

COL. BILLY HILL'S IRON WORKS

by Louise Pettus

Before U. S. Steel or the Carnegie Co., and even before railroads transported ore, there were small iron works near ore deposits dotting the Southern foothills.

Nanny's Mountain in northeastern York County was the site of an ample, some said "inexhaustible," supply of iron ore. Robert Mills, in his "Statistics of South Carolina," said the top of Nanny's Mountain was covered with a superior grade of ore 2 miles in diameter.

The first mining on Nanny's Mountain was done by William Hill (1741-1816). Hill, a native of northern Ireland, came to York County in 1762 and began acquiring land grants that totalled 5,000 acres before the Revolutionary War and increased to 24,376 acres by 1805.

In an age when the average neighboring York County plantation was about 350 acres, Hill's land acquisitions were impressive indeed. His acreage not only measured his prominence but also reflected the high demand for iron products.

Indeed, the frontiersmen did prize iron. York County estate inventories distinguish between iron and wood implements, placing a much higher appraisal value on the former.

The inventories of the times showed a wide range of uses for the iron: bake irons, flat irons, nails, spikes, plows, grates, hammers, hinges, swivels, pots and axes.

While much is known about Col. Hill through his distinguished Revolutionary War service and his seven terms in the S. C. House and nine years in the state Senate, relatively little is known about the several ironworks he built. No physical traces are left.

The first ironworks, known as AERA Furnace, was built with money from a bounty paid out by the S. C. Treasury in 1776.

Hill sent for skilled artisans and 100 slaves from North Carolina's Troublesome Creek Iron Works. If we assume that he followed the North Carolina-Virginia pattern of construction, we can estimate that he took about 8 months to build a foundry with a huge furnace lined with firebrick. Lime came from King's Creek.

Having no coal available, Hill used charcoal from the forests of his vast holdings to fire his furnaces. About 250 acres of woodland a year would be necessary to feed the furnaces. A tramway, 2.5 miles long, brought ore from Nanny's Mountain to the site on Allison Creek.

When the process of converting iron ore into cast iron began (called a "blast") it lasted for six months or more. There were 12-hour shifts and no holidays until the end of the blast, when there would be a "blow-out" and a few days of merrymaking before the process was repeated.

When the AERA Furnace was finished, it produced cannon and shot for Sumter's forces and furnished most of the cannonballs used in the siege of Charleston.

The British destroyed the ironworks in 1780, along with Hill's "home, grain mill, sawmills, negro houses and 90 negroes."

AERA was rebuilt in 1787 by 50 slaves who were confiscated by the state from Tory estates and awarded to Hill for his losses.

In 1788 Hill built AETNA Furnace. Instead of the irregular flow of air from bellows, as used in AERA, Hill used air fanned by a waterwheel on Allison Creek. While slaves provided most of the labor, Hill used white miners, foundrymen, woodcutters and coal miners and paid them all in iron.

In 1919 a marker was placed at the site of Hill's Iron Works by the Daughters of the American Revolution and United Daughters of the Confederacy. In 1958 a granite monument was erected to honor Col. William Hill, iron master and Revolutionary soldier.

Louise Pettus, written for newspaper column, "Nearby History" which appeared in York Observer, a supplement of the Charlotte (N.C.) Observer, June 2, 1986.