

Robertsville Forge Update

It doesn't seem possible, but it has been nine years since we began to unravel the shroud of mystery that surrounded the Revolutionary War forge site located in Colebrook's southeastern corner.

For as many years as the oldest resident can remember, tales of a forge having been in operation in Robertsville during the War of Independence abounded, but when asked specific questions such as exactly where it was located or what products were produced there, answers became vague, or as we now know, wildly inaccurate.

Richard Smith, a Boston merchant who had cornered the iron industry in New England during the late 1760s, had purchased approximately 280 acres of land in the southeastern corner of Colebrook in 1769 and 1770 and had caused to be constructed 11 structures based around a large four-fired forge. This little community, built in complete isolation in an undeveloped corner of a township that was not to be incorporated for another ten years, was to produce vital iron products for the upcoming War of Independence. By the twentieth century however, the whole complex was all but forgotten.

We can thank one person for the resurgence of interest in the forge and the gathering of information that brought both it and the man responsible for its creation and operation to the fore. Walt Landgraf had been central to the reconstruction of the Beckley furnace in Canaan, undertaken in the 1990s. During his research on the iron industry in Litchfield County, he came upon a research librarian in the Baker Library of the Harvard University Business College who offhandedly remarked during a lunch break one day that they had much more material than what pertained to Salisbury and Canaan; would he be interested in seeing what they had on the town of Colebrook? That was the end of Walt's lunch for that day, and what we now know of the subject can be dated from that moment.

Back in Colebrook, the first order of the day was to locate the exact location of the forge building. This proved to be more complicated than one might expect, as local lore mentioned three possible locations; one was immediately upstream from the bridge on Old Creamery Road, another was immediately downstream from that same bridge and the third was near the confluence of Sandy Brook and Still River, another few hundred yards downstream from the aforementioned bridge. Land records may mention when a building was erected on a piece of property, but when you are dealing with a 280-acre plot of land, it seldom if ever gives the exact location. What finally gave us the break we were looking for was a land transaction conducted around 1820 that stated that its southeast corner was 66 feet from the northwest corner of the old forge. The site was the one just upstream from the Old Creamery Bridge. One factor in the difficulty in determining that this was indeed the spot was that the entire floor area had been filled with large boulders from the reconstruction of the Old Creamery Bridge after the 1955 flood. This may ultimately prove to be a blessing in disguise, as it is an effective means to discourage scavengers who might remove artifacts, thus decreasing the scientific value of the site.

Once we knew where the forge had been located, we set out to determine what exactly had been made there. We were immediately confronted with a bit of misinformation appearing in the text on the official historical marker sign in front of the

historical society in Colebrook Center. It states that one of the commodities manufactured in town during the Revolution was cannon. Not so, cannon could only be poured into a mold constructed directly in front of a blast furnace, such as the one in Salisbury, near the source of the iron ore. Colebrook never had a blast furnace, but did have Smith's Forge. A forge takes the product of the blast furnace (pig iron) and by reheating and pounding out impurities, creates a marketable product. It didn't take us long to realize that we were dealing with no ordinary forge. To begin with, the building was physically larger than most forges; it contained four water wheels, each enclosed and supplied with a stove so as to ensure continuous operation during the coldest periods of winter.

Our oral histories tell of ore being transported to Colebrook from Salisbury in saddlebags by horses. Initially we treated this skeptically, as the transportation costs for ore over the 23 miles separating Ore Hill in Salisbury from Colebrook were deemed to have been prohibitive. However, in May 2000, evidence was unearthed in the State Library in Hartford by Walt Landgraf that the manager of the Robertsville Forge, Jacob Ogden, had petitioned the state legislature to aid in the rebuilding of the facility after it burned in 1781. One of his arguments was that he had 50 tons of Salisbury ore on hand, and that it was common knowledge how important the forge was to the war effort. The legislature did come to his aid, and the forge was rebuilt. This amount of ore does not seem likely to have been transported by saddlebags; certainly some form of wagon must have been employed, either two-wheeled or four-wheeled, and drawn by oxen, not horses.

The old newspapers, now on microfilm in the library, have proven to be invaluable, as on several occasions Smith sought to sell the forge, never with much success. The ads were quite specific in their descriptions, thus our detailed knowledge of not only what the physical plant looked like, but what and how much was being produced.

The most important product manufactured for the war effort had to have been the forge's ability to produce small quantities of steel. We know that Smith (or his managing partner, Jared Lane) imported a man from "the low countries" who had the knowledge of steel manufacturing in his head. The British government had specifically denied the colonies the right to manufacture many commodities, one of which was steel, but without the ability to produce steel, cannon could not be produced. As stated earlier, pouring white-hot molten iron into a mold in front of the blast furnace made cannon. After it cools, a centering rod is extracted and the cannon blank must then be bored out to whatever specifications are required. This can only be done by the use of a steel bit. The colonists' inability to manufacture steel was one of the considerations taken into account by the British military planners, leading them, at least early on, to believe that the colonists would never be able to confront the might of the British military forces on the battlefields of North America. The forge in Colebrook may well have produced the first steel ever to be made in the Americas. We have not been able to find any accounts of earlier manufacturers, although one of the professors at Yale University, who is involved with our research, cautioned against making a claim for being the first.

Robertsville Forge Update Continued

While steel bits may have been the most militarily important product produced there, it was an insignificant amount of the overall production. By bulk and weight, anchors destined for merchant vessels probably accounted for the majority, but this operation took place in the mid-1780s, after the war had ended. One entry in October 1785 mentions 14,702 lbs. of anchors, which were transported six to a cart to Hartford, where they were sold.

During the war, steel appears to have been produced around the beginning of 1777, the year Burgoyne's army surrendered at Saratoga. An advertisement in the Hartford newspaper that year states that they have steel "made in the German way, to be sold at this place, by the subscriber, who has procured workmen that understand the business, and warrant the steel to be good for edge tools."

The following year this ad appeared, also in the Hartford paper: "Steel for plough iron and edge tools, manufactured in the German method, full drawn out neat and small, to be sold for cash by the subscriber. I with pleasure inform my customers that I have improved in the skill from what was made here last year, although that was good steel." It is signed by the manager, Jacob Ogden.

Not only did we discover what was made there, we also found out what wasn't made there; all of our legends had the forge making canon balls during the Revolution. Why did this story get started? A large pile of three-pounders were uncovered at the site by school children from the Forge School on a scrap drive around 1944. The ball on display at the historical society is one of them; proof positive, right? One of the documents Walt turned up was an item stating that a quantity of scrap canon balls had been purchased for melting down. This was after the peace treaty ending the war had been signed; it was probably one of the first examples of military war surplus!

When we knew all that we needed to know about the forge itself, our attention turned to the men who made the facility work, from the owner Smith, to the workers themselves. Smith, and his partner, John Atkinson, have emerged from the mists of time to become very real persons, and we will deal with them separately. Walt Landgraf felt that there exists enough information on these two men for a graduate student to write a doctoral thesis on them.

Our investigations led us to many locations; Cambridge, Mass.; Rutgers, New Jersey; Hartford, Conn. and we have a researcher in England on our payroll who has come up with an amazing amount of documentation on both Smith and Atkinson. It was during a session at Rutgers that a 1771 map showing the layout for the 11-building complex turned up. This was an amazing find, as it not only showed the location and relationship of all the features in Robertsville, it named the occupants of the four dwelling houses. One name was Morgan, and we know that Morgan was a competent forge manager, as after he left Robertsville, he removed to Barkhamsted, where he established his own forge near the mouth of what is today referred to as Morgan Brook, next to the Century Woodworking Company.

Another name (although not one mentioned on the map) was Cahoon. Both Jacob Ogden and Jared Lane held Cahoon in very high esteem. He probably was the builder of the water wheels and other more complicated features at the forge. We also know that he constructed the bridge next to the forge crossing Still River so that they could access their

property on the east bank of the river. The eastern abutments of this first bridge can still be seen near the water line, looking much like a section of stone wall, while standing on the present Old Creamery Road Bridge. We have seen a letter bemoaning the fact that Cahoon was leaving to pursue his future “in the north country”, and that his loss would deal a severe blow to the operation at the forge.

A year or so ago, while on a trip back to my high school alma matter, Lyndon Institute, located in the town of Lyndon, Vermont, the subject of the town’s history came up, and it turns out that the same man who had been so valuable to Colebrook is now remembered as the founder of the Town of Lyndon, Vermont. It is indeed a small world.

The recent loss of Walt Landgraf has had a profound effect on many aspects of life as we knew it in not only his home town of Barkhamsted, but also all of the surrounding communities, the research on the forge site being only one example. But he was a great organizer, and he left a plan that was being implemented when he passed away, and that was to have a professional archaeologist perform a dig at the forge site. He had arranged for a grant from the Farmington River Waterways for this purpose, and with other funds raised primarily by the Barkhamsted Historical Society, had enough to secure the services of Marc Banks, an archaeologist from Simsbury to conduct the project. Work began on October 8, 2007 and will continue probably until about the first of December unless he is chased out by severe weather.

Walt and I had conducted primary test bores to see if we could determine the dimensions and exact locations of the buildings depicted on the 1771 map, and were somewhat successful in that we identified the coalhouse (charcoal), the blacksmith shop, store and possibly another outbuilding, but we drew a blank when it came to any of the four houses. The scale of the old map is off, and the present road alignment wasn’t established until the year following their construction, although it stands to reason that the houses would have been in close proximity to the road alignments.

So far Mark has established a 10-meter grid across much of the large field that we hope holds some of the answers that we seek. A marker flag is then placed at each intersection, and selectively holes equaling one-quarter of a meter are dug, always keeping the flag at the southwest corner of the hole. With every 10-centimeter layer (about 4 inches) the contents are carefully sifted through a fine wire mesh and any cultural objects are carefully placed in a zip-lock bag and identified. After the sub soil layer is reached, one more 10-centimeter layer is searched and if nothing is found, the hole is filled back in and another location is chosen. If by chance a significant find is unearthed, then the adjacent squares would be excavated.

Although Northwest Regional and the local grammar schools have been notified about this dig, no one has come around to either check out the site or to help with the digging and sifting. I can only speak for myself, but from a very young age I would have just about lived at the site of an archaeological dig – heck, even now Mark has to throw me out at the end of nearly every day that weather permits work there; I’m having the time of my life!

Bob Grigg