

Role of the Robertsville Forge During the War of Independence, The

What started out as (what we thought would be) a relatively simple task of determining the exact location of the forge in Robertsville ultimately turned into a very complex and fascinating quest, which has significantly added to the knowledge we have about Colebrook between 1769 through the Revolutionary War period, which ended in 1783.

This forge and the support community that surrounded it was the brainchild of its owner, Richard Smith, a Boston merchant. In 1768 he purchased the hematite mine in Salisbury, Connecticut, and along with that real estate came the blast furnaces and related iron works that made up the bulk of the iron industry in North America. The volume of iron production in other colonies paled in comparison with Salisbury. Along with these purchases was a forge located in what is today Collinsville, at the site of the old Collins Company on the Farmington River. Within two years Smith had shut down this forge and replaced it with a brand new facility located on Still River, just over the boundary from Winchester. The reason for this move isn't obvious until you take into account the fact that Colebrook was not yet an official township, something that was not to happen for another nine years in 1779. Simply put, this meant that there were no taxes, no paperwork to be filled out and no one snooping around asking questions. There weren't even any roads in that section. The first one, more or less along the alignment of Conn. Rt. 8, was the one made by a man named Kellogg, who supplied wood for the charcoal that would be needed for the operation of the forge. Research turned up the number of cords of wood stacked on what is today the large field at the east end of Robertsville Road, where the present archaeological excavation is underway, in 1770 at 1,100, an amazing amount when you consider that in those days, a skilled woodsman could only produce one cord of stacked wood in one workday.

Smith, as far as we know, knew little if anything about iron or the iron industry, other than to understand its economic importance. Consequently, he had to hire knowledgeable men to run his newly acquired business. This he did by hiring a man with an extensive background in iron from New Jersey by the name of Jared Lane. Lane was made Smith's equal partner as well as his lawyer. Lane brought with him another New Jerseyite named Jacob Ogden, also from a third-generation iron family. Lane would assume control of the Salisbury operations, while Ogden would run things in Colebrook as a satellite of Salisbury.

One of the first things Ogden did was to court and win the hand of Jerusha, the daughter of Joseph Rockwell, who lived atop what we now refer to as Deer Hill, due west of the forge site. They were to make their home in Colebrook for more than a decade before moving to Hartford in 1781.

Smith then, had set up the forge to facilitate his economic plans in colonial Connecticut. He had permission from the British Parliament to produce iron in the form of pig iron and merchant bar, but certainly not steel or many of the larger objects, such as ship anchors, that were manufactured in Colebrook. England was very jealous of her right to tax commodities. Much that was produced in the colonies was shipped to England, where they were then re-shipped carrying English taxes. The lack of a paper trail allowed Smith to circumvent these laws.

The outbreak of hostilities in 1775 changed all this. Smith had scheduled a business trip back to England in 1774, but due to his daughter falling ill, postponed it for a year, thus allowing his enemies to maintain the reason for his departure was political rather than economic. These enemies persuaded the Colony (or State) of Connecticut to seize the Colebrook and Salisbury operations in Smith's absence so that they could produce materials for the American war effort.

The fact that Lane and Ogden were allowed to remain at their posts indicates that their loyalty was never in doubt. Richard Smith, whose loyalty had been questioned for more than two and a quarter centuries, now has been cleared of these suspicions. We now know that Smith and Governor Jonathan Trumbull had entered into an agreement whereby Smith provided all of the black powder that was required for the state militia for the duration of the war. These two men must have agreed that this information be kept a secret, as the truth was never divulged even during Smith's trial in the Rhode Island courts over jurisdiction of Smith's captured household goods. This is a very interesting story, one that will be fully explored in a future article.

At the time the Robertsville forge was under the jurisdiction of the State of Connecticut, it began manufacturing something other than merchant bar iron and its byproducts. Salisbury, as well as other blast furnaces, could manufacture any number of cannon, but there was one huge problem; the barrel of a cannon has to be reamed out after it is cast, and this can only be done with something stronger than iron, in other words, steel. The British military minds must have been dumbfounded when Washington's army showed up on battlefields not only with a sizable number of American made cannon, but, as it turned out, ones that were actually more accurate than their own. This reflected another bit of technology employed by Lane in Salisbury; new and secret French technology had devised a better method of boring out cannon. The British method, which had been used here until hostilities broke out was to hoist the blank cannon up by means of a tripod, then lowering it down upon the bit, which was turned by a horse walking around in a circle. The result was a cannon that might be considerably off center, and would have to be adjusted by the gunner before firing. The French technology was essentially the same as is used today in reaming out a long barrel; the barrel remains horizontal and the bit is turned into it. This information did not come to the British until after the war ended.

Colebrook seems to have been the first source of steel in the Colonies, but we can be fairly certain that the technique for manufacturing it was quickly disseminated to other forges. Our research only identified the person who brought this knowledge to the Smith forge as being from the Low Countries, which in those days probably meant that it was French technology. The steel was used for making the tips of the drills that bored out the newly cast cannon. It was also used to make the interchangeable noses of the giant 500-pound hammers used to purify and shape the raw pig iron and merchant bars. The Colebrook Historical Society has one of these that was found at the site. According to Professor Gordon of Yale, it is the only one in existence.

These three men, Richard Smith, Jared Lane and Jacob Ogden were truly American Patriots, and deserve a more prominent position in American history than they presently occupy.

Historic Bytes
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