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# THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF BAUGH AUTO BODY

**BENJAMIN WEST | MARCH 4, 2019**



**TOPICS:** [BAUGH AUTO BODY](#), [DAVE BRAT](#), [ERIC CANTOR](#), [GADSDEN SIGNS](#), [GERRY BAUGH](#), [MECHANICSVILLE TEA PARTY](#), [REPUBLICAN PARTY](#), [TEA PARTY](#), [VIRGINIA RIGHT](#)

*How did Gerry Baugh go from being a primary player in Central Virginia's hard-right political sphere to closing his body shop without notice, leaving customers in the lurch? RVA Mag does some digging.*

When I cut my engine in the parking lot of Baugh Auto Body and Truck Repair, the air was relatively still. There was some minor commotion at the large shooting range next door — car doors closing, people chatting — and a muffled rush of cars passing on Broad Street. But since Baugh Auto is tucked into a little oasis — down a hill behind a cube of a car wash and with some vegetation cover — it felt isolated, and vaguely surreal.

I rapped on the door a few times and tried to peek through the window with little success. There was no light and no movement. A sign on the door read: “Baugh Auto Body is not currently accepting any vehicles until further notice. We are sorry for an inconvenience this may cause.”

I assumed the signwriter meant “any” ...or maybe they had one specific inconvenience in mind. Either way, I stood around for another minute, waiting for some sort of response. But I didn't expect anything. Not just because of the empty parking lot, or the heavily locked-up back lot, but because of an unprecedented move in late January when Baugh Auto Body abruptly closed. No warning. No documented apology or motive. No nothing.

“My car was in pieces,” Riley Shaia said. “I couldn't have driven it off that lot if I wanted to.”

A customer of Baugh's for two decades, Shaia comes into the story because her minivan had been damaged in an accident — she wasn't at fault. She said she chose Baugh over her insurance company's preferred vendor because of her past positive experiences with the shop. Then the “red flags” started cropping up — less communication than normal, mainly, but nothing that she noticed in the moment. As the scheduled pick-up day drew near, she decided to call on a whim.

“The gentleman said: ‘Well, I have some very bad news for you,’” Shaia said.

"It didn't really register. I was like: closed? Like, for the day? What are you talking about? And he said: 'No, we're closed for good. We're just closing down.'"

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*Photo by Benjamin West*

Shaia said she was “shell-shocked.” She was instructed to get her car off of Baugh property in the next couple of days, or her keys would be left in the car and it would be free game for anybody who Menu stopped by.

Luckily, Shaia’s insurance company handled the situation beautifully and got her car out of there. She stressed how wonderful they were, how they incurred losses though they had no obligation (remember, she had opted to use someone other than their preferred vendor). But others weren’t so lucky. Shaia drove to Baugh’s to case the scene, making sure her insurance wouldn’t run into any more unforeseen anomalies. She was met with a locked building, the aforementioned sign, and about 40 other vehicles, some in pieces like hers. One thing was for sure: things were about to go downhill fast.

Naturally, people started finding out, and their first instinct was to show up at the shop’s front door to secure their property. Shaia said a former employee decided to unlock the place and dump out the keys to begin the exodus. NBC 12 was at the scene.

(<http://www.nbc12.com/2019/02/02/customers-furious-after-longtime-auto-shop-closes-without-notice/>). Their footage shows reporter Eric Perry walking into the unlocked building and calling out with no response. The camera pans down to the front desk haphazardly littered with people’s keys. Perry spoke with one woman who had shown up to check on her car, and had no idea what was happening.

“I found a key, it starts my car and I’m going,” she said. The woman left a note on the desk, just in case.

Shaia said she heard from secondhand sources that the abrupt closure had something to do with debt, though she stressed that she cannot vouch for these claims personally. However, RVA Mag found no bankruptcy filings from Baugh Auto Body Repair, and there seemed to be no shortage of customers leading up to the big day.

To date there’s been no definitive answer to why Baugh Auto Body went under.

## **Who is Gerry Baugh?**

Hop on the highway, weave out of the concrete jungle, and you might run into one of the many roadside signs maintained by local branches of the hard-right political movement known as the Tea Party. They’re similar to the muted yellow of the Gadsden Flag (you know, the “don’t tread on me” one). They’re typically on private property, and highlight the juicy bits in red.

Over the years some have read: “What is your fair share of what someone else has worked for?” – Thomas Sowell,” “By 2031 all tax revenues will go to federal entitlements and our debt interest. Nothing is left for anything else,” and “The further a society drifts from the truth... the more it will



hate those who speak it' – George Orwell" (who, incidentally, was a fervent Socialist (<https://www.biographyonline.net/socialism-george-orwell/>)).

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But if you were cruising down a particular local road sometime in 2012 (we're not sure which one), there was a chance you passed one that read like this:

"A patriot who stood up for freedom. Thank you Gerry Baugh."



Photo via Virginia Right (<http://www.varight.com/news/so-who-is-gerry-baugh-a-hero-of-mine-he-cares-about-his-community-state-and-country-join-your-local-tea-party-today/>)

This isn't a coincidence, or some minor point. For years, Baugh has poured his money and energy into Tea Party efforts. Elwood "Sandy" Sanders Jr., a local lawyer and blogger for Virginia Right (<http://www.varight.com/>), remembers the first time he heard about Baugh, which happened when he opened up a 2010 issue of the Mechanicsville Local. The article ([https://www.richmond.com/news/local/hanover/mechanicsville-local/most-support-school-district-s-budget-goals/article\\_64d280e9-34ae-5d3e-8f3a-72e5eea6d5ff.html](https://www.richmond.com/news/local/hanover/mechanicsville-local/most-support-school-district-s-budget-goals/article_64d280e9-34ae-5d3e-8f3a-72e5eea6d5ff.html)) that caught his eye detailed a pre-budget meeting for Hanover County School Board. While most in the audience were explicitly praising the county school superintendent's plan, Baugh walked in and started asking some hard questions. He had done his research, according to Sanders, and spoke out against what he saw as the grotesquely high salaries of the board members.

"And so he was above the fold; and I thought: man, that guy's my hero," Sanders said.

"He did his homework, he went to the meeting, and he kind of broke up that 'let's congratulate ourselves' attitude that many of those kinds of meetings have."

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Sanders said he immediately wanted to meet Baugh. And he wouldn't have to wait long — a few weeks later, he ran into him at a meeting of the Mechanicsville Tea Party (<https://www.facebook.com/MechanicsvilleVATEAParty/>). Back in those days, according to Sanders, the political energy of the group was much higher, and there were more active members. The meetings were in their salad days, and anything was possible, even meeting somebody you deeply admired. Your hero.

Sanders found out Baugh was one of the founding members of the Party. He may have even played a large role in the famous signage around town, though Sanders isn't sure.

"I would assume that he was behind all of that in some way," Sanders said.



*Photo by Christopher Rand, via [imgur](https://imgur.com/gallery/tpD2Z/) (<https://imgur.com/gallery/tpD2Z/>)*

Baugh served as the Mechanicsville Tea Party president for at least two years, and during his term in 2012, Virginia Right, the publication Sanders writes for, named Baugh Person of the Year (<http://www.varight.com/news/virginia-right-person-of-the-year-for-2012-gerry-baugh-mechanicsville-tea-party/>). As they got to know each other, Baugh and Sanders went out for lunch on many occasions.

"He wanted to help me if I wanted to run for delegate," Sanders said.

Sanders never did run for office; he didn't feel he was "politically wired" in that way. But around the time of their conversations, Baugh was having similar conversations with somebody else — Menu somebody who, just a few years later, would be dominating headlines with one of the most unexpected political victories in Virginia history: Dave Brat.

It's half-a-decade's old news by now. But in case you aren't aware, Brat beat House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in his party's 2014 primary and went on to win the general election. This second part wasn't a surprise because, until the 7th Congressional District voted in Abigail Spanberger this past November, the district consistently voted conservative (Spanberger is the first Democrat to hold the office since 1970). In 2014, it was widely seen as the Republican primary that would determine the election's ultimate winner. And the Republican primary was surprising.

According to an article by International Business Times (<https://www.ibtimes.com/house-majority-leader-eric-cantor-defeated-tea-party-challenger-david-brat-virginia-gop-1597736>), Brat's victory over Cantor marked the first House Majority Leader to be ousted by their own party's primary since the title was introduced in 1899.



*Photo by Christopher Rand, via [imgur](https://imgur.com/gallery/tpD2Z) (<https://imgur.com/gallery/tpD2Z>)*

According to multiple sources, Baugh played a potentially irreplaceable role in convincing Brat, an out-of-the-spotlight college professor, to challenge Cantor, who'd been the incumbent for well over a decade. It's political science 101: this does not happen.

In his Virginia Right article titled "GIVE SOME CREDIT where IT IS DUE: GERRY BAUGH," (<http://www.varight.com/news/give-some-credit-where-it-is-due-gerry-baugh/>) Sanders writes that Baugh "worked hard to try to talk Dr. Brat into running." A Chesterfield Monthly article reprinted

([https://books.google.com/books?id=4Qa2CAAAQBAJ&pg=PT75&dq=gerry+baugh&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiUs671qd\\_gAhVvS98KHf5wAe0Q6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=gerry%20baugh&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=4Qa2CAAAQBAJ&pg=PT75&dq=gerry+baugh&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiUs671qd_gAhVvS98KHf5wAe0Q6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=gerry%20baugh&f=false)) in a book titled *Slingshot: The Defeat of Eric Cantor* states that four years before Brat ran for office, Baugh brought him to speak with Mechanicsville Tea Party members and “continued to lobby Brat to challenge Cantor.”

What’s more, Roll Call tells us (<https://www.rollcall.com/news/meet-david-brats-core-contributors>) that not even Gerry Baugh himself but his company, Baugh Auto Body, was Brat’s largest campaign contributor during the primary race against Cantor, donating a total of \$5400. Fun fact: Baugh actually contributed more in the primary than Koch Industries donated in the general election (<https://www.opensecrets.org/races/contributors?cycle=2014&id=VA07&spec=N>). Blogger Michael Maynard even cracks a joke (<https://mmaynard119.wordpress.com/2014/06/13/blinded-by-the-light/>) about it: “Baugh’s Auto Body must be one of the Koch Brothers’ secret campaign contribution groups.”

### **So Where Is Gerry Baugh Now?**

It’s clear that Gerry Baugh played a definitive role in Central Virginia politics. While he isn’t always in the spotlight, he works hard to fight for what he believes in.

But this doesn’t change the reason that he’s in the spotlight now. While his Auto Body shop may have helped Dave Brat down the road to Congress, it left a lot of its customers in the lurch.



[Menu](#)*Photo by Benjamin West*

Besides some minimal reporting and a handful of angry social media posts, the mysterious disappearance of Baugh Auto Body is already fading into history. Their website was removed almost simultaneously with the closure ([though you can still view it on the Wayback Machine](https://web.archive.org/web/20180827131419/https://baughautobody.com/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180827131419/https://baughautobody.com/>)), and listing sites are beginning to remove Baugh from their accessible records.

But for an instrumental figure in one of the most surprising and unusual political events in Virginia — heck, in United States — history to disappear like this certainly seems worth noting.

We might never know what prompted such a puzzling event. RVA Mag has received no response to requests for comment from owner Gerry Baugh, but because most of his online contact information is linked to his former company, we can't be sure that he is even receiving these requests.

If we don't know anything else, we know this: closing your business without warning or remorse leaves a lot of people very angry.

"They obviously knew they had some problems when they took our cars," Shaia said. "This didn't happen overnight, it wasn't like something catastrophic happened to their business — I'm pretty sure this is a long term thing."

Shaia said that although Baugh Auto kept taking her insurance money, and went as far as to take her car apart, they “didn’t do a thing to fix it.”

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“It’s just very dishonest and disturbing that someone would do that.”

*Top Photo via Google Street View*



## Benjamin West



Benjamin West has lived in Richmond for about half a decade. He loves long walks on North Bank trail and adding to his collection of mid-grade pens. His New Year's resolution was to choose campy, sci-fi paperback illustrations for all of his Spotify playlists, but he's already tripped up a few times.

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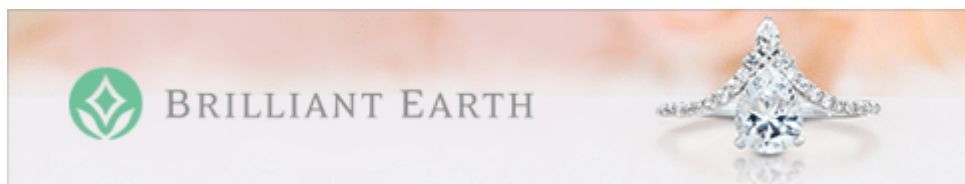
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