

REVOLUTIONARY WAR - HUNTER'S IRON WORKS



c. 1782, by H. Charles McBarron. (U.S. Army)

James Hunter's Iron Works, also known as Rappahannock Forge, was located east of Falmouth. It was Stafford's major industrial enterprise and one of Virginia's and America's early major industrial plants. In the Revolution, it produced weapons and implements for the Continental Army and Navy. The complex contained a blast furnace and forge; slitting, hammer, merchant, wire, plating, grist, saw, and steel mills; naileries and tanyards; carpenter, cooper, smith, and wheelwright shops; coal houses; stables; storage buildings; and quarters. It was considered the largest iron works in the colonies. Hunter and his iron works were credited with significant contributions to the cause of American independence. Yet, in 1783, Hunter paid taxes on some 260 slaves -- the pragmatic Scotsman did everything possible to increase production for the Revolution, including using slave labor. Thus, while Hunter's slaves ultimately helped win the war for independence, its victory eluded and excluded them for two more centuries. (Today's location is called Olde Forge.)



Wall gun produced at Hunter's Iron Works. (Springfield, MA Armory)



Making pig iron ingots, such as those found near the site of the Hunter's Iron Works. (Albert Z. Conner)

Stafford's Hunter's Iron Works, its relation to other Virginia iron industries, and its aid to the Revolution, is a fascinating parts of Stafford's history. Local historian Jerrilynn Eby MacGregor relates: "Off the highways of America, are scores of crumbling monuments that recall this country's stark beginning. These are the remains of venerable furnaces where iron ore was smelted to shape the destiny of America..."

James Hunter, born in Scotland in 1721, settled permanently in the Falmouth area in 1746. There he became a leading iron master of his day as well as a wealthy merchant. In the mid-1750s Hunter built a forge and mill complex on the north side of the Rappahannock River and the facility was operating as early as 1759. This complex, capable of manufacturing a wide variety of consumer goods, was unique in North America. Its products ranged from wool and cotton combs to textiles to nails and wire. By 1776, efforts at Hunter's Iron Works shifted from domestic goods to war materiel. In June of that year, he demonstrated a production model musket with bayonet. Legislators approved the design and ordered as many muskets as Hunter's gunsmiths could manufacture during the next year. Hunter was to receive six pounds for each "stand" or completely finished weapon.

In 1777 the legislature, backed by Governor Patrick Henry, recognized Hunter's Iron Works, also known as Rappahannock Forge, by subsidizing plant expansion. By the end of the following year, the works included steel and brass furnaces; a new iron furnace;

wire, plating and slitting mills; grist mills; forges; and a saw mill. The manufacturing mills were described as “one for making iron for the army and navy; one for fashioning arms, entrenching tools, and anchors; one for splitting and plating iron; and another for producing wire.” A British customs officer had already described Hunter’s facility as “the greatest iron works that is upon the Continent.”

Governor Thomas Jefferson wrote Hunter in 1781 indicating his concern for the works’ safety asserting “its significance to the safety of the colonies.” Virginia moved to secure the works. A state debt to Hunter for 180,000 Pounds (the modern equivalent of \$800,000) attests to production-levels at the works and the value of Hunter’s muskets, wall-guns, swords, and equipment. Prior to 1781, state officials paid substantial amounts to James Hunter, though it is unclear exactly how much he was owed. After 1781 the General Assembly, essentially broke and unable to pay its bills, failed to issue full payment on Hunter’s outstanding warrants.

Far from being destitute at his death, Hunter actually held substantial assets including his plantation house, “Stanstead,” some 6,000 acres of land in Stafford (and additional acreage in other places) and numerous slaves. Due to non-payment of bills owed him by the state, his estate was burdened with substantial debts, but the exact balance is unknown. Regardless of his financial situation, his contributions to the Revolution were great and personified the 1776 Philadelphia pledge committing “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

The man behind the success of Hunter’s Iron Works was actually John Strode, a Pennsylvania Quaker who managed the manufactory from c.1760 until c.1779 when he moved to Culpeper. Strode, a millwright and engineer, was responsible for much of the design and building carried on at Rappahannock Forge prior to the Revolution. James Hunter died in 1784 and the Revolution officially ended shortly afterward. Production continued at the works on a greatly reduced scale. Numerous attempts by the heirs to sell the property were unsuccessful. Not until the early 19th Century did Falmouth businessman Joseph Ficklen purchase the property. It is not known whether iron smelting resumed, but the forge and merchant mill continued in operation and Ficklen used parts of the works for his flour mills. Though heavily damaged by flooding, Union occupation, and time, many foundations remain on the forge site as does most of the three-quarters-mile-long canal that directed water from the river to the manufacturing mills. In 2001-2002, the Stafford County Historical Society purchased a Virginia Historical Marker to commemorate the “famous” Hunter’s Iron Works, ironically so perilously close to oblivion.

Representative of Stafford's revolutionary symbolism was John De Baptist. A free black from the island of St. Kitts and nearby Spotsylvania County, he was one of as many as 10 Afro-Virginians who served on the *Dragon*, launched October 1777 to patrol the Rappahannock and Chesapeake. From the late war years until his death in 1804, DeBaptist operated a Falmouth ferry. His later "Publick Claim" sought recompense for 8 days of transporting French troops across the Rappahannock at Falmouth in May 1783.



DeBaptiste Grave, Union Church, Falmouth. (Lymans)

Irony persisted. James Hunter, a slaveowner, had sacrificed everything in the cause of independence. Never adequately compensated for his efforts, he died in weakened financial condition. Hunter's grave marker, either by design or accident, is a fence-enclosed tree. And free black DeBaptist, owner of considerable property when he died, was able to afford a finer tombstone. Regardless, they lie buried, close to one another in Falmouth's Union Church Cemetery, where both have been honored by Revolutionary heritage groups.



Hunter's Gravesite, Union Cemetery, Falmouth. (Lymans)

Apocryphal stories abound that he died penniless and was buried at night to avoid creditors, but these appear incorrect. It is unlikely creditors would have dug up his body for retribution, and the wrought iron fence wouldn't have kept out anyone. Persistent stories James Hunter had "died a pauper" and was unceremoniously buried in Union Cemetery, Falmouth, led a group of citizens during the 1976 U.S. Bicentennial Celebration to hold a memorial service for the Revolutionary War patriot and industrialist.