

Working at an Iron Furnace: Help Wanted for Making Iron, Apply Here!

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The ironmaster, of course, had to bring a workforce with him, or attract one, to his wilderness site. It must include not only a dozen or so experienced furnace workers, but also a substantial supportive group as well: woodcutters, colliers, miners, and, if the works included a refinery forge, slitting mill, or nailory, workers to operate those auxiliary operations as well. A considerable number of horses and mules, and sometimes oxen, were needed to pull the ore and charcoal wagons. Being removed from established farms and towns, the ironmaking community had to be as nearly self-sufficient as possible. Residents usually had their own gardens, raised some chickens and pigs, and hunted in the forests for game. In addition, the plantation had several farm families: the farmers who grew foodstuffs for both workers and animals, and their wives who among other things cooked the meals, preserved food for winter, spun and wove cloth, and made and repaired clothing. A few of the men had special skills, such as cobblers who made and patched shoes and boots, blacksmiths who shod horses and made tools, and carpenters who constructed buildings and made furniture and wooden tools. Livestock was also essential to the plantation: draft animals for farm work, cows for milk, sheep for wool, and chickens, geese, ducks, and pigs for food. Not surprisingly, plantation villages frequently contained a hundred or more residents.

To maintain these plantation villages, both a sawmill to provide lumber and a gristmill to grind grain were needed or must be readily available in the area. An ironworks store, usually owned by the ironmaster, made available the goods that workers could not or preferred not to make for themselves. A part of the store's stock consisted of local farm and garden produce in season and locally butchered meat. It also included goods from nearby mercantile centers, among other things tobacco, salt and spirits; ribbons, buttons and fabrics; guns, gunpowder, and shot; and eyeglasses, dress shoes and ladies' hats. Sometimes they carried a few luxury items imported from abroad: coffee and tea, silks, and imported books. Ironmasters, by the mid-nineteenth century, often provided such additional amenities as a school for the workers' children, and supported a church or churches to serve the community's religious needs.

Work on an iron plantation intermingled industrial work with agricultural duties, with the latter often taking precedence. Individual furnace and forge workers were excused as needed to care for their livestock, to make hay, or plant and cultivate their own crops, while a portion of the furnacemen, miners, and forgemen alike were pressed into planting and harvesting in season.

In some ways a northern iron plantation resembled a southern cotton or tobacco plantation. Both occupied large tracts of land in relatively remote areas, produced a single product for market, employed a large force of dependent workers, and aimed so far as possible at being self-sufficient communities. The ironmaster and the cotton or tobacco planter held comparable social positions. Most lived in very substantial

dwellings, if not mansion houses, and adopted a life style based originally on that of the English gentry. The two types of plantation, however, were also quite different. The business of a southern plantation was commercial agriculture; the iron plantation's was industrial production. Perhaps the most important difference, however, was their respective labor systems.

Although colonial ironmasters did use some slaves (both Native American Indians and African Americans) and indentured servants, slavery was abolished and bond servitude fell into disuse soon after the Revolution. Thereafter northern iron plantations relied wholly on free labor. Unlike slaves, free workers were not property, but could change jobs and enter into business transactions as they pleased, and sue in the courts of law. At least in theory, they received wages. In practice, especially at first when the economy functioned with a very limited money supply, little cash actually changed hands. The greater portion of a worker's wage was in the form of credit at the company store. Purchases of food, clothing, and other goods were debited against credits for work or other services performed for the employer. By contrast, cotton and tobacco planters depended on slaves whom they outright owned, fed, clothed, and housed. Wages for slaves were exceedingly rare. Unlike iron workers, moreover, slaves could be bought and sold by their owners and had no standing in courts of law.

Housing on an iron plantation, almost always provided by the ironmaster, was a part of the workers' compensation. Where one lived closely reflected the community's social structure. The ironmaster and his family usually resided in a large stone or brick mansion, preferably on a hill, upwind, a comfortable distance from the smoky and noisy furnace or forge. Substantial homes, usually of frame construction, housed other managers and clerks and their families. The laboring families lived in small log cabins or four to six room wooden frame houses in a village close by the ironworks. Worker dwellings also differed in size, location, and building material according to the status of the work performed by the various residents. Unmarried and transient workers either roomed and boarded with village families, or lived together in a company-operated boarding house somewhat removed from the family dwellings.

Philadelphia area ironmasters needing skilled workers could usually hire experienced immigrants from the iron districts of England or Wales. Some even recruited such artisans directly in those countries. Once in America, however, these workers were in such demand that, attracted by higher wages, they frequently moved from one ironworks to another. In time, many made their way to furnaces and forges in the interior of Pennsylvania. Unskilled workers, on the other hand, were available from a variety of sources. Many were local farmers' sons anxious to earn money, others were recent immigrants (for the most part from the British Isles or Germany until after the Civil War), some were blacks (both free-born and runaway slaves), while yet others were casual workers from nearby towns and cities in search of steady employment.