Archaeology in Robertsville

2010 marks the beginning of the fourth year of the archaeological dig being conducted in Robertsville, Connecticut. The purpose is to locate the positions of the several structures that once were the support buildings for an iron forge constructed in 1770 by a Mr. Richard Smith, a Boston merchant who had acquired the rights to most of the iron deposits and their corresponding structures in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. After buying the iron ore beds in Salisbury, the largest known in North America at the time, and the blast furnace and other support buildings, he caused to have constructed in the southeast corner of Colebrook a very large (for those times) forge along with ten other buildings to support it.

The late Walt Landgraf of Barkhamsted, a historian and teacher of the first order, can be credited with the initiation of the research into this forge that has led us to some fascinating discoveries and a wealth of scientific data concerning not only this forge and the role it played in the American War of Independence, but information about the workings of an isolated manufacturing center at a time period earlier than the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

The purpose of this paper is not to give an overview of the history of the iron industry locally, but to focus on the manner in which the archaeologist goes about his work.

In the summer of 2007 Dr. Marc Banks, with a PhD. in archaeology, was awarded a grant from the Farmington River Coordinating Committee to begin an investigation into the Robertsville site. Locally, Marc had done research for the Barkhamsted Historical Society, as well as research for the State of Connecticut, making him an excellent choice to conduct this investigation. Work got underway on October 6th, 2007 with a crew of five or six, most of whom had had some previous experience with archaeological digs.

Initially, the work centered on a large open field of some seven or eight acres, alongside the relatively straight Robertsville Road, which is east of CT Rt. 8. A straight east-west line was established arbitrarily, but in this case, parallel to the road and about 25 feet from it. Two pins were driven deep into the ground, one at each end of the base line, as it is called. A one-meter grid was then established along and perpendicular to the base line, creating a grid system that theoretically covers the entire field. From that point, test pits can be dug anywhere on the field and the exact locations can be identified on a map of the area. Say the first test hole is to be 50 meters east of the westernmost pin, and is dug on the south side of the base line. Universal archaeological protocol dictates that every one-meter test pit will be identified by a wire rod, capped by a colored flag placed exactly at the southwest corner of the one square meter pit. These are the flags the casual passersby sees while driving past an active site. The flag we are referring to here would be marked with a permanent pen to read “R. Smith Site, E50, S1” (east 50 meters, [from the westernmost pin] south one meter). When starting to dig this square, any material found would be marked on its own plastic bag to read: “1-10 cmbs (one to ten centimeters [4 inches] below surface).” Then the initials of the team that dug and recorded the hole, along with the date. This information is written on a plastic zip-lock bag and all artifacts discovered in the 1-10 centimeter layer are place within this bag. Next, level 10-20 cmbs is investigated, its contents bagged, identified, and so forth. As the material is carefully removed

from each level, it is placed on a ¼-inch square wire cloth shaking screen with a wooden frame. Everything too large to pass through this screen is examined, and if it is determined that it is just a local pebble, and thus having no value to the purpose of the dig, it is tossed aside, to be shoveled back into the hole when it is determined that no more signs of human involvement are present.

From a map we discovered in New Jersey drawn in 1771, we knew the general location of all eleven structures, and as we already knew the location of the forge itself, we set about finding the exact location of the other buildings. The closest to the forge was the coal house, so called, which housed the charcoal to operate the forges. From the first shovel-full of soil at this site, charcoal was abundant, and when the area had been investigated, it was determined that the coal house was 40 feet north to south, and 60 feet east to west. At one corner the charcoal was more than two feet deep with bands of sand and gravel, probably placed there to cover charcoal that had become wet. This was a major concern in those days, as wet charcoal could cause explosions. Coal houses had roofs that extended out several feet past the eves to maintain dryness.

The Smith Forge complex is divided into four sections today; the forge itself is on Electric Company property at the southeast quadrant, at the southwest, the large field containing the coal house and two dwelling houses is privately owned, the northwest quadrant , containing at least two more dwelling sites and part of the original road alignment is privately owned, and the northeast quadrant is divided between the electric company and the owners of the large field, diagonally across the intersection.

The two dwellings in the field were excavated during 2008 and 2009. The information gained from them answered questions about the lifestyle of the operators of the forge. The type and amount of ceramics reflect the fact that this small, closely-knit community, which included a company store that was in fact a satellite of the large store located at the iron complex around the Salisbury Blast furnaces. In the period we are examining, from 1770 through 1810, we wouldn't expect to find working class people using imported china cups and saucers. We also wouldn't expect to find cuff links and shoe buckles, but we did.

Among the earliest examples of ceramics was English Trail Slip c. 1675-1710 (production dates); white salt-glazed stoneware c. 1720-1770; Whieldonware c. 1740-1770; hand-painted creamware c. 1760s-1820; and redware c. 1780s-1840. Whieldonware has an interesting background; it was among the first attempts made by Wedgewood, who was to go on to be considered one of the premier names in English china.

The summer of 2010 has been devoted to unearthing the sites of the blacksmith shop and reverberatory furnace, also called a puddling furnace, both of which are located in the southeast quadrant alongside Still River. It has been especially gratifying to have the original road alignment reveal itself, broken tools and slag identify the blacksmith shop, and even the pits that came up completely empty, proving in their lack of evidence that nothing ever stood there.

Our area is blessed to have such a pristine site of national importance that has been revealed with the financial aid and encouragement of an organization such as the Farmington River Coordinating Committee and an archaeologist the caliber of Dr. Marc Banks.

Historic Bytes