

## **John Atkinson**

Richard Smith, owner and developer of the Robertsville Forge, as well as the ore beds and iron-making facilities in Salisbury, began his career in America as a merchant in Boston. He had arrived there in 1767 with a friend and partner, one John Atkinson. They set up shop on what was then called King Street, since renamed State Street, in the same neighborhood as today's Custom House and Quincy Market.

Atkinson seemed to have been the partner who stayed home and tended to the business, while Smith made excursions throughout southern New England acquiring land and business opportunities and prospects. All of our research into the background of our local iron/steel industry indicated that Smith was the only name associated with its beginnings; consequently we concentrated our research efforts on him. This work yielded information that surpassed our greatest hopes and expectations, but as far as the parent firm of Smith & Atkinson was concerned, only the name came up on occasion, thus we knew of the existence of a person named John Atkinson, but little else. Nor did we need to know about him; after all, he was not a piece of the puzzle that we were hoping to assemble.

Before proceeding further, let me define the term "we". The group of interested persons who began the in-depth research into the Robertsville Forge consists of Walt Landgraf, who had been instrumental in the restoration efforts of the Beckley Furnace in Canaan; historian David Ingram of Boston; retired professor of archeology Fred Warner of Barkhamsted, and Robert Grigg of the Colebrook Historical Society. The contacts that were ferreted out were the result of efforts made by Walt Landgraf and Dave Ingram, so it is to them that we owe a vote of gratitude for the wealth of knowledge that has been gained in the last few years.

It was the result of information supplied to us by our researcher in England that drew our attention to Atkinson, who slowly began to emerge from the indistinct mists of the past and assume an identity of his own.

The 1760s were trying times here in the American Colonies; tensions were running higher with every arriving ship from the home country, bringing with them more laws and restrictions, all of which were to ultimately lead to the violence that was to initiate the War of Independence. Many citizens of Boston as well as other major cities in the colonies considered themselves to be British subjects, and were proud to support, love and defend the king or Queen of Great Britain. The outbreak of hostilities brought with it great anguish and anxiety on the part of these citizens who had come to detest British Parliament, but who still clung to their allegiance and love of King George.

In Boston, after Gen. Washington had successfully completed a series of military campaigns that effectively compromised British presence in that port and commercial center and in 1776, the British evacuated the city, taking with them all those who considered themselves Loyalists, most of whom were taken to Halifax, Nova Scotia. This group did not include Richard Smith, as he had departed for England and other points on the continent on a business trip that he had planned prior to the outbreak of hostilities, but which had to be postponed because of his daughter's health. Once military action broke out, he and his family could not

return to Boston. The evacuation did include John Atkinson and his family. There is nothing particularly strange on Atkinson's part in this move. However, whereas most displaced loyalists remained in Canada, Atkinson did not.

We will here present two documents, number one being public knowledge in this country, the second turned out to be a bombshell.

“To the honorable senate and house of representatives in general court assembled: The petition of John Atkinson, late of Boston in the county of Suffolk & Commonwealth of Massachusetts, but now a resident in the city of New York and State of New York, merchant, humbly sheweth:

That previous to the Revolution he arrived at Boston from England and there resided till the commencement of the late war, when he returned to the place of his nativity – that at the termination of the contest he returned to America & has resided in the State of New York these four years past – that he has endeavored in all his conduct, both before & since the revolution to demean himself as a good citizen and to prove himself a friend & supporter of the constitution of this country – that being one of those persons whose return was proscribed and which proscription cannot be reversed, but by an act of the legislature he humbly prays that an act”----- etc.

This document is from the Massachusetts Archives, Miscellaneous Papers of the legislature, re: Acts of 1790, chapter 47, dated March 11, 1791.

On the basis of this plea by Atkinson, he was granted citizenship, and in fact lived out the rest of his life in this country.

Next comes what our researcher in England uncovered about our friend:

“MEMORIAL OF JOHN ATKINSON – LETTER FROM FRANCIS GREEN”

“I do hereby certify that I have been intimately acquainted with Mr. John Atkinson, merchant (of the house of Smith & Atkinson, late of Boston, Mass.) for more than 10 years past and that he hath uniformly conducted so as to convince me of his inviolate loyalty of attachment to the British Government. That he was one of the gentlemen who assisted Governor Gage and Gov,r Hutchinson in 1774 in conveyance of which he became obnoxious to the Populace & Confederacies which were formed thro'out the country to break off his connections and to win his business, which was extensive.

That he was enrolled in the Corps of Associates of Boston, which I had the honor to command. That he quitted the town with his family in March 1776 accompanying the Army of Halifax, & hath since, to my knowledge borne arms as a volunteer at New York in 1778 & 1779 & 1780. That he was convinced in fitting out armed vessels at New York to distress the Enemy & on occasion hath exhibited a laudable zeal to promote the success of His Majesty's Army during the late rebellion.”

MEMORIAL OF JOHN ATKINSON”

“To the Hon. The Commissioners appointed by Act of Parliament for enquiry into the losses and services of the American Loyalists – The Memorial of John Atkinson, late of Boston, Massachusetts Bay, Merchant – sheweth that your Memorialist had been settled at Boston since 1767. That he hath maintained his Allegiance to the British Government and hath manifested his

loyalty not only by associating for the interior peace and defense of Boston during the blockade, but by bearing arms since that time, and was well known to be always firmly attached to the King's Cause, on which account he found himself obliged to quit that town with his family at the evacuation of Boston, and proceeded with the Army to Halifax, as will appear by the certificates herewith and thereby relinquishing his property and business, which was extensive – That he hath never applied hitherto to Government for relief – That the house of Smith & Atkinson, of which he is a partner, left a large property behind in 1776 (His partner having previously repaired to England) a schedule of which is hereto annexed.

That by the Acts of the States he is prohibited from returning to look after his concerns, and of course must be a very great sufferer in consequence of his loyalty and attachment to Great Britain. Your memorialist therefore prays that his case may be taken into your consideration in order that he may be entitled under your report to receive such aid or relief for his losses, loyalty and service may be found to deserve.

(Signed) John Atkinson  
Basinghall Street no. 7  
March 4, 1784

In the letter from Francis Green, noted previously, reference is made to Atkinson's involvement with armed vessels. Additional documentation from England shed more light on the subject. He did not remain long in Nova Scotia, but went to Ontario, where he was able to make his way down the Hudson Valley to the city of New York, then the military and administrative headquarters in the American Colonies. He immediately made his abilities available to the authorities there. Not only did he become actively engaged in fitting out merchant ships as armed warships to attack, run down and eliminate American merchantmen and warships, he was in charge of the entire operation; he was the man who reported to Gen. Gates. As history attests, he was very successful in this role. Not only that, he admits to bearing arms against the American forces while in Boston.

Atkinson had to swear on a bible in both his petitions to the American authorities as well as those in England. There is a document on file in England wherein he states that he held the Americans in such contempt that he felt confident that his oath on this side of the Atlantic did not constitute an act of heresy.

I don't know whether or not Atkinson received compensation by the British government, although I assume that he did. I do know that his appeal to Massachusetts was successful, as was Richard Smith's in the State of Connecticut. When you reflect on the matter, there must have been a large number of applicants to the various former colonies for restitution of lands and citizenship following the war, many of whom might well have been honest victims of the upheaval. The various governors and their councils wouldn't necessarily be able to prove or disprove many of these claims, and unless there wasn't a flagrant violation that someone might have known about, (in this case, Massachusetts did not know what had transpired in New York) restitution would have been made.

Eventually, evidently in 1791, Atkinson, with his family returned to Massachusetts. As it turns out, he didn't remain there long, but departed for the realized, but largely untapped opportunities in The Grants, as New Hampshire and Vermont were known at that time. He settled in the southeastern Vermont town of Bellows Falls, where he proceeded to not only make a name for himself, but to endear himself with the inhabitants to the degree that they named their main street after him. What did he do to warrant these feelings? It was John Atkinson who engineered the vast waterworks consisting of the dams and locks that tamed the Connecticut River as it poured over the granite outcroppings that cause the falls between Bellows Falls and North Walpole, New Hampshire. Atkinson, his sons and grandsons, controlled the water rights to these dams and canals. Until well into the twentieth century, Bellows Falls was one of the premier industrial sites along the Connecticut River.

Today, if you travel north on I-91, get off at the Bellows Falls exit and drive through town on U.S. Rt. 5; which is their main street, Atkinson Street.