



- #10 2003-REMEMBERING ISABEL (*SPRING 05*)
- #9 1970-ANNEXATION (*SUMMER 05*)
- #8 1912-WHEN GUN COTTON WAS KING (*FALL 05*)
- #7 1864-BERMUDA HUNDRED CAMPAIGN (*JAN/FEB 06*)
- #6 1815-BELLONA FOUNDRY, CAST IN WAR (*MAY/JUN 06*)
- #5 1782-NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION IN CHESTERFIELD (*SEPT/OCT 06*)
- #4 1775-1781-BRITISH INVASION (*NOV/DEC 06*)
- #3 1730s-MID-LOTHIAN MINES (*JAN/FEB 07*)

#2 1622 FALLING CREEK IRON WORKS

Nowadays, folks visit Falling Creek to enjoy the scenery and to listen to the serene sounds of water tumbling over a beautiful set of falls.

Almost 400 years ago, the site had a different purpose. Rather than providing a picnic spot for nature lovers, Falling Creek was the site of the first iron blast furnace in the New World. It was also the site of a devastating attack that would put an end to the fledgling iron production in this area.

The close proximity of raw iron ore, wood for fuel and power provided by the falling water made the Falling Creek site perfect for this development. As described by George Sandys to the Virginia Company, "The Falling Creek is so fitting for the purpose of the ironworks, as if nature had applied herself to the wish and direction of the workman."

Good bog iron was found along Falling Creek in 1608 and sent to England. It was sold for prices that offered great promise to the company on the large return of capital needed for such a venture. By 1619, the first of about 150 ironworkers and family members were sent to Falling Creek. At first, Capt. Bluett (first name not known) was appointed to supervise the expedition, but he died on the voyage to Virginia and most of the workers were not prepared for the harsh conditions in Virginia and succumbed quickly.

Even with this first disappointment, efforts were renewed to produce iron in the New World. A report written in 1624 stated, "And the Iron-workes brought after five thousand pounds expences to that assured perfection, as

with in three months they promised to send home great quantities." Master proprietor John Berkeley of Gloucestershire had successfully supervised the ironworks near Beavestone Castle in Gloucester, England, and was recruited to replace Bluett. Berkeley, in turn, took his son, Maurice, 20 other ironworkers and three servants to Virginia to finish the ironworks and begin production. In order to aid this project, apothecary J. Fitch was also established at the site to provide health care for the plantation.

With the ironworks built and ready for production, the years of labor, great expense and hardship of the Virginia Company of London and its settlers at Falling Creek seemed to be on the verge of commercial success. Engaged in the many labors of construction and pressured by London to produce iron, the ironworkers had not made defenses, nor were they prepared for violent unrest from Virginian Indians.

The Peace of Pocahontas, begun in 1614 with the forging of a political settlement sealed by Pocahontas' and John Rolfe's marriage, had ended the first conflicts between the newcomers and the Powhatan people. But English expansion along the James River and its tributaries had placed great pressure on the Powhatans. Poor crop conditions during 1617-18 and evangelism also had renewed Indian fears. With the very able Opechancanough becoming the third, and last, paramount chief of the Powhatan Chiefdom, the stage was set for renewed hostilities.

Tensions continued to rise with small raids between the Powhatan Indians and the set-



The falls at Falling Creek provided the power needed for the production of iron.

tlers from 1619-21. During these uneasy days, Opechancanough began to sound out support from the Powhatan tribes and allied nations to resume warfare with the English. Former Virginia Governor George Yardley, Governor Francis Wyatt, and Opechancanough continued diplomacy to resolve issues with each other, but the death of Nemattanew, known to the English as “Jack of the Feather” due to his distinctive feathered battle dress, during the fall of 1621, turned the Powhatan efforts to strike the following spring.

Around 8 a.m. on Good Friday, March 22, 1622, the coordinated raid took place. Accustomed to Virginia Indians visiting among the English settlements, the workers at Falling Creek were overwhelmed in moments without any effective resistance being made. Some 25 died, including Berkeley and Fitch, as well as the few women and children at the ironworks. The Indians burned and destroyed the works.

In 1623, Maurice Berkeley returned to rebuild the ironworks, but was unsuccessful. Other sources of income-producing commerce were enticing the settlers, such as farming tobacco. The ironworks was abandoned, and the Virginia Company lost its charter in 1624.

Three unsuccessful attempts to rebuild the site followed, in 1628-30, in 1634 and 1687-93. But over time, the resources, location and ore would again bring efforts to establish the iron industry in Chesterfield. In 1749-50, Archibald Cary established a furnace and foundry at Falling Creek. Cary, building his locally famous “Chesterfield Forge,” allowed iron to once again be worked at the creek. In 1769, a British traveler noted the “extremely valuable mills, iron works...near the town of Warwick.” However, Cary converted the iron works to a grist mill.

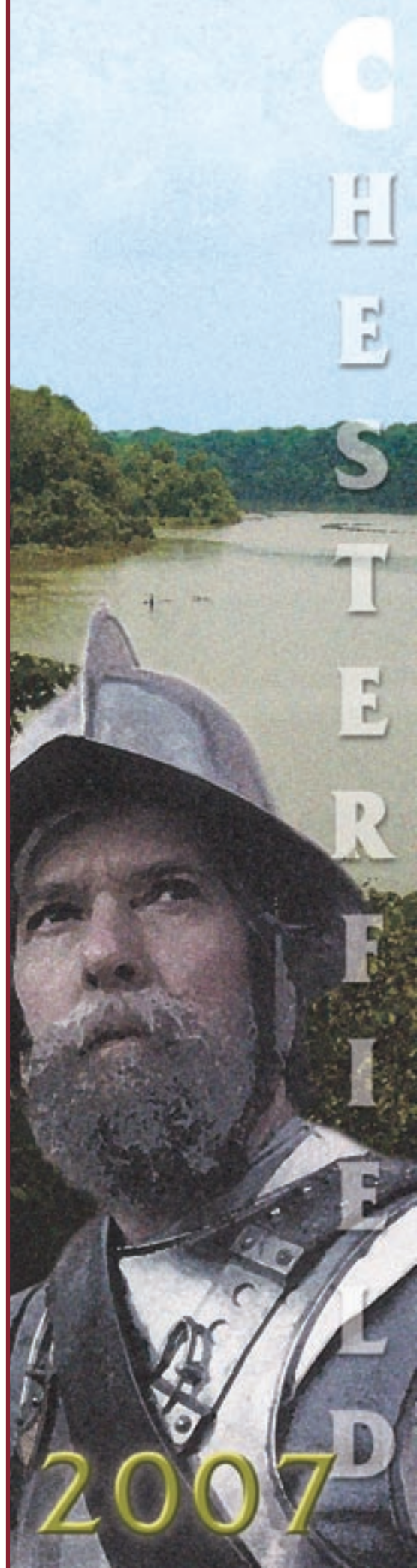
During the Revolutionary War, Cary, the

“Wheel Horse of the Revolution,” was a remarkably able member of Virginia’s government serving as first colonel of the Chesterfield Battalion. On Dec. 9, 1775, he led his men into action near Norfolk with no local men lost. His gunpowder mill on POCOOSHOCK Creek, as well as his grist and saw mills, ropewalk, shipyards and clothing production at Warwick, produced much for Virginia’s war supplies. Cary’s store at Warwick provided flags and drums for Capt. Robert Falkner and Capt. John Markham’s companies and the Amelia Militia Battalion.

This operation was destroyed on April 29-30, 1781, by British forces under the command of Maj. Gen. William Phillips and Brig. Gen. Benedict Arnold. In a report, the following were destroyed in this attack: a “magazine with 500 barrels of flour, several warehouses with 150 hogsheads of tobacco, a large range of rope walks, storehouses filled with bark and tan and Cary’s mills.” Also lost were five sailing vessels. On May 23, 1781, the British again struck at Cary’s mills in a hard rain. Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton’s British Legion dragoons hit the Chesterfield militia. Some six militia were killed and 40 made prisoners. American reports state that two British soldiers were killed and left behind. This action marked the last Revolutionary War combat within Chesterfield County.

The mill was rebuilt in the 1850s by John Watkins and was active until about 1906. The stone foundations on the north side of the creek are the remains of that mill.

This article was provided by Chesterfield County. For more information about the Falling Creek Ironworks Park, or the Falling Creek Ironworks Foundation, contact Chesterfield County’s Parks and Recreation Department at (804) 748-1623. ❖



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