

Wofford Probes Mystery

Wofford College students will soon be using techniques from a variety of academic disciplines to probe the mysteries of the area of South Carolina once known as the "Old Iron District."

The effort will be directed by Terry A. Ferguson, instructor of geology at Wofford. A 1975 Wofford graduate, Ferguson is a candidate for the PhD in archaeology and anthropology at the University of Tennessee.

Financial support will be provided by a grant from the National Park Service, administered by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

Through historical research, the Wofford group will attempt to locate as many of the colonial and antebellum ironworking sites in the Upstate as possible. By observing intact features, mapping, and doing archaeological surveys, they hope to provide sufficient documentation to place many of these sites on the National Register of Historic Places.

"The project grew out of an Interim study a group of students at Wofford did last January," Ferguson said. "We found that ironmaking in what is now Cherokee County and surrounding areas of York, Union and Spartanburg Counties was so extensive that it was almost a harbinger of the industrial revolution. In an area that before the American Revolution was still part of the frontier, it was a tremendous economic and social change."

Iron ores, limestone, forests and water power were essential to iron production prior to the Civil War, and all of these occurred close together in a belt along the Broad River in Upstate South Carolina. A high grade "gray" iron ore suitable for bars and castings could be

found on the west slope of Kings Mountain, while a lower grade or "brown" ore for pig iron was also abundant.

Although the Wofford researchers hope to find evidence of smaller forges of an earlier date, the ironmaking industry in the state began in earnest in 1773 with the establishment of Wofford's Iron Works on Lawson's Fork Creek at what is now called Glendale. Within several years, nearby farmers were buying locally made pots, pans, and farm implements, and supplemented their incomes by making charcoal to sell at the forge.

Supported by large loan from the government of South Carolina during the American Revolution, the establishment is said to have supplied many of the weapons needed by local patriots, and apparently was burned by loyalist troops in 1781.

Other large ironworking businesses established shortly after 1800 were in the Kings Mountain Iron Manufacturing Company at Cherokee Falls and the Nesbitt Iron Manufacturing Company on Thicketty Mountain, which also operated a rolling mill and foundry at Hurricane Shoals on the Pacolet River.

These large companies were casualties of the Civil War, not only because of the economic pressures of war production but also because they made extensive use of slave artisans. In addition, the development of steel manufacturing in western Pennsylvania and an improved transportation system made iron making in South Carolina unprofitable. Nevertheless, many of these earlier manufacturing sites continued in use as the location for some of the early cotton textile factories.

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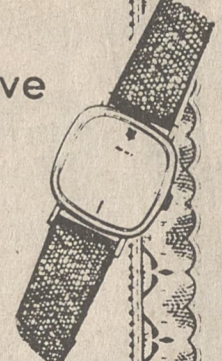
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