

Some Misconceptions Concerning the Early Iron Industry in Colebrook

Local histories are a compilation of facts and lore, handed down from generation to generation in spoken and written form. Usually there is no incentive to question these bits of information, but occasionally something will happen that requires a closer look be taken at some particular aspect of our past; such is the case with our involvement with the early iron industry. In the 1990s, during the rebuilding of the Beckley Furnace in East Canaan, Walt Landgraf, one of the principals in the reconstruction, was doing research at the Baker Library at Harvard, when he uncovered a wealth of information concerning the involvement of Richard Smith's iron operations during the late 1760s and continuing through the Revolutionary period. Richard Smith was the Boston merchant who had succeeded in cornering the iron market in New England in the years prior to the outbreak of hostilities that led to the American War of Liberation. He owned the ore deposits and blast furnaces in Salisbury as well as forges as far east as present day Collinsville. When the pressures of the Beckley Furnace project lessened, he was able to turn his attention to the Robertsville forge. It was at this point that I became involved in the project. Walt assembled a team that researched materials in Boston and at Rutgers University in New Jersey. From the results of this research, papers were written and submitted to the United States Department of the Interior, which awarded us substantial funds with which we were able to engage researchers in England and other locations to broaden our research. These investigations are still ongoing, even as the tenth year anniversary looms. Among the wealth of information unearthed were some "facts" that had been universally accepted as historic truths that were proven to have been in error. Here are three that most of us grew up believing:

To begin with, there is no truth in the belief that Salisbury ore was carried via saddlebag to be converted into iron in Robertsville. It is difficult to find the source of this misinformation. Irving Manchester's History of Colebrook correctly identifies pig iron bars as the commodity, and it was transported as bars, or "pig iron" in wagons or carts. These loads consisted of bars weighing a total of some 1,100 pounds. Two teamster's receipts still survive from 1768 concerning bars transported in this manner from Pettibone's forge in Norfolk to Colebrook.

Ore Hill ore produced between 2,000 – 2,500 tons of iron for each 5,000 tons of ore (less than 50%). The cost of transportation was .15¢ to .20¢ per ton per mile. Total production costs of Connecticut furnaces in the Salisbury area were \$4.00 - \$5.00 per ton. (*The Early Iron Industry of Connecticut* Herbert C. Kieth and Charles Rufus Harte, New Haven, 1935.) It is approximately 27 miles from Ore Hill to the site of the Robertsville forge. With this in mind, it seems unlikely that Salisbury ore was ever transported to Colebrook, at least during the decade of the 1770s.

Another rumor occasionally still bandied about is that some of the chain that was deployed across the Hudson River in the vicinity of West Point was manufactured in the Robertsville forge. Here are the circumstances surrounding those chains: The American military strategists ordered heavy chains to be deployed across the Hudson River to prevent British warships from ascending the river to threaten Albany and the whole of the Mohawk and Hudson River valleys. These chains, consisting of 18" links, were to block access to the upper Hudson at West Point and at Fort Montgomery. Most of the Fort Montgomery chain (1,500 feet out of a total of 1,800 feet) had been forged for use on the

Sorel River (since renamed the Richelieu River that flows from Lake Champlain to the St. Lawrence River) from Ticonderoga iron at that location. The additional 300 feet were furnished by Robert Livingston, and much of the work was done at Poughkeepsie, but it is quite possible that part, if not all of the iron came from Livingston's Ancram, N. Y. furnace that used Salisbury ore. Salisbury had little, if anything to do with the West Point chain, for the original contract with the firm of Noble, Townsend & Co., on file at the New York State Library at Albany, required that the chain be made of Stirling Mine iron. It was forged at the Stirling furnace. At the time, this was in Bergen County, New Jersey, but now, because of a boundary change, is in New York State. The chain was shipped to West Point in sections, and was assembled there. (The above information was extracted from a paper presented at the 51st annual meeting of the Connecticut Society of Civil Engineers, Inc. February 20, 1935.)

And finally, from 1944 until 2005, it was believed that the forge in Robertsville had produced cannonballs during the Revolutionary War period. The reason for this is as follows: During the Second World War, the three Colebrook schools were involved with scrap drives held to aid the war effort. In approximately 1944, students from the Forge School in Robertsville discovered a large mass of "three pounders", of the type used by the warships in the eighteenth century, almost on top of the foundations of Richard Smith's forge. Everyone naturally assumed that they must have been made there, and the war came to a conclusion before they could be shipped. Nothing occurred to cast doubt on this assumption until 2005, when Walt Landgraf uncovered documents stating that the forge had purchased these cannonballs after the war was over as a form of cheap scrap iron. They had not been used by the time the forge closed its doors for the final time in 1811, and lay there until being discovered by the schoolchildren. No cannonballs of any type were produced in Robertsville, although there were many tons of anchors intended for merchant ships that were shipped to Hartford via the new road alignment from the forge along the east bank of the Farmington River to Canton.

The accompanying map shows the relationship between the various localities involved with Revolutionary War engagements, in this case, the chains across the Hudson River at Fort Montgomery and West Point.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg