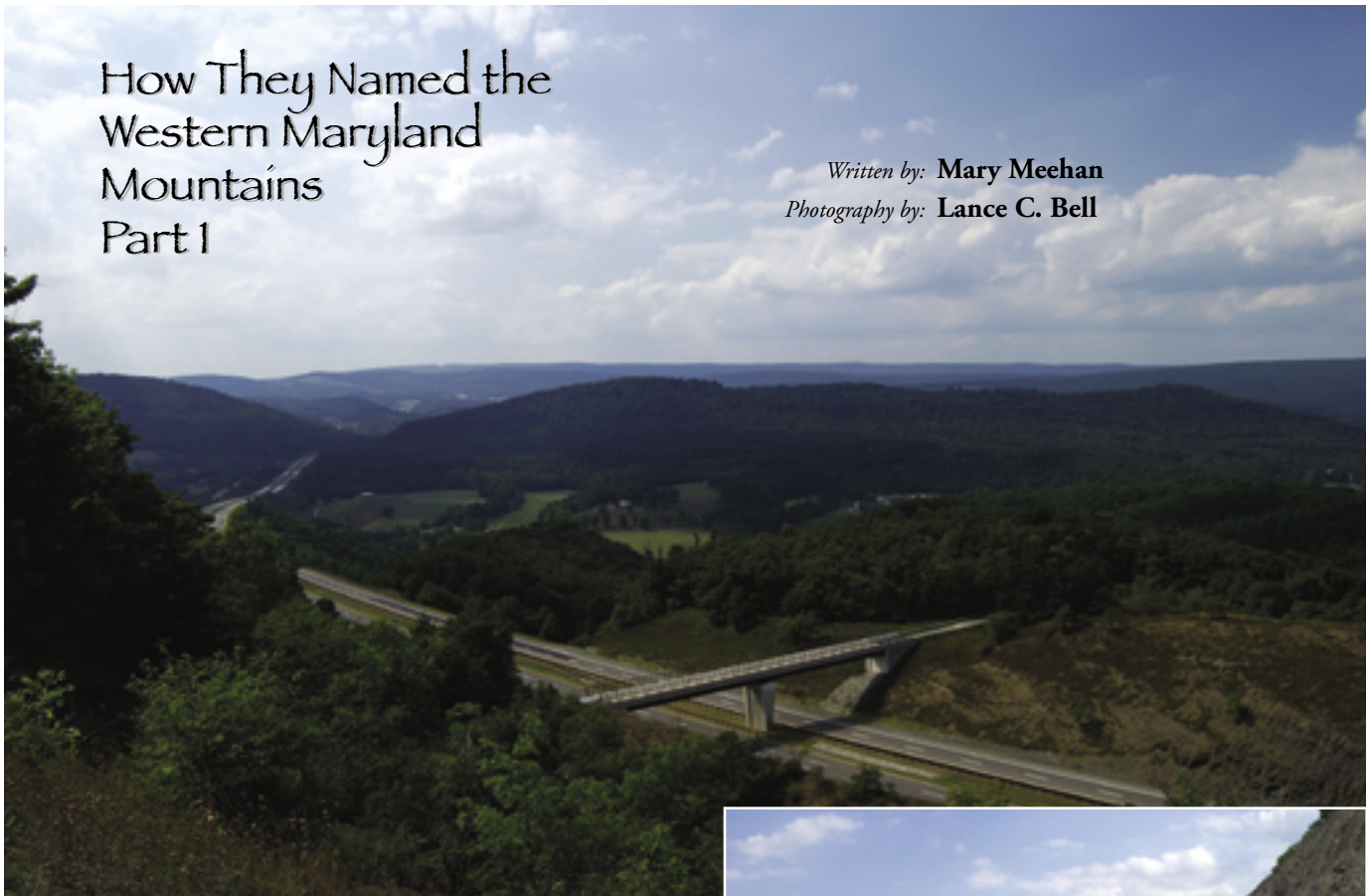


# How They Named the Western Maryland Mountains Part I

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View taken of the area, looking west from Polish Mountain.

Did you ever wonder, while driving up Polish Mountain, where its name comes from? Does it commemorate a Polish family or Polish hero?

Some evidence suggests that the name is not related to the Polish nationality at all, and that most people mispronounce it. Perhaps it should be pronounced with a short “o,” as in “shoe polish” or “furniture polish.”

But if you ask people in Flintstone, Md., at the base of the mountain, you’re likely to hear a long “o.” A woman behind the counter in Helmick’s Grocery insisted, “It’s Plish...Everyone around here calls it Plish.” A young woman who was selling corn at a roadside stand concurred. So did a small group of people who were chatting outside Edie’s Country Kitchen. Yet if you ask whether the mountain was named for a Polish family or some incident related to Poland, you draw a blank. No one seems to know. And there are not many people with Polish names in Allegany County—especially not when compared with the large number who have English or German names.



The late John Mash, historian of the Green Ridge State Forest, said some people in the Polish Mountain area told him the name “should be pronounced as in shoe polish.” They contended, Marsh wrote in *The Land of the Living*, that “the first settlers saw the effect the setting sun had on the tree foliage on the mountain” and that to them it seemed “smoothed and polished.”

In their 1923 history of Allegany County, James W. Thomas and T. J. C. Williams suggested that the mountain was named for the polished look of its rock. They described its face as “quite even and smooth and scalloped into many segments.” They had a point. Even now, if you drive over Polish Mountain in the late afternoon of a sunny day, you may see the sun give a glittery, polished effect to rocks high on the mountain.



*Garrett County farmlands looking east with Negro Mountain in the background.*



In land records at the state archives in Annapolis, John Mash found references from the 1790s to a “Polished Mountain” land parcel in Allegany County. There are similar references in old records at the Allegany County Courthouse in Cumberland. In 1803, for example, James Statton Collins, a farmer, sold some land on “Polished Mountain” to Jacob Wineland, a miller. Perhaps, the “ed” in “Polished” was gradually dropped over the years, and people forgot the origin of the mountain’s name.

Garrett County’s Negro Mountain, which runs between Grantsville and Keyzers Ridge and stretches up into Pennsylvania, honors the memory of a brave man who apparently was convinced that he would die in battle.

“A free Negro who was with the English was killed,” reported the *Maryland Gazette* of June 10, 1756. The

*Gazette* was describing a skirmish that took place west of Cumberland during the French and Indian War. By “the English,” it meant the English-born pioneer Thomas Cresap and a band of volunteers he led over the mountains in pursuit of French-allied Indians. Actually, many of the Cresap volunteers probably were American-born, and some were friendly Nottoway Indians.

The *Gazette* did not say exactly where the skirmish took place. But 70 years later, the Rev. John J. Jacob, who had married into the Cresap family, wrote that it happened on Negro Mountain and that the mountain was named to commemorate the Negro who had accompanied Cresap and died in the “running fight” there. Jacob didn’t give the man’s name, but said he was “of gigantic stature.”

The skirmish took place less than a year after General Edward Braddock’s defeat in Pennsylvania by the French and Indians. Taking advantage of the British army’s temporary withdrawal, the Indians raided English settlements all over the frontier—burning cabins, tomahawking and scalping

families, and taking prisoners. The French paid their Indian allies for English scalps; and the English paid both their settlers and friendly Indians for the scalps of enemy Indians. The brutal war was made even worse by the Indian practice of torturing to death the men they captured. This may explain why many on the Cresap expedition—although they actually saw very few Indians—lost their nerve and wanted to hurry home.

Colonel Cresap himself wrote an account of the expedition for Ben Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* of June 17, 1756. He had left his home in Oldtown, Md., on May 20th, marching west with 71 volunteers. (According to the *Maryland Gazette*, Cresap's two sons were with him; he had lost a third son in a skirmish with Indians a short time before.) Cresap's band joined one from Fort Cumberland; they advanced west together in search of Indians, but later separated.

One day Cresap's men divided into three groups to look for hostile Indians. Toward sunset, Cresap's group encountered one of the others at a bridge, where they were getting drunk and making noise. Telling them to quiet down, he led his group across the bridge, then saw three Indians approaching on horseback. Cresap kept moving toward them, with his gun "cocked on my shoulder." Then, he said, "an old Negro presented his Gun at" the Indians—that is, raised his gun to fire. They jumped off their horses, took cover behind trees, and started shooting. They shot the Negro; Cresap didn't say whether the man died right away.

Cresap's men shot and wounded two Indians, perhaps fatally. Night was falling, though, and they couldn't find the wounded Indians. Fearing that other Indians might be lurking in the area, and realizing that most of his men were "drunk at the Bridge," Cresap acted cautiously. He planned to camp a few miles away and return in the morning to look for the wounded Indians (probably to scalp them). But when they reached the intended camping place, his men insisted on marching on back to Fort Cumberland, and Cresap went with them.

It's hard to tell what Colonel Cresap meant when he called the fallen Negro an "old" man. Cresap himself was probably in his early sixties by that time and undoubtedly was seen by many as an old guy. He gave no other information on the other man.

But 126 years later, in his 1882 *History of Western Maryland*, J. Thomas Scharf said the man's name was Nemesis and that he was Cresap's servant. Shortly before the expedition started, Scharf wrote, Nemesis was "cleaning his rifle to be ready for the fray." Cresap asked him, "Well, Nemesis, are you ready for the fight?"

Nemesis responded, "Yes, massa; but I don't come back."

Joshing him, Cresap said, "Well, Nemesis, if you are afraid of being killed, you can stay here with the women, and I will go without you."

Nemesis kept cleaning his rifle and replied, "Massa, you knows I's not afraid; where you go, I will go; where

you fight, Nemesis will fight; but Nemesis will not come back."

Cresap realized he had been unfair to Nemesis, who was, Scharf said, "as brave a man as ever drew a trigger." Cresap said he had only joked and that the two of them would fight together and defend each other.

Scharf apparently heard this story from Thomas J. McKaig, a prominent attorney in Cumberland. McKaig had lived in the city since 1826; he may have heard the Nemesis story from old men who had been on the expedition or from Cresap descendants. (While records are unclear, at least two suggest that McKaig's first wife was a direct descendant of Col. Cresap.) So Scharf's account may be fairly accurate. If it is, though, why didn't Cresap name Nemesis in his own account and pay some tribute to his bravery?

In an 1859 book about his hunting exploits in Western Maryland, Meshach Browning told a story that raises other questions. Browning was born 25 years after the Cresap expedition. Someone who had been on it, he wrote, told him that the Negro was mortally wounded, but still living and "was laid under a rock [probably meaning a rock overhang, for shelter] until the party should return from their expedition." The men returned the next day, Browning said; the Negro was "still groaning under the rock; but their fear of the Indians was so great, that, not daring to go to his assistance, they left him to die in the woods on the mountain." This contradicts Cresap's account, which says his party returned to Fort Cumberland instead of going back to the mountain. But perhaps they left a dying Nemesis behind.

Another account—doubtful, yet possibly true—suggests that a man named Andrew Friend was on the Cresap expedition. By this account, Friend and another man stayed with the wounded Nemesis, at the risk of their own lives, and buried him on the mountain after he died.

While there is doubt about some details, there is no doubt about the steadiness and courage of the man who died on the mountain.



*John Mash's book, The Land of the Living, is available at the following locations:*

<b>Bill's Place</b> Little Orleans (310) 478-2701	<b>Main Street Books*</b> Frostburg (301) 689-5605
<b>Book Center*</b> Cumberland (301) 722-2284	<b>Road Kill Café</b> Artemas, PA (814) 784-3257
<b>Book Market*</b> Oakland (301) 334-8778	<b>Rocky Gap State Park Headquarters</b> Flintstone (301) 777-2012
<b>Green Ridge State Forest Headquarters</b> Flintstone (301) 478-3125	
<b>Knot Hole*</b> Flintstone (301) 478-3040	*these stores will ship