

How One Furniture Maker Battled Offshoring,  
Stayed Local—and Helped Save an American Town

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# FACTORY MAN



BETH MACY

"Beth Macy has done a masterful job in personalizing the biggest American economic story of our time—how to save American jobs in the twenty-first century. John Bassett III is a cinematic figure and quintessential American, battling for his company, his town, and his country."

— JONATHAN ALTER, AUTHOR OF *THE CENTER HOLDS: OBAMA AND HIS ENEMIES*

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Stayed Local—and Helped Save an American Town

BETH MACY



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*For all the world's factory workers, past and present, and especially for my long-ago factory mom, Sarah Macy Slack, whose airplane lights I still imagine I can glimpse, up among the stars*

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*Black cat, white cat, all that matters is that it catches mice.*

—TENG HSIAO-P'ING

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## PROLOGUE

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### The Dusty Road to Dalian

John D. Bassett III was snaking his way through the sooty streets of rural northern China on a three-day fact-finding mission. It was 2002, and the third-generation Virginia furniture maker was gathering ammunition for an epic battle to keep the sawdust in his factory flying. He was close to the border with North Korea, on the hunt for a dresser built in the style of a nineteenth-century French monarch. If he could find the man who'd made that damn Louis Philippe, he might just save his business.

Back at Vaughan-Bassett, his factory in Galax, line workers had already deconstructed the dresser piece by piece and proved that the one hundred dollars the Chinese were wholesaling it for was far less than the cost of the materials—a violation of World Trade Organization laws. The sticker on the back read *Dalian, China*, and now here he was, some eight thousand miles away from his Blue Ridge Mountains, trying to pinpoint the source of the cheap chest of drawers.

It was November and snowy. The car creaked with every icy pothole it hit.

Word had already reached him through a friendly translator a few months earlier: There was a factory owner in the hinterlands, a hundred miles outside of Dalian, who'd been bragging that he was going to bring the Bassett furniture family down.

If they were going to war, Bassett told his son Wyatt, their family needed to heed Napoleon's advice: Know your enemy.

Today, for once in his life, JBIII sat silent. The car lurched along northward, farther into the remote province of Liaoning.

The first time John Bassett visited an Asian factory was in 1984, and it was only after dinner and way too many drinks that an elderly factory owner in Taiwan revealed his real opinion of American business leaders. The man was so candid that at first, his own interpreter clammed up, refusing to translate his words.

The Taiwanese businessman had negotiated plenty of deals with Europeans and South Americans, but he'd never met people quite like the Americans.

What do you mean? JBIII pressed.

I have figured you guys out, the translator finally relayed.

Tell me.

If the price is right, you will do *anything*. We have never seen people before who are this greedy—

or this naive.

~~The Americans were not only knocking one another over in a stampede to import the cheapest furniture they could but they were also ignoring the fact that they were jeopardizing their own factories back home by teaching their Asian competitors every nuance of the American furniture-making trade.~~

When we get on top, the man said, don't expect us to be dumb enough to do for you what you've been dumb enough to do for us.

It would take many more trips to Asia before it became clear to JBIII what the Taiwanese furniture maker meant. During that time, two events helped ensure China would indeed get on top: China's admission into the WTO, and the great exodus of 160 million rural Chinese to the cities—the largest migration in human history.

It would take the hundred-dollar dresser and getting eyeball-to-eyeball with the man behind before JBIII fully understood the battle he was about to enter. The rules of war had changed—drastically—and cowboy capitalism seemed to be the only rule of international trade.

It was cold inside the factory where Bassett finally met with businessman and Communist Party official He YunFeng in northern China in November 2002. The workers' breath froze in little puffs of vapor. The Chinese furniture magnate looked him “in the damn eye,” Bassett recalled. Then he said something that raised the hair on the back of the Virginian's neck.

He YunFeng would be happy to provide Bassett with the dressers at a fraction of what they cost to make, a feat Bassett knew would not be possible without Chinese government subsidies. All Bassett had to do in return, He YunFeng said, was close his own factories.

Close his factories? John Bassett pictured the whole lot of his hard-charging forebears turning to mass in their graves. He thought of his 1,730 workers—plainspoken mountain types, many of whom had followed their parents and grandparents into the factories—standing in unemployment lines instead of assembly lines. He thought of the smokestacks that for a century had borne his family name and of the legacy he wanted to leave his kids.

Back at home, he felt alone in the industry, with only his two sons and his scrappy little factories. He was the last American furniture maker willing to raise hell about what was happening. If he could prove the Chinese were selling the product below the cost of the materials, if he could prove the factories were buoyed by Communist government subsidies in an illegal price dump designed to drive American companies out of business, then his company just might survive. If he could convince a majority of his industry to join him in persuading the U.S. Department of Commerce and the U.S. International Trade Commission of the truth, maybe the entire industry could be saved.

But those were big ifs, with potentially huge pitfalls. Surely he would be scorned by both his longtime customers and his competitors. He'd be ridiculed by the handful of families that had ruled the fifty-billion-dollar industry, as well as some members of his own family, who were too busy closing down factories—and cashing their checks—to protect their furniture-making legacy.

He'd be ostracized for trying to stop the flood of furniture jobs from America, for striking back against the one-percenters who were about to move damn near all their plants to Asia and tear the heart out of the Blue Ridge region he loved.

From the taverns of Virginia to the halls of power in Washington, DC; from the factory floor to the back roads of Liaoning, China, where he would uncover a great lie at the heart of globalization, John Bassett was going to war.

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# PART I

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# 1

## The Tipoff

*What were all them little people doing at work today?*

—BASSETT FURNITURE LINE WORKER ON THE PRESENCE OF TAIWANESE FACTORY MANAGERS

Once in a reporter's career, if one is very lucky, a person like John D. Bassett III comes along. JBIII is inspirational. He's brash. He's a sawdust-covered good old boy from rural Virginia, a larger-than-life rule breaker who for more than a decade has stood almost single-handedly against the outflow of furniture jobs from America.

"He's an asshole!" more than one of his competitors barked when they heard I was writing a book about globalization with JBIII as a main character. Over the course of researching this book, over the course of hearing his many lectures and listening to him evade my questions by telling me the same stories over and over, there were times that I agreed.

I first heard about him in Rocky Mount, Virginia, about half an hour from my home in Roanoke while eating breakfast with my neighbor and good friend Joel Shepherd. Joel owns Virginia Furniture Market, a Rocky Mount retail establishment that began thriving at the same time the import boom hit. Right now as I type, I'm sitting in a paisley recliner that my husband and I still fight over because it's the comfiest seat in our 1926 American foursquare. I remember Joel showing it to me in his store rocking it back and forth. Despite what I might have heard about made-in-China furniture, he told me a swarm of high-school wrestlers could pin one another on this chair and it would not fall apart. With the friendly-neighbor discount, I bought it for a hundred and sixty bucks.

I had invited Joel to breakfast to pick his brain. I was working on a *Roanoke Times* series on the impact of globalization on southwest Virginia's company towns, articles inspired by the work of freelance photographer Jared Soares, who'd been making the hourlong trek from Roanoke to Martinsville three times a week for more than a year. His photos were gritty and moving: church services and tattoo artists; a textile-plant conveyor belt converted for use in a food bank; a disabled minister named Leonard whiling away the time in his kitchen in the middle of the afternoon. The people of Martinsville and Henry County, Virginia, were refreshingly open about what had happened to them, Jared told me, and he'd long wondered why our newspaper didn't do more to document the effects of globalization in our mountainous corner of the world.

Not that many other media outlets had done any better. According to a 2009 Pew Research Center survey, the gravest economic crisis since the Great Depression was largely being covered from the to

down, primarily from the perspective of big business and the Obama administration. The percentage of economy stories that featured ordinary people and displaced workers? Just 2 percent. If the people of Henry County wanted their stories to be heard, Jared and I were going to have to help.

It would be up to writers and photographers like us to paint the long-view picture of what had happened when, one after another, the textile and then the furniture factories closed and set up shops instead in Mexico, China, and Vietnam, where workers were paid a fraction of what the American laborers were earning. In the Henry County region alone, some twenty thousand people had lost their jobs.

In the early 1960s, Martinsville was Virginia's manufacturing powerhouse, known for being home to more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the country. But by 2009, one-fifth of the town's labor force was unemployed, and many of the millionaires had fled for cheerier landscapes. Henry County was now the capital of long-term unemployment, with Virginia's highest rate for nine of the past eleven years.

A week before my breakfast with Joel, an empty Bassett Furniture plant had burned to the ground. Police arrested Silas Crane, a thirty-four-year-old Henry County man who'd been trying to salvage the factory's copper electrical casings to sell on the black market but instead had sparked an electrical fire. His burns were visible in his police mug shot. I'd heard many similar stories, as some of the desperate moved from the unemployment rolls to the crime rosters. A stranger approached one woman I know outside a CVS pharmacy and offered her a hundred dollars if she'd sign for the purchase of the cold medicine pseudoephedrine—the main ingredient used to make methamphetamine.

Most people, though, were scraping by in legal ways—babysitting, growing their own food, working part-time at Walmart. The director of an area food bank told me that he could divine what people used to do for work by their disfigurements: The women who'd been bent over sewing machines all day making sweatshirts had humps on their backs. The men who culled lumber were missing fingers. "We're the last, last, last resort, to come stand in line and get a box of old food," he said.

But, Joel explained, there was this feisty old man in Galax, a small town about seventy miles away from Rocky Mount, who'd managed to buck the trend. He was from the family that had once run the largest furniture-making operation in the world, Bassett Furniture Industries. His name was John Bassett III, and, yes, he was from *that* Bassett family—the name inscribed on the back of so many American headboards and dressers; the name often stamped on the bedroom suite behind door number three on *Let's Make a Deal*. The story of how he fought against the tides of globalization was full of legal cunning, political intrigue, and, judging from what Joel told me about Bassett's Asian competitors, some serious cowboy grit.

As Joel explained over a plate of sausage biscuits and gravy that morning, imitating the patriarch's booming voice and cringe-inducing chutzpah: "The 'fucking Chi-Comms' were not going to tell *him* how to make furniture!"

But there was another, even juicier element to the story. John Bassett was no longer living in the eponymous company town of Bassett, Virginia. He'd been booted out of his family's business by a domineering relative. Three decades later, the family squabble turned corporate coup still had local tongues wagging with talk of a living-room fight scene (some say it was the front porch), a rescue squad call, and, my favorite detail: John Bassett tipping the ambulance driver a hundred bucks not to tell anybody that he'd had his battered brother-in-law hauled away, like something out of *Dynasty*.

But was any of it true? And what did the family infighting have to do with John Bassett giving the

middle finger to the lure of easy money overseas?

Plenty, it would turn out. But peeling that onion would take me more than a year. It would have me burning up U.S. Route 58, the curvy mountain road that meanders through the former company town just north of the Virginia–North Carolina line, where it hits you why the people of Henry County have come to call what happened “the 58 virus.”

It would send me across the Blue Ridge to John Bassett’s billowing smokestacks in Galax; to the International Home Furnishings Market in High Point, North Carolina, to meet a crop of young MBA and marketing execs in their skinny suits and aggressive glasses; and, on the advice of laid-off Stanley Furniture worker Wanda Perdue, to Surabaya, Indonesia, where much of the world’s wooden bedroom furniture is now made.

I first met Wanda in early 2012 outside a community college computer lab, where she came for regular tutoring in math. She was fifty-eight years old, cobbling together a living by working part-time at Walmart and hoping to land a full-time position as soon as she got her associate’s degree in office administration. Her one splurge was buying Luck’s pinto beans, the only non-store-brand food she allowed herself.

The farthest she’d been from home was a trip to Myrtle Beach she’d taken three years before. It was her first time seeing the ocean—at the age of fifty-five.

“I want you to see what they do in Indonesia and explain to me why we can’t do that here in North Carolina anymore,” she said.

*Fair enough*, I thought.

Joel and I were sitting in a landscape of rusted silos and vacant factories. Weeds sprouted through cracks in empty parking lots. Across the street from us was the shell of Lane Furniture, another defunct furniture maker that, like Stanley, had family connections to Bassett. In the 1920s, Edward Lane pushed the notion that every teenage girl in America needed to store her trousseau in a hope chest made of protective cedarwood, a safe place to keep her hopes and household accessories until she landed the man of her dreams. By the time soldiers returned from World War II, the cedar chest was ubiquitous, a must-have in the starter kit for a suburban home. “*It’s the Real Love-Gift*,” *So America’s Most Romantic Sweethearts*, proclaimed a 1948 ad featuring Audie Murphy, the decorated combat soldier and movie star.

Joel pointed to the silk mills where his aunts had once worked, now closed, every one of them: the victims of what economists call “creative destruction.” The lost jobs and vanishing industries that resulted from the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and China joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 were necessary outcomes, the theory goes. Over time, society becomes richer and more productive, and citizens across the globe benefit from higher living standards.

Thomas L. Friedman devotes nearly all 639 pages of *The World Is Flat* to the benefits of globalization, noting that it saved American consumers roughly \$600 billion, extended more capital to businesses to invest in new innovations, and helped the Federal Reserve hold interest rates down, which in turn gave Americans a chance to buy or refinance homes.

Or as Joel put it, reminding me of my hundred-and-sixty-dollar recliner: “We’ve all enjoyed the benefits of falling prices. A person can get far more value for [her] furniture dollar now than she could thirty years ago.” Not to mention that globalization has improved the standard of living among factory workers in China, Vietnam, and Indonesia, people who used to toil in rice paddies and farm fields.

The car put the carriage makers out of work, just like the Internet hurt mail carriers and many

my own newspaper colleagues—one of the reasons my newspaper shrank its core coverage area and no longer has a Henry County beat.

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But as the daughter of a displaced factory worker, I wondered about the dinghies being sunk by globalization's rising tide. I questioned why the unemployment stories rarely quoted the displaced workers or mentioned the fact that many folks in the corporate offices had simply switched jobs from factory bosses to global-sourcing managers. They were *still there, still fabulously employed*, some hauling in seven-figure salaries. When the big guys weren't off traveling the globe, their cars were among the few left in the company parking lots.

In small towns across America, the front-page stories about escalating drug crime and lower test scores seemed somehow linked to the page 3 briefs on deaths in faraway garment factories. But the connection was hard to define—and even harder to report on—given the complex Spirograph interlooping supply chains, impotent regulators, and press-avoiding CEOs.

No one, it seemed, was minding the back room of this new global store.

My first memory: Riding with an older sister to pick up my mom from work at Grimes, the aircraft-lighting factory in Urbana, Ohio. Mom worked the graveyard shift when the economy was good. When it wasn't, she waitressed—badly, she said—and watched other people's kids. At Grimes she sat with other women at long tables in a cavernous, dimly lit rooms, tucked into a row of Quonset huts. They soldered strobe lights for airplanes. When she got home, she used to pay me a quarter to rub her throbbing neck.

I remember pointing to airplanes passing by overhead and saying to my friends, "See that light? My mom *made* that." So what if the lights Mom soldered were fixed to military transport planes, not those passenger jets I pointed out. My mom's handiwork was stellar. You could see it up there, right near the stars.

The Vietnam War ended, and it would be a long economic slog in Urbana before the aircraft lighting workers benefited from a thirteen-million-dollar contract to make searchlights for Black Hawk helicopters, in 2012, some fifteen years after the heirs of inventor Warren "Old Man" Grimes cashed out. Honeywell International now runs Urbana's aerospace lighting operations in modern facilities staffed by about half the number of assembly workers it once employed. The company that used to be the town's sugar daddy now employs about 650, down from 1,300 at its peak, with much of the production accomplished via circuit cards and high-tech machinery rather than hand labor. One of my high-school buddies helps manage the outsourced engineers—via video teleconferencing—from Bangalore, India, where they're paid one quarter of what their American counterparts earn.

Throughout my childhood, my dad nursed his psychological wounds from World War II in VFW and American Legion halls. He was a housepainter by trade, but in my shame, I saw him as the serial unemployed town drunk. He didn't attend my band concerts or my softball games or even my high school graduation—lapses that seem almost criminal to me now that I have kids. But that's the way it was, and since I didn't know any different, it didn't keep me awake at night. The best thing he provided was access to a doting grandmother: his mom, who lived next door, taught me to read when I was four, and kept a roof over our heads (she owned our house).

We weren't victims of globalization. But, like the blue-collar folks I interviewed in Bassett and Galena who followed their parents and grandparents to the assembly lines, we didn't have a lot of options beyond high school. I managed to get to college thanks to the nudging of wonderful teachers and friends (and friends' parents), federally funded Pell Grants, work-study jobs, and scholarships. My older brother edged his way into the middle class through grit and brains. A high-school dropout with

moderate epilepsy, he progressed through a series of car-safety jobs until he landed at a major automotive research-and-development center in Raymond, Ohio, where he designs crash-test fixtures. By the time I graduated from college and got my first newspaper job, he was making more than twice my salary.

A few years back, a group of researchers at the University of Virginia invited him to share the details of his work. My brother, with his GED and a few community college courses under his belt, was summoned to Mr. Jefferson's University to tell those PhDs what he'd put together by way of experience and elbow grease. Not long ago his company gave him a bonus for inventing a new process that saved it thousands of dollars. He's been lucky to get to use his innate intelligence despite his lack of a formal degree. "It's no big deal," he tells me when I brag about his ability to make or fix not just cars but *anything*. "Mostly it's just common sense."

The moment I heard there was a company owner who had actually taken on big business *and* the People's Republic of China, I knew I had to find out who John Bassett was. He had not only kept his small factory going but somehow managed to turn it into the largest wooden-bedroom-furniture factory in America.

I got on the highway to Galax to meet the Southern patriarch, then seventy-four, at his Vaughan Bassett Furniture Company. I'd already mapped out his insanely twisted family tree at the Virginia Room of the Roanoke City Library, already called around to get the real scoop about his long-simmering family feud. I'd already interviewed several Henry County textile and furniture workers who were laid off not long after Taiwanese managers showed up to take pictures of the Virginia assembly lines so they could copy them back home.

One woman described her mom hobbling home from work, her knees shot from decades of standing on concrete floors, and wondering aloud, "What were all them little people doing at work today?"

I already knew that JBIII (as I began to refer to him) was grooming his middle-aged sons, Wyatt and Doug, to take over. Both had returned home after business school to help save the family company. I'd heard, too, that he'd cut their salaries when the recession hit rather than lay off more line workers, and he personally stopped pulling a paycheck during the leanest years.

One rainy afternoon, a furniture-store owner in nearby Collinsville described for me how globalization had taken a 70 percent bite out of his business, a store that used to be frequented by people who worked in the Henry County textile and furniture plants. Delano Thomasson's father had worked down the road from Bassett at Stanley Furniture, in Stanleytown, and his mother down another road at Fieldcrest, a sprawling textile plant started by Chicago-based Marshall Field's—and now the site of a weekly community food bank. (In the ladies' room of the Fieldale Café, a meat-and-three diner frequented by retirees, a framed photograph proudly displays what put this town on the map: a stack of Fieldcrest towels.)

Bassett Furniture was no longer made in Bassett, Delano explained in his Southern drawl as rain plinked into metal buckets set down to protect the sofas and bedroom suites (pronounced "suits" in Southern furniture lingo). "With his determination, John Bassett probably would have kept some of Bassett Furniture factories going if he could've kept the company."

I should have made up a shorthand for that statement the first time I heard it. I've interviewed scores of people since then who've said essentially the same thing.

Delano knew all about JBIII's covert mission to Dalian, China, and he had his own version of the evil-brother-in-law yarn—the story of the man who'd elbowed JBIII out of the CEO job at Bassett

Furniture, the company John Bassett III had been reared to run. But would any of the Bassetts open up to me about those things? Would JBIII reveal what it felt like to be the family black sheep with a dresser-size chip on his shoulder? Would he tell me the real story of how he'd fought the Chinese? If he wouldn't, would the people who grew up under the thumb of the family that ran the company today be bold enough to spill the beans?

"You don't even realize what kind of spiderweb you've got going," said Bassett Furniture's longtime corporate pilot, a man who worked for years under John Bassett's brother-in-law and nemesis, Bob Spilman. "*War and Peace* will seem like a ten-cent novel compared to your spiderweb. But lucky for you, the scorpion is already dead," he added, referring to Spilman, the Bassett CEO who could be equally brilliant and biting.

JBIII comes from an imposing family of multimillionaires whose ancestors signed the Magna Carta and who maintain a persistent but unspoken code that, no matter what, one should always keep the family secrets where they belong: in the family closet. What secrets would he tell me, the daughter of a former factory worker?

I relate better to people like Octavia Witcher, a fifty-five-year-old displaced Stanley Furniture worker who gave me her elderly mother's phone number as a contact, because her own phone was about to be turned off. And to people like divorced former Tultex worker Mary Redd, who described trying to raise her fourteen-year-old daughter alone, working the only job she could find—as a thirty-hour-a-week receptionist, with no benefits. When she told me that, I recalled receiving full financial aid for college because my mom, widowed by that time, made just eight thousand dollars a year teaching driving cars for a Honda subcontractor.

When Mary recounted running into the former Tultex CEO at a party she was helping cater for Martinsville's elite, what she said to him literally made me gasp: "If Tultex were to open back up today and the only way I could get there would be to crawl on my belly like a snake, I would do it."

John Bassett grew up with chauffeurs, vacation homes, and prep schools. I was the longshot and the underdog, but fortunately for me, John Bassett was too, whether he was ready to admit it to a reporter or not.

With any luck at all, he would help me explain this circuitous piece of American history, from its hardwood forests to its executive boardrooms; from handsaws and planing tools to smartphones and Skype; from the oak logs that sailed from the port of Norfolk, Virginia, to Asia and then returned months later, in the form of dressers and beds.

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# The Original Outsourcer

*Someday I'll buy and sell you.*

—J.D. BASSETT SR. TO HIS FATHER, JOHN HENRY BASSETT

To understand JBIII, you have to understand where he comes from, a place where everywhere you looked, he saw his name: on the WELCOME TO BASSETT sign, the bank, the library, the school, and the myriad company smokestacks that rose high above the town. Born into a family of brash, industrious people who weren't afraid of hard work—as long as their pockets were getting lined—he was named for his grandfather John David Bassett Sr., or J.D., as the town's founder and patriarch was known. If you worked for him, and most people did, you called him “Mr. J.D.”

But before there was a company called Bassett, there was a place called Bassett, and before it was called that, it was just red clay and foothills, a nowhere spot from a time when people named things for exactly what they were.

Horsepasture is where this story begins.

To the families who lived in Horsepasture, the Smith River dominated everything. It floated tobacco to market on bateaux. Its floods made soil-enriching silt, grist for fertile bottomland, and bumper crops of corn and tobacco. With its flat, low, and deceptively slow current, it would become one of Virginia's best trout-fishing streams. It froze in winter, gave cooling relief in summer, and by and by, it unleashed its might.

And on the day of JBIII's birth, the Smith River nearly ruined everything.

John Bassett III was born during the epic flood of 1937. Town Creek, from the county to the north, had spilled over its banks, and the Smith soon followed suit. It had been a good summer. The future Yankees' star Phil Rizzuto had just pounded out eighty-eight hits and turned nearly as many double plays, leading his minor-league team, the Bassett Furnituremakers, to the Bi-State League title. People were feeling good about the bustling little company town, and JBIII's grandfather Mr. J.D. felt especially good. He liked to buy ice cream and peanuts for kids at baseball games, and he could afford to, with six humming factories that sent freight cars laden with Bassett furniture all over the country.

Then, overnight, everything changed. After several hours of rain, Mr. J.D. saw the river rushing. His chauffeur ran him from one end of town to the other while he barked orders and warned people

seek higher ground. In the worst flood to hit in a century, the Smith steeped the railroad tracks and made kindling out of the town's swinging suspension bridges, which were owned by Bassett Furniture like most everything else.

Water flowed through the first-floor windows of the town's Riverside Hotel. Drenched phone lines and highways were rendered useless. The people who worked in the Bassett Furniture plants climbed the hills and watched everything that wasn't fastened down float away, even the cows.

It was a dramatic backdrop for the entrance of the third John Bassett, a flood of near biblical proportions that had people wondering, decades later, if it prophesied his exit from the town. His parents already had three girls, and the entire family had been praying for a boy. An heir. Someone who would one day run the growing furniture dynasty.

Days before John Bassett III was due to enter the world, a different chauffeur had driven his mother sixty miles south to a hospital in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Labor had come so swiftly with her last baby that the girl had been born at home. With this birth, the parents wanted to be cautious, especially with the river rising.

The flood was so bad that the Red Cross pitched tents on the hills. People sat atop railroad cars to inspect the rising waters as silt poured into their company-owned homes. Yet another Bassett family chauffeur was dispatched to pick up Mr. J.D.'s son, John D. Bassett Jr.—or Mr. Doug, as he was known—so he could check on the drenched factories while his wife was away giving birth. Despite the devastation—it took the factory equipment days to dry out—Mr. J.D. could at least take some comfort in the arrival of a third-generation heir.

Along with Mr. J.D., the Smith River ruled Bassett, Virginia, or at least the ten-mile stretch of it that bisected the smoky little unincorporated town. In a grainy photograph of the flood, four young men standing in knee-deep water pose for the camera, two of them clad in bib overalls, the typical factory worker's uniform. The three white men in the picture are playful, clearly enjoying the rare day off. The lone black man is standing slightly apart, straight as a pine, his arms folded and one hand clutching a hat. Very likely he was descended from Henry County slaves. Most black people there were.

"Race is entwined with everything down there," a Roanoke historian and race scholar warned me repeatedly as I set out to understand the Henry County of JBIII's youth.

"You'll run up against some raw truths," said the Virginia folklorist Joe Wilson, named a Living Legend by the Library of Congress for his study of Appalachian history and culture. Wilson reminded me that relationships between the races, and the complexities of one dominating the other, have been an evolving part of American history for four centuries and counting.

In a county known for a tobacco industry propped up by nearly five thousand slaves—it was said you could walk the thirty miles from Danville to Martinsville and never leave plantation land owned by the Samuel Hairston family—there are 486 Hairston descendants currently listed in the Martinsville–Henry County phone book, and nearly all are black. (The white Hairstons pronounce the name "*Haawr*-ston," Gladys Hairston, a young African American, told me, chuckling.)

Slavery may have been long past by the time the furniture makers hit the scene, but its Jim Crow legacy was very much intact. The plantation mind-set was palpable in the factories and in the homes of the well-to-do, and it was key in the development of Bassett Furniture.

My friend Joel, the furniture retailer, has a copy of his family's land grant framed on the wall of his country home in Rocky Mount; next to it is the last will and testament of the home's original owner designating which family member would inherit which slaves. In Joel's backyard, there's a family cemetery with granite headstones. At the edge of the property sits a cemetery for the family



slaves, marked by periwinkle and fieldstones.

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Henry County lies just over the next ridge. It's named for the Revolutionary War orator Patrick Henry, Virginia's first governor after the country won its independence and the owner of Henry County Leatherwood, a ten-thousand-acre tobacco plantation flanked by the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west and the North Carolina foothills to the south. The region was settled by frontier folk and wealthy planters who were sent west to nab land, much of it courtesy of grants from King George III. The red clay soil was perfect for tobacco growing, especially if one owned slaves to work the labor-intensive crop.

Topography drove demographics; tobacco stopped at the foot of the mountains, so that's large where black migration stopped, too. An hour away, in mountainous Roanoke, the much younger city where I live, today's black population is 28 percent. But in the Henry County seat of Martinsville, African Americans make up nearly half the population.

When the great migration drove six million Southern blacks to work in cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, many in Virginia's Piedmont chose not to leave home. Thanks to people like the Bassetts, there was plenty of work to be had in mill towns across the South. Tobacco, textile, and furniture plants in the Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont helped the descendants of slaves avoid the hopelessness of the sharecropping system embedded farther South. Then, as now, there were few unions to protect them in these Southern right-to-work states, but at least they finally had paying jobs.

Long before he built his empire, J.D. Bassett knew his fortunes rested outside the family farm, which had to be cultivated by hired help or by the owners' hands. He was born in 1866, the year after the Civil War ended, descended from a long line of prominent Bassetts. William Bassett sailed from the Isle of Wight aboard the *Fortune* in 1621, built one of the original forts at Jamestown, and filled his library with books he'd carted from his English home. His descendants included Revolutionary War captains and westward pioneers.

The first Bassett to stake a claim in Henry County was Nathaniel Bassett, a Revolutionary War captain who'd had the good luck to be deeded a 791-acre land grant from King George III in 1773. The property begat more wealth and property, and his son, Burwell, bought land from war hero Colonel George Hairston, Burwell's wife's uncle, a member of the county's most prominent family, and the largest slaveholder in Virginia, which was the largest slaveholding state in the Union.

In the official family narrative, the furniture founder claimed his father, John Henry Bassett, owned eighty-eight slaves before the war. He "had lived the life of Reilly just like the other young gentlemen of his time, visiting around among the neighbors," J.D. told an interviewer in 1939. But 1860 census records show that was not the case; Alexander Bassett, Nathaniel's grandson and John Henry's father, was a tobacco farmer with real estate and personal property valued at \$14,300, but he had only twenty slaves, ages six months to thirty-nine years.

"Even the myth of how many slaves they had wasn't right!" the historian John Kern ranted, warning me to check and double-check everything I got from the family and corporate archives.

While Alexander's oldest son, Woodson, owned nine slaves, J.D.'s father, John Henry, owned just two boys, ages fourteen and eight. He relied mainly on family hands, claiming ownership of two horses, five milk cows, three sheep, seven swine, and considerable stores of wheat, rye, oats, corn, and tobacco.

J.D.'s mother, Nancy Spencer Bassett, was thought to be the brainy and driven one; John Henry,

Civil War veteran turned gentleman farmer, “sat around and grinned a lot,” said Spencer Morten, who married into the family in 1949 and became a company executive. A former journalist, Morten was eighty-nine when we first met, but his memory was razor sharp. And after sitting on the family periphery for so many decades, he was ready to describe all the dramas he’d witnessed in the boardrooms, in the factories—and behind the scenes at family dinners.

John Henry was ill prepared for Reconstruction. He had general knowledge of farming and had ridden horses across his estate, but the social whirl of antebellum life had taken precedence over learning to reap profits from his land. Now, he mostly walked, routinely visiting his brother, who lived eight miles away. After his wife died, John Henry walked to court a woman who lived two miles down the road. He was eighty-five at the time, and his daughters weren’t pleased at all, often sending a relative or friend to fetch him home.

That’s a story you’ll find more than once in this family saga, with one generation after another running a critical eye over potential spouses—the aristocracy’s number one tool for protecting the family fortune. The women may not have held titles to the businesses or the land, but they had subtle ways of exerting power.

After the war, much of the South was in chaos, and those who had been prosperous before it were now land-rich and cash-poor. John Henry’s sons had little choice but to work. They took care of horses and cattle, cut wood, and harvested crops, which they sent to market with the help of former slaves turned farmhands. J.D., the oldest, quickly emerged as their leader.

As a granddaughter would gush much later: “Could these adversities have planted the seed of ambition to succeed and make something of his life?”

J.D.’s first job off the farm was pinhooking, or speculating, on tobacco. He bought the crop directly from the farmers, then sold it at auction in Martinsville, which was fast becoming the plug-tobacco capital of the world. Tobacco was second only to moonshining, the county’s other big cash-making enterprise.

He worked twelve-hour days, and he was good with people. When it came time to marry, he didn’t chase the daughter of a wealthy landowner. He went after his former teacher, who was just three years his senior and every bit as hardworking. With his wife, Pocahontas, he started a small grocery on the family farm along the Smith River.

Chickens sold for eight cents apiece, a pair of shoes for fifty cents. Miss Pokey, as she was called, minded the store while J.D. hopped onto a mule-driven carriage and sold their goods on the road. Other than the family home place, the store was the first building erected in the area, and before long it housed the first post office. In need of a postmark, “the government agent asked what we would name the post office,” J.D. recalled. Not so modestly, he told the agent, “My name is Bassett, so why not call it Bassett?”

The location was ripe for expansion, with the rushing Smith River right there to generate power, not to mention all of J.D.’s inherited land along the Blue Ridge foothills. After the war, the extended Bassett clan owned 21,197 acres in Henry County, most of it thickly forested with walnut, oak, maple, hickory, and other valuable trees.

The fledgling Norfolk and Western Railway was building a new line, called the Punkin Vine, from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to Roanoke, Virginia. And J.D., itching to help restore his family fortune, dreamed of getting a sawmill up and running before the new tracks being laid reached Henry County, the halfway point between the two stations. The wheeling and dealing commenced: J.D. persuaded the railroaders to run their tracks through Bassett instead of Ferrum Summit, just north of h

family's farm, as was originally planned, J.D. offered them free right-of-way through his property. One account has him secretly traveling on horseback to meet with the railway president to convince him to change the route. In another version, memorialized in a romanticized woodcut print that was part of the company's thirtieth-anniversary promotion, a twenty-one-year-old J.D. wearing a dapper three-piece suit called on the railway president in his office.

We do know he promised that railroad construction workers could rent rooms in the back of his store at a low rate, a business model that would become part of his family's philosophy: offering incentives to the other guy is a good idea, as long as you end up getting more from him in return.

Already a commanding presence at six two and two hundred pounds, young J.D. kept a cigar in his hand or in his suit jacket pocket, hoping it would make him seem older than his years. When he wasn't working, he was thinking constantly about ways to reap benefits from the new transportation boom. He rearranged the store as a gathering place, stocking it with goods for not only the usual farmers and townsfolk but also the railroad men, engineers, and workers who would do most of their trading at the store. He would make it their store—and make their money his, even during the panic of 1893. Customers came in as late as midnight, and J.D. was usually the last in town to go to bed.

J.D. had more cash on hand than most people in Horsepasture, and, as storekeeper, he was privy to the financial affairs of his neighbors; if he paid attention, he was privy to their private affairs too. So the young J.D. Bassett became friend, adviser, creditor, and commissary general of some one hundred folks, including the railroaders.

But he wanted to be more than an innkeeper and merchandiser. He wanted to sell the N&W wood for its bridge timbers and railroad ties. To pull off the sawmilling that would require, he needed more than moxie. Before he could become *Mr. J.D.*, what he needed most was cash.

The first time I met Spencer Morten, at the Bassett Historical Center, he brought along a yellowed newspaper clipping that explained the genesis of that critical cash infusion. It described how "Uncle Billy" Law had saved J.D.'s hide after J.D.'s own father turned him down for a business loan. A few years earlier, J.D.'s pinhooking partner in Martinsville had swindled him. Together they'd earned what was considered a bundle at the time—\$450—but when J.D. went to the bank to withdraw his share, he found that his partner had absconded with the haul. He owed his innkeepers six dollars for room and board, and, tail between his legs, he'd gone to his father and asked him to loan him the money.

John Henry refused to give him a loan and instead made his son dig out the season's potato crop and sell that to pay off his debt.

When his father refused him a loan again, this time for the sawmill, family tensions flared.

"Someday I'll buy and sell you," J.D. snapped.

Bassett blood may have been thicker than Smith River water, but not by much. J.D. traveled to neighboring Patrick County and borrowed the money from his wealthy uncle William J. Law instead.

Not long ago, at a cousins' gathering of third-generation multimillionaires in Hobe Sound on Florida's Jupiter Island, where several Bassett relatives, including John Bassett III, winter at neighboring homes, Spencer Morten offered a toast to Billy Law. Few had even heard of Uncle Billy, and none of them seemed to care about his role in the family fortune.

"Spoiled brats," Spencer fumed, later, to his wife.

By the time the iron horse of the Punkin Vine first rattled the floors of Bassett Mercantile, in 1893

J.D. had paid his uncle back, with interest, from his sawmill proceeds. The train rolled past the fledgling town of Bassett atop oak ties made in the Bassett sawmill. J.D. then set about wheedling the railroad into building a depot across the tracks from his store.

Several people in town told me in hushed tones—as if protecting a century-old secret—that J.D. sold the railroad buyer lumber and then, the next day, sold him some of the same pieces *again*. Purchased lumber was marked with whitewash at the ends of the logs, but J.D. simply sawed off the painted part and then, the next day, trotted out the same pieces of wood. If the buyer had actually gotten out of his carriage to look at the wood himself, he might have noticed the scam. A century later JBIII still abides by that old Bassett Furniture principle, insisting that every piece of lumber delivered to his factory be counted by a lumberyard employee.

J.D. may have been a country boy educated in a one-room school, but he had the sense to marry a brainy woman. When J.D.'s first sawmill partner disappeared from town with a chunk of the profit just as the pinhooker had done, J.D. tasked Miss Pokey with handling the books. He also made a move that would both enrich and complicate things for his extended clan: the Bassett company would henceforth be a purely *family* affair.

While photographs show a formal Mr. J.D. sporting a mustache, bow tie, and derby hat, Miss Pokey was rarely seen without an apron. With hammer and nails stuffed in her apron pocket, she didn't mind measuring lumber or tacking down a loose floorboard. The town of Bassett was little more than a building, a river, and a set of train tracks flanked by dirt roads. People traveled mainly by wagon, and when the rains pushed the Smith out of its banks, the carriages were often bogged down in mud and dependent on mules to pull them out.

Once the rail line was built, J.D. took his horse and carriage on the road to rustle up new customers, selling his timber to casket companies and small furniture factories from High Point, North Carolina to Lynchburg, Virginia. For a time he and his brother C.C. built and sold caskets themselves. He told an interviewer in 1958 that he had routinely split four hundred rails a day and was not above polishing shoes or making communion wine for churches when business was slow.

The big daddies of furniture-making were still in places with large immigrant populations, such as Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Jamestown, New York; the recently arrived craftsmen turned out high-quality designs in the traditions of Sheraton and Duncan Phyfe. J.D. would take off for points north and be gone for weeks, selling the furniture manufacturers on the value of Henry County hardwoods and poking around their factories.

The official version of what happened next, printed in the Bassett Furniture corporate history, has Mr. J.D. outplaying the factory owners in Grand Rapids in 1902 to bring the heart of American furniture-making to the South. Most people say the scheme was actually hatched by his wife. "Miss Pokey had a good business mind, and she'd tell him what to buy and what not to buy," said Bassett librarian Pat Ross, whose grandmother knew the woman well.

The story goes that the couple had ridden the train to a factory in Michigan. While her husband was making his lumber pitch, Miss Pokey coyly asked a secretary for a tour of the plant, during which she took copious mental notes. "I think we can do this ourselves," she said to her husband on their way out of town.

At the time, the Southern economy was still recovering from the Civil War, and the Bassetts knew little about making furniture—or "fu-ni-cha," as they pronounced it then and still do now. But the savings in freight alone would give them an edge over the Northern manufacturers. They had plentiful Henry County woods on Bassett-owned lands—and lots of small-time farmers, sharecroppers, and moonshiners eager to come out of the hills and escape pauperism. Why not make the furniture in the

same place they milled the lumber?

The industry had already shifted from New England to Michigan, and now it was coming to the South, predominantly to small towns in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Nearly a century before the first container of furniture was shipped from China to the United States, J.D. Bassett joined the flow of entrepreneurs hoping to capitalize on cheap, hungry labor and all those tree-stocked hills.

A handful of North Carolina sawmillers in Lenoir and High Point had already proved it could be done. “There was a lot of fine timber in those days,” J.D. recalled, but no real roads yet for moving out. “We had to go by horseback any distance at all.”

In one photograph, J.D. sits astride his horse in front of the old family home place, a surprising ramshackle affair. The house was clapboard with crooked posts supporting the front porch, which held a lone, wobbly-looking chair. Wearing a rumpled suit and tie, he poses with his teenage daughter Anne, on the horse next to him.

Hardwoods dot the foothills in this sepia-toned scenic backdrop—though some are chopped and scattered on the ground.

Down the hill, out of the camera’s view, sat the seeds of the family’s growing fortune.

J.D. had built a factory in his front yard.

He’d mapped it out first in a drawing, based on the Northern factories he’d been selling to, showing everything from the rough end, where the lumber was measured and cut, to the finishing room. Then he called a meeting of his sawmill partners—his brothers, C.C. and Sam, and his brother-in-law Reed Stone. Smoke would coil from boiler chimneys and steam would hiss from vents, he told them. Imagine the quiet wilderness filled with the slapping of leather belts on flywheels and the screeching of saws.

Careful management would be vital, and salesmanship was so important that he would personally see to that himself. He asked his brothers to “abandon the foolishness of sawing all our good timber and shipping it north” and instead visualize trains loaded down with Bassett beds and Bassett dresser.

From day one, he was the self-appointed brains and boss of the operation. He once ordered his brother-in-law to “run down there” and fetch him some supplies.

“Aye, God, J.D., I’ll walk but I’ll not run,” Reed Stone replied, in what became a long-standing family retort.

The year was 1902. Cuba had just broken from Spain, Teddy Roosevelt became the first president to ride in a motorcar, and J.D. Bassett was about to build himself a company—as well as a proper town.

Together, the four men begged, borrowed, and scraped up \$27,500. The first Bassett factory began a stone’s throw from the post office in a two-and-a-half-story wooden shed next to the river, a site the people of Bassett still refer to as Old Town. Horsepasture was now far out *thataway*—in the Henning County foothills—as the Industrial Revolution arrived and began shaping the narrow riverside town.

The men employed fifty workers at the start, Scots-Irish mountain men and black sharecropper, rugged farmers and moonshiners, all of whom were happy to work for five cents an hour. Like most refugees, the first generation of Southern mill hands were known for their patience. Desperate to feed their families, they brought with them an individualism nurtured by solitary life on small farms—a trait that would make them putty in company owners’ hands, especially when union organizers came to town. (They may not have loved their bosses, but they trusted them more than they trusted the outsiders.)

They had lived in coves, distant from the cash economy. Now they traveled to work on foot, carrying lanterns in the predawn, some from as far as eight miles away. For one hundred dollars, J.D. hired a traveling furniture designer he'd met in Grand Rapids to develop blueprints, beginning with bedroom furniture because that was simplest to make. Built of Henry County oak, the beds wholesaled for \$1.50 and were Victorian in design. When the first piece of furniture came off the new Bassett Furniture Company line—a chest of drawers with a carved mirror held up by ornate curvy arms—sold for \$4.75.

Never one to hide his light under a bushel, J.D. began to imagine that one day he just might swipe Grand Rapids' "Furniture City" nickname. He talked it over constantly with his wife.

As people moved away from the extended-family farms and built homes in cities and towns, the demand for mass-produced furniture soared. By 1905, just three years after forming the company, Bassett Furniture was entirely debt-free, partly because J.D. was paying himself only seventy-five dollars a month. By 1907, the town was so full of new arrivals that he opened a bank.

By 1918, he was shipping furniture to every corner of the country as well as Canada. He owned a bank and held stock in several other furniture factories, from Galax, Virginia, to Lexington, North Carolina, all of which allowed him to set aside one million dollars for each of his children, according to Spencer Morten, the equivalent of fifteen million dollars today.

Virginia didn't have the immigrant craftsmen from Germany, Poland, and Lithuania that Grand Rapids claimed. But J.D.'s hardscrabble lot was willing to figure out how to make the basic forms with minimal carvings and overlays. When special knowledge was required, J.D. thought nothing of venturing to a competitor's factory and hiring its foremen away. He'd already swiped their ideas; he would steal their people too. By 1924, he had five hundred employees, many of them North Carolina natives.

His goal was nothing less than to establish the South as the dominant furniture-making region in the United States.

If everyone in the family could just get along, there was no telling how far the company would go.

By the time most people switched from driving horses to driving cars, Mr. J.D. had settled on being driven—in his Cadillac—by a chauffeur, first Pete Wade and later James Thompson. When his grown sons teased him in later years about never learning to drive, he shot back, "I pay Pete twenty-five cents an hour to drive me around, and I sit in the passenger seat thinking about how to make more money. If you boys want me to pay you twenty-five cents an hour to drive me around, that would be fine."

Decades later, John Bassett III would grow up thinking of his grandfather's methods as Bassett 101. Cash is power; avoid all but necessary debt. Buy the best machinery and run the hell out of it. Hire smart people who think like you (but not too much), reward the best ones, and work the hell out of them. And by all means, pay somebody else to do your e-mailing and iPad-ing if it frees you up to do the heavy lifting of moneymaking.

Above all, when you see a snake's head, hit it. He liked that problem-solving mantra so much that when someone made him a cross-stitch of it, he hung it on his office wall.

But those strategies were of little concern to the young furniture heir during his first days on the planet, which he spent in another state, far removed from the whining planers and hissing steam of the

factory, everything now quieted by the flood. Soon enough, the Smith River would recede to its proper place. ~~The chauffeur would deliver mother and son to their sprawling brick home, enveloped by oaks and perched high on a hill. He'd meet his daddy, his sisters, and the family's faithful servants, William and Augusta, who lived above the garage.~~

The sisters were loved and they knew it. But when Little John finally arrived, it was the happiest day of their father's life. The prince had arrived. Doug Bassett called Mr. J.D. and shouted into the phone, "Papa, I've got a son and he's a boy!" Mr. J.D. was so happy, he offered to pay the hospital bill on the spot. He sent a check for \$1,000, along with this letter, written on Bassett Furniture Industries stationery:

*My dear Boy:*

*Grandpop is writing you this letter so you will see it when you are a man. I will not be living when you are grown, but I want to say to you that I am hoping you will do big things, following the pace set by your grandpop and your dad. We are going to expect much bigger things of you than we are able to do, as you are living in a more progressive age.... I want you to know that I love you and always will, and expect you to be a great man some day.*

*Yours,  
Grand Daddy  
J.D. Bassett*

The letter was framed, along with the check, and when the dear boy grew up and entered the family business, he hung it front and center on his office wall.

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# 3

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## The Town the Daddy Rabbits Built

*I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and I had no intention of taking it out.*

—JOHN BASSETT III

JBIII's first memory: It was a Saturday morning in 1943, and his father, Doug, took him to several Bassett factories to check on operations. W.M. Bassett, the boy's uncle Bill, was now overseeing Bassett Furniture and, with Doug, had come up with the notion of contracting with the Yellow Cab and Coach Company to make wooden truck bodies that would carry weapons for the armed forces. The factories had limped through the Depression without laying anyone off, though salaries and hours were severely cut, and one year, the N&W train car brought employees Virginia hams instead of bonuses. Mr. J.D. had personally surveyed his employees, counting the number of dependents each man had, and he assigned shifts accordingly, making sure each man had enough work to support his family.

But now Bassett was back to running full blast. Six at the time of this visit, towheaded Little John (as the entire town called him) promptly got lost in the maze of whirring routers and band saws. The confident factory-man stride was still decades away, and scared of the noise and unable to find his dad, Little John burst into tears. He was so upset when he was found that a chauffeur was dispatched to drive him back to his family's house on the hill.

It may have taken him a few years to conquer his fear of loud machinery, but the silver spoon fit perfectly from the start. Richmond lawyer Tom Word recalled meeting JBIII at a Boy Scout Jamboree when they were both twelve. "He was the rich man's kid, the person everybody liked to talk about. And he was spoiled beyond belief," Word said. He had the kind of unwavering confidence you get when you live in a town named after and run by your family. And Little John had the same name as his grandpop, who controlled everything for miles around—the cops, the area politicians, the factory workers, the household help.

The Bassetts and the families who owned Martinsville's textile mills were known as the Families—the people who ran things, with tentacles stretching to the state capital, Richmond, and beyond. Since J.D. Bassett owned the land the community was built on, he chose not to incorporate the town as Bassett, preventing the formation of a town council.

Bassett Furniture Industries ran the town of Bassett. It was as simple—and as complicated—that.



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sample content of Factory Man: How One Furniture Maker Battled Offshoring, Stayed Local - and Helped Save an American Town

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