

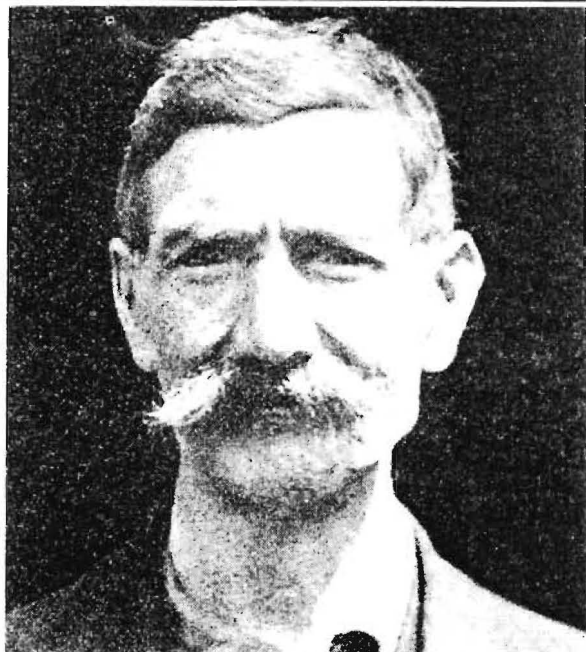


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"Scotch-Johnny" John Houston
by
Jim Glanville

John Houston, or Scotch-Johnny," as he was known in his working days at the Mathieson Alkali Works, is an interesting figure in the history of Saltville and a person whose lifetime encompasses the great transitions that swept through the soda ash (sodium carbonate) industry in Europe and America at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

When he began his career as a chemical worker at the Mathieson Alkali Works in 1878, at Widnes (near Liverpool), England, it was in an old-fashioned Leblanc process plant at a time when such plants dominated the European scene and the US relied entirely on European soda imports. (From roughly 1820-1880 the Leblanc process, which used salt, coal, and sulfur as its raw materials, reigned supreme.) Thirty years later, at the end of Houston's working career, every one of the Leblanc plants had been shut down, and world production of soda ash came entirely from plants using the ammonia-soda process. Ammonia process plants, which began large scale operations in the 1870s and which still today operate in many parts of the world (but not in the US, which has abundant supplies of mined natural soda), use salt and limestone as their raw materials, with recycled ammonia being a key intermediate in the production process. The ammonia-soda process was first successfully commercialized by the Belgian chemist Ernest Solvay and second, in Widnes, by the Scot Neil Mathieson around 1890.

Also during Houston's working career the United States went from being completely dependent on imported, European-manufactured (mainly British) soda ash to becoming the leading soda ash producer in the world. This period was the era during which the US chemical industry began its rise to its present world dominance.

The Saltville soda ash plant operated the ammonia process from its first operation in 1895 until it closed in 1971 during a time frame when competition from soda derived from natural mineral sources in the American west (predominately trona from Wyoming) made the operation of all the ammonia-soda plants in the US uneconomic. At the present time, all of the US production of soda ash (28.2% of the world total) comes from mineral sources. The bulk of soda ash production in the rest of the world continues to come from the ammonia-soda process including the entire output of China (27.4% of the world total) and Europe (21.7% of the world total).

Houston was born in 1862 in Campbeltown at the lower end of the Kintyre peninsula of Argyll on the Atlantic west coast of Scotland. He died on March 3rd, 1928, and is buried in the Elizabeth cemetery in Saltville. It was no coincidence that Neil Mathieson himself had been born in Campbeltown 36 years earlier: Mathieson was known all his life to favor employees from his old home town. When the Mathieson family contracted to build the Saltville plant in the early 1890s, Houston was one of 20-30 chemical workers who crossed the Atlantic with the Mathiesons to build the plant. Neil Mathieson only visited Saltville once, but his son Thomas Train Mathieson was a Saltville resident for three years during the plant's construction.

One of the key documents of Saltville history is the 1922 anniversary issue of *The Alkalite*, which was
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Scotch- Johnny continued...

published to celebrate the twenty-fifth year of operation of the Mathieson Alkali Works. In that issue we have the only known record of the thoughts of "Scotch-Johnny," who was by 1922 "the only man left with us out of the original number who came over from England in 1893 to build the plant."

The main events of Houston's life and related events in the chemical industry are shown in the following table.

Main Events in the Life of John Houston		
1862		Born in Campbeltown, Argyll, on the Kintyre peninsula.
1878	Aged 16	Moves to Widnes (near Liverpool) in England and becomes an employee of Mathieson Alkali Works which operates the Leblanc soda process there.
Around 1885	Aged 23	Serves as personal employee of Neil Mathieson on Mathieson's private boat.
1887		Neil Mathieson builds an ammonia-soda process plant at Widnes. By this time, ammonia-soda plants for built by the Solvay company had been in operation for 15 years. Mathieson Alkali becomes the second commercial operator of the ammonia process (after Solvay). Houston was familiar with this plant.
1890	Aged 28	Mathieson sells out to United Alkali, a British cartel intending to continue the operations of the now outmoded British Leblanc process plants. By selling out, Mathieson becomes free to undertake operations at Saltville. It is not known if Houston became an employee of the cartel or continued to be employed by Mathieson.
1893	Aged 31	Houston, now certainly employed by Mathieson, arrives in New York from Liverpool on May 8th aboard the steamship <i>Umbria</i> . States his age as 31 and his occupation as "chemicals."
1893	Aged 31	May 10th. Arrives in Saltville. Begins work at the plant.
1894	Aged 32	Bride to be (Isabel F.) arrives from Britain. They marry in nearby Bristol.
1895	Aged 33	Daughter May Isabelle (known as "May I") born May 4.
1898	Aged 36	Daughter Ida born. Date not known.
1900?		Third daughter born. Nothing known about her except that she was living in 1922.
1902	Aged 40	He becomes a US citizen.
1904	Aged 42	Son Ian Fairley born April 23.
1922	Aged 60	Only known interview with Houston published in the <i>Alkalite</i> . At this time he was working at the Mathieson plant as a "drum maker."
1928	Aged 66	Houston dies March 3rd. Buried in Elizabeth Cemetery, Saltville.

John Houston has no doubt been gone too long for there to be any living persons with memories of him, but his daughter May Isabelle is well-remembered by many Saltville residents today. For example, "May I," as she was widely known, was a grade school teacher of Glade Spring resident Skip Maiden (seen in one of the accompanying pictures), and Helen Barbrow of Saltville, while not having her as a teacher, sang in the children's chorus that "May I" led. Recollections differ as to whether "May I" spoke with Scot's accent or a southwest Virginia accent, but everybody agrees that she used a pitch pipe with her singing groups.

Scotch Johnny became a strong partisan of his adopted country. His sentiments were recorded by Hamilton in 1922: "It was in 1893 that he came to Saltville ... and in the twenty-nine years he has lived in the valley, he has been only as far east as Roanoke and as far west as Bristol. That is the best comment he could make on his love for the community. It is impossible, according to Mr. Houston, for a native-born American to fully appreciate what it



John Houston's home on the east bank of the North Holston River about three miles north of downtown Saltville. It was standing open and unoccupied when the author visited it in June 2003. *(Author's Picture)*



Saltville native Skip Maiden at John Houston's grave site in the Elizabeth Cemetery, Saltville 2003. Houston's daughter, "May I," was a grade school teacher of Maiden. *(Author's Picture)*

means to a stranger within our gates to live under such a government of liberty and freedom. It was on May tenth, 1893, that he first saw the valley. ... It had been raining for several days and the clouds still hung heavy and dark. Suddenly as he rode into Saltville the sun burst forth and revealed its fields and hills in all their glory. It was to him, he says, like Pilgrim's vision of 'Happy Valley.' And such hospitality as he met on all sides he believes was never surpassed. The people were, and still are, the best in the world, the scenery equal to any in Scotland or Switzerland and the country the greatest on earth. He felt free at last in a land where all men are equal and where there is no class distinction."

The author has himself spent many years in southwest Virginia after landing initially in New York on September 11, 1962, on a propeller driven plane from London. He shares many of Mr. Houston's feelings about his also-adopted country and region.

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Houston family burial plot. Elizabeth Cemetery, Saltville, Virginia.

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About the author:

Jim Glanville has lived in southwest Virginia since 1969 and plans shortly to retire from the Chemistry Department at Virginia Tech. He became interested in Saltville in 1970 around the time of the chemical plant closing and first wrote about Saltville at that time. He is the author of a chemistry text book for engineers and is currently working on a long-planned book about the history of Saltville and its chemical plant.

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