

R ROBESONIA A

• FRIENDS OF THE •

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Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, Inc. PO Box 162 • Robesonia, PA 19551-1230

Robesonia Furnace and the Cornwall Mines

by Mike Bernard

It is sometime around the turn of the twentieth century. Mining at the great Cornwall ore hills continues as it has been since the 1740's when Peter Grubb started operation of what would stay for generations as the greatest iron ore mine in North America. Peter Bernardo, around age 50, starts another day with his crew of miners including son Josiah. They will work to uncover and break the ore so that it can be loaded on rail cars for transportation to a local blast furnace. But Peter does not work for the Cornwall Ore Bank Co. or any of the Grubb/Coleman entities who have always run the operation. In a rare and long-time contentious situation Peter works for the Robesonia Iron Co. of Robesonia, PA. They have their own miners, equipment, hoists and crushers working a smaller footprint next to the main Ore Bank equipment and they are loading ore for an "outside" furnace in work that has gone on since 1793.

Peter Grubb, the grandson of the founder of Cornwall and its legendary ore deposit, had inherited a 1/6 interest in the famous property. In May 1786 it was this interest which he sold to Robert Coleman, putting Coleman and his future family on the path to the extensive and legendary Coleman iron making empire and the associated riches. It has been speculated that young Peter sold his share of the business as a way to ensure cash for the current value rather than dealing with the ups and downs of a growing operation.

An interesting and ultimately famous (or infamous) sidebar to this transaction was a proviso which was the key to what the yet unformed town of Robesonia would become. Within the interest there should be reserved "the right, liberty and privilege at all times hereafter of digging, raising and hauling away a sufficient quantity of iron ore for the supply of any one furnace at the election of Peter Grubb, his heirs and assigns, at all-time hereafters." This statement's wording has been written slightly different over time, but the gist was always the same- unlimited supply of ore for whoever is bestowed with the right!

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Young Peter Grubb ultimately sold this right, in May 1788 to George Ege, who would go on to build Reading Furnace near what would later become the furnace and town of Robeson. Ege, like the Grubbs, Colemans, Birds, Rutters and Potts was to become another member of early Pennsylvania iron making royalty. Starting life as the nephew of the well-known Henry Stiegel during the peak of Stiegel's business success, he would learn the intricacies of iron at Charming Forge and Elizabeth Furnace. When Stiegel fell into business and financial distress Ege would first lease Charming Forge and eventually purchase that property at Womelsdorf - not far from the present town of Robeson. Besides Reading Ege would also own or partner in multiple iron facilities in the region. Reading was first put into blast in 1793. It used Cornwall iron hauled by wagon, a distance of 25 miles, to produce pig iron which in the early days was then sent almost exclusively to Charming Forge for further processing into goods. Ege ran his operations mostly living at a fine mansion (still standing) which he updated at Charming also having built the beautiful mansion (also standing) at the Reading, soon to be Robeson, until his death in 1829. At this point the Reading plantation- called this due to its ~7000 acres and self-sufficiency in charcoal fuel production, waterpower and a worker population, was managed by a trustee until finally being sold in 1836. The properties would pass through many owners with the names of Klein, Seilzinger, McCrea and Porter until 1845 when control went to Henry Robeson of the Robeson, Brooke and Company. This now began a period of great changes to the operation- not only the area soon to become Robeson but also to Cornwall and its famous Ore Banks.

Robeson would waste no time in expanding out of the small size, small output of the Reading Furnace. The old charcoal furnace, capable of roughly 20 tons a week of cast iron, was replaced with the latest technology, a hot blast furnace fired with coal. This brought output to 50 tons. This was the beginning of regular updates that increased output eventually to 1000's of tons. Besides the successful furnace operations Robeson desired to build a town around his holdings. Beginning in the 1850's Robeson was incorporated and over time had churches, a modern school, stores, firehouse and its own water system and other utilities like gas.

Henry Robeson would die in 1860, but the town and industrial operations would continue to expand and improve under various entities that tended to be heirs of the original Robeson & Brooke organization. Finally in 1885 Robesonia Iron Co was formed and took control of all operations. In one of those strange twists of history the Freeman family of Cornwall, descendants of Robert Coleman and at the time still holding ownership in the Cornwall mine, were original partners in the new firm and would manage things until the ultimate closure that came later. Strange but probably not surprising that Cornwall royalty would end up at the spot that had been taking Cornwall ore for over 90 years, the family had always been very diversified and widespread in its holdings. And why not? Robesonia was well established, profitable and had a reputation for providing a good quality iron.

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Robesonia Operations at Cornwall Mines



Peter Bernardo with shovel and mining crew

Robesonía Furnace and the Cornwall Mines

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As furnace operations in Robesonía expanded the need for larger quantities of iron ore also grew. At Cornwall this meant more modern equipment as well as larger crews to work the operation. A local newspaper article from 1894 mentions the new inclined plane hoisting system (top image, previous page) and associated items to handle the required quantity of ore to be gathered, crushed and loaded into rail cars for delivery to the furnace. By the early 1900's Robesonía was taking over 100,000 tons of iron ore annually from the mine. With the expanded mining operations came the desire to provide local housing to be made available to the mine workers. Maybe following the incorporated Cornwall Ore Banks which was doing something similar- providing housing to secure and retain "a better class of worker"? Bethlehem Steel documents note 14 properties in total at the time of their purchase, most being adjacent to the open pit in Minersville, some on land called the Robesonía Tract in a deed recorded in 1883 between Cornwall owners and Ferguson-White of Robesonía, and it is also known there were some in Quentin, a nearby town.

In the early days of mining at Cornwall it can probably be said that its various owners- primarily Grubb's and Coleman's- got along reasonably well. They mostly kept to what were called the "holes". There was the Mt Hope hole, the Elizabeth hole and the Cornwall holes to name a few. As time went on and the operation grew much larger, and therefore more expensive to operate, the taking of ore became much more contentious. Initially the owners would lay out boundaries to keep separate from each other but ultimately by the mid-19th century the famous hills were in continuous litigation. One famous legal action had as its result the formation of the Cornwall Ore Bank Co. in 1864. And if the owners were going to keep better track of ore production and costs, they most certainly did not want a company like Robesonía to take as much as they needed. However, in court actions that would drag on for years the ruling was always the same- the owners of Robesonía had a legal and binding agreement. This decision applied to any one furnace, from the early days of a small charcoal furnace to the modern blast furnace many tens of times larger. Although there was at least once when the mine did get a win. Robesonía would have two furnaces, and when one was taken down for repair and maintenance, they would bring the other online. This meant the flow of ore would not stop for any reason. But the court would declare Robesonía was entitled to just one furnace and when it was down no iron ore could be consumed.

After a successful run of iron making in Robesonía for over 125 years, the end came rapidly in 1927. Generations of legal maneuvering had failed to break the Cornwall lease, including litigation from Cornwall's latest, and last owner, the Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Doing the next best thing, in April Bethlehem purchased the Robesonía Iron Co. and promptly shut it down and began the process of razing it. There would be no more Cornwall ore going anywhere but to the new owners steelmaking operations. Articles have stated that upwards of a million dollars was the cost to shut down the furnace, a huge amount to spend in those days. That may not have been the case though as there is confusion over how the sale was handled and certainly no love between the new owners and the old. Based on deed records and a few surviving documents, however the deal was done it seems convoluted and presumably a bit of closed-door deal making. But, as Bethlehem archives show, they did pay almost a half-million dollars just to acquire the iron rights as well as the Robesonía equipment and property at Cornwall.

What started with wagons loads in 1793, to the convenience and cost-savings of the Union Canal and finally the railroad, iron ore would no longer be delivered to Robesonía to feed the furnaces. The end of an era.

Mike Bernard

Thanks to Randy Gartner for introducing me to the museum and property at Robesonía as well as Mike Weber, Mike Trump and Mike Emery of Cornwall Iron Furnace for providing information.

***Mike Bernard is a guide at Cornwall Iron Furnace and a local history fanatic with deep family roots in Cornwall. Peter Bernardo was his Great-grandfather**

Updates on recent legal activities with the Borough of Robesonia

In January of 2024, Robesonia Borough's engineers sent the Friends a letter informing us we were in violation of the zoning. They informed us we could no longer park trucks on the property. They also told us we could not rent the pavilion, even to members. They told us we need to get approval to have music and several other things. We agreed not to park the trucks there, but didn't want to give up any other rights as we felt they were included in the variance established in 1995. We consulted with an attorney, but took no other action. Harvey Marshall, borough council president said he wanted to work it out. I met with Harvey and councilman Mark Spotts. The borough then sent us a letter saying we could do this and that. We replied to that letter requesting some changes. At the next borough council meeting, council went into executive session. When they came out, they announced that the borough would no longer negotiate with the Friends. At that time our attorney, Jan Matthew Taminini, advised us to file an action in Berks County Court because we felt the Borough violated the Sunshine Act which was meant to force boroughs to discuss things in public. At the same time, we hired Alex Elikor, a zoning attorney. When the Friends purchased the property, we applied for and received, a zoning variance to operate a museum and park on our property. We have operated under that variance, without any complaint or concern since 1995. Both attorney's advised us we had the right to do the things we had been doing for the past 29 years. The Hon. Madelyn Fudeman, Judge, Berks County Court, ordered Borough Council and the Friends board to appear before her at a hearing to settle the matter. The judge told the Borough that our 1995 variance gave us wide latitude in what we could do on the property. The judge asked both sides to settle the matter. The Friends agreed to drop the Sunshine Action, have music no more than 4 times per year and no later than 8pm. The Borough rescinded their letter for the zoning violation. We are again allowed to have unlimited events, rent the pavilion to members and other non profits. We would like to thank both of our attorneys and all the people who supported us.

Randy Gartner

Then...and Now...



The "Falls" and Furnace St and S Church St



Robesonia Furnace circa 1927 Inserted black line represents approx. location of present day Mountain Ave



Mining for "Robesonia" at Cornwall



Cory Putt, Assistant Master Collier at Hopewell Furnace, and Friends board member, tends to the “pile” during the weeks long process of converting hardwoods, to charcoal, a very pure form of carbon. This fuel would be the source of intense heat during the iron making process. Cory will share insights of the process at the Friends Annual Business Meeting and Dinner.

IRON FURNACE PRODUCTION USING CHARCOAL, BEFORE THE USE OF COAL.

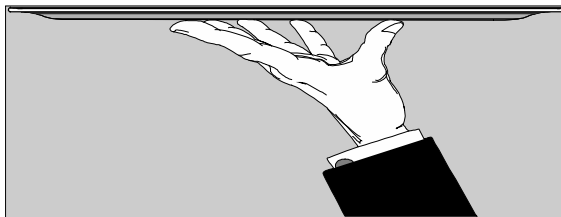
Did You Know?

- The Robesonia Furnace was established in 1794, and relied on the local dense forest-ry to provide charcoal to power the furnace.
- In a charcoal fired iron furnace, 2 cords of wood converted to charcoal will sustain the furnace for about 2.5 hours.
- The average charcoal hearth consumed 30 cords of wood to produce around 1100 bushels of charcoal, enough to keep the furnace operating for 1 1/2 days.
- The annual requirement for charcoal at nearby Hopewell consumed 5000 to 6000 cords of wood, or more than 200 acres of woodlands each year
- Despite popular myths, charcoal making did not lead to the deforestation of the area. The best kind of wood for making charcoal was hardwood trees that were 20-25 years old.
- A furnace with about 6,000 acres of forest could create a system in which woodcut-ters would cut what they needed from a specific area, then take measures to prevent livestock from eating the new “shoots,” and 20 years later, woodcutters would work their way back around to this area and cut again.

Friends of the Robesonian Furnace

2025 Annual Dinner

MARCH 18, 2025



Ozgoods Robesonian

5:30 - 6:30 BYOB Cocktail Hour

6:30 - 7:15 Dinner Buffet

7:15 Speaker –**Cory Putt, Assistant**

Master Collier-Hopewell Furnace

Presenting on Making Charcoal

8:00 - BUSINESS MEETING

- PRESIDENT'S REPORT
- TREASURER'S REPORT

OFFICERS:

PRESIDENT : ABBY WERTZ

VICE PRESIDENT : RANDY GARTNER

TREASURER : BARBARA ORTH

SECRETARY : DONNA KUHN

BOARD MEMBERS: TRACY RICE, LYLE

McMULLAN, CORY PUTT, KEITH RENTSCHLER

Board member Emeritus: Calvin Yoh, KELLY RENTSCHLER.

**HAVE AN INTEREST IN SERVING OR DONATING
AN ARTIFACT TO THE MUSEUM? WOULD YOU
LIKE TO SCHEDULE A TOUR FOR YOUR GROUP?**

PLEASE CALL 484.955.7381

MUSEUM & TOURS: RANDY GARTNER

Registration Form

Name _____ **Phone** _____

Choice of entrees:

- **Grilled Salmon with soy honey sauce:** **\$31.00** _____
- **Roast Prime Rib Beef Au Jus:** **\$38.00** _____
- **Roast Turkey with gravy:** **\$23.00** _____

Includes salad, vegetable du jour, roasted potatoes, fresh baked rolls, fountain soda, coffee, tea and dessert .

REGISTRATION DEADLINE TUESDAY, MARCH 11, 2025

Please make checks payable and send along with form to:

Friends of the Robesonian Furnace, PO Box 162, Robesonian, PA 19551

Membership Renewal Form

(Check your mailing label for your current date of membership)

Date _____ Telephone Number _____

Name _____ Spouse _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Yearly Amount Level		One Time Amount Level	
\$ 10.00 _____ Individual	\$ 25.00 _____ Contributing	\$ 100.00 _____ Life Member	
\$ 20.00 _____ Family	\$ 50.00 _____ Sponsor		

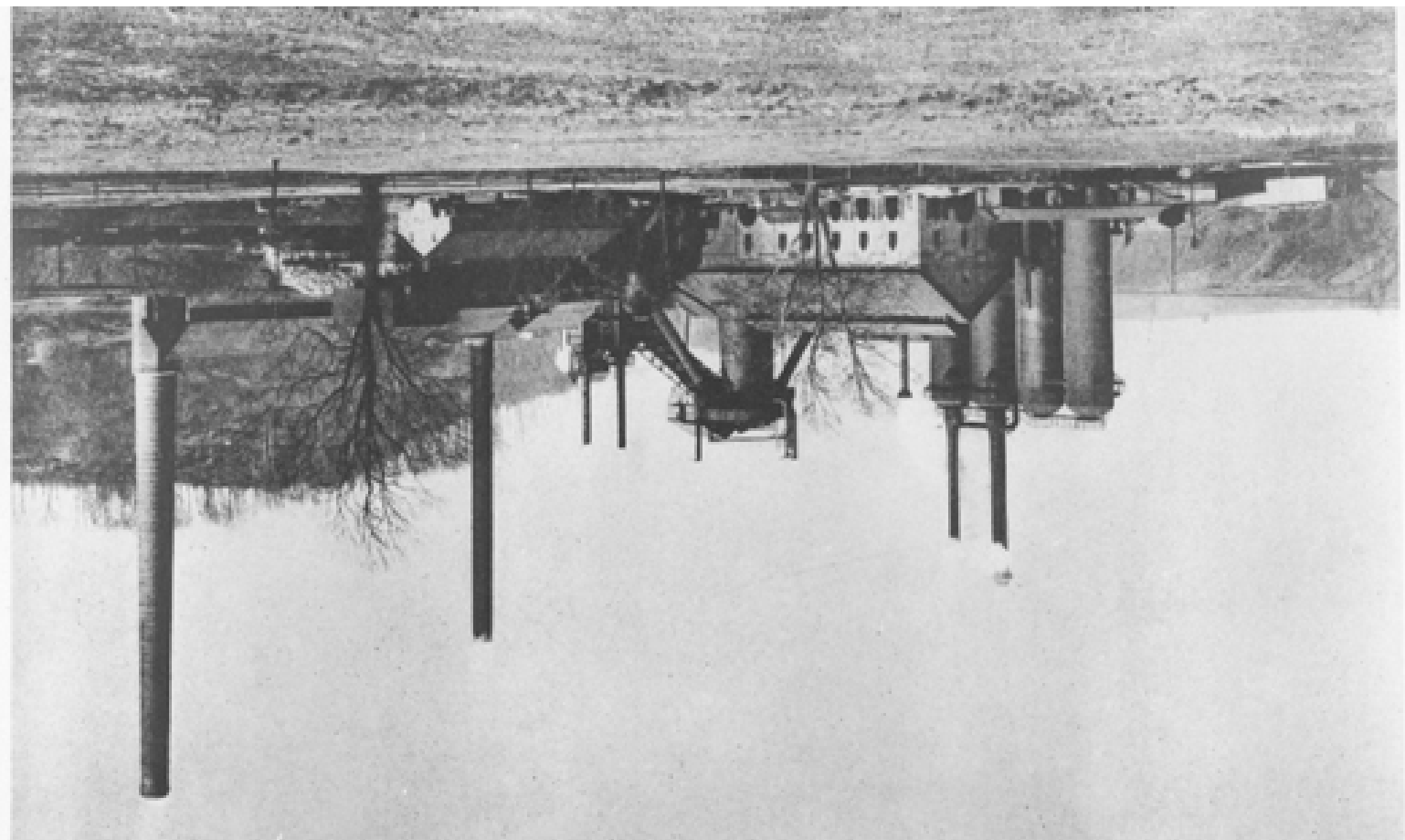
***Memberships for 2024 expired Dec. 31, 2024 *All donations are tax deductible**

**Please make checks payable and send along with Membership Form to:
Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, P.O. Box 162 Robesonia PA 19551-0162**



**That you can schedule a walking tour of the Furnace grounds for your private group? It's true!
Call our very own Randy Gartner to schedule. Take advantage of his wealth of knowledge on the Furnace site and operations- 484.955.7381**

Sign Up A Friend! How about sharing with a friend or sending them a gift membership?



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Robesonia, PA 19551-0162