A 15,000 Acre Plantation that Paid its Worker with Iron Ingots

By: Louise Pettus

In 1776, the year the American colonies declared their independence from England, was also the year that Aera Furnace went into operation. The South Carolina legislature decided to encourage the production of iron by offering a 1,000£ bounty. York County’s Nanny Mountain had iron ore in abundance.

Col. William Hill secured a partner, Col. Isaac Hayne of Charleston, and managed to get title to 15,000 acres of land and 100 slaves. He was able to hire skilled artisans who had worked at North Carolina’s Troublesome Creek Iron works.

AERA furnace was built in 8 months. A 2.5 mile tramway was constructed that ran from Nanny’s Mountain to Allison creek. With lime from Kings Creek and plenty of woodland to make charcoal the production of cannon and cannon balls began.

When Charleston fell in the spring of 1780, the British captured Col. Isaac Hayne and later executed him. When the Redcoats headed for the upcountry, a major goal was to destroy the Hill Iron Works. Not only did the British destroy the iron works but they burned Hill’s home and all of his property. They also confiscated the slaves and all the livestock.

After the war, SC confiscated 50 slaves from Tory estates and awarded them to Hill. AERA furnace was rebuilt and AETNA furnace was built using a waterwheel for power.

In 1795 Hill was sued by the heirs of Isaac Hayne who were joined by other creditors. The York county sheriff announced that the iron works and 15,000 acres of land would go on the auction block.

A Boston, Massachusetts newspaper, The Columbian Centinel Extra, advertised the auction on October 14, 1795. Besides AETNA and AERA furnaces and the 15,000 acres, the ad listed a “good two-story brick house, 4 grist and 2 saw mills, 90 negroes (between 70 and 80 grown), wagons, teams and utensils.”

The output was stated to be 17 or 18 tons of iron per week or best grade iron only at 15 tons a week. The workforce included blacksmiths and founders. The ad pointed out that they were skilled in casting “ovens, flat irons, gudgeons, machines and cranks.” The best customers were gristmills, wind mills, tow mills and the rice mills of the lowcountry.

There were specifics such as the statement that 3 tons of ore was equal to 2900 lb. of metal. AERA’S furnace wheel was 26 ft. high and 4 ft. wide while AETNA’s furnace wheel was 28 ft. high and 4 1/2 feet wide. The forge wheel was 16 ft. high; the hammer wheels were 11ft. high and 5 ft. wide.

The water in Allison Creek was high enough to run the two forges for nine months of the year with a head of water 19 ft. high.

The ad further informed prospective buyers that the workers were all paid their wages in iron. Wages of ordinary workers ranged from 100 to 130 lb. iron per month. A founder was rewarded for his skill with 1250 lb. iron per month.
As to the value of the iron, the only example given was that 4 lb. of iron equaled 1 bushel of corn. It sounds like a bookkeeper’s nightmare!

The highest bidder at the auction was William Edward Hayne of Charleston who went into partnership with Hill. Five thousand acres of the original 15,000 were sold to other parties.

The Hill/Hayne partnership lasted until 1809 when they were no longer making a profit. A major reason for the shutdown of Hill’s Iron Works was that they had exhausted the trees that furnished the charcoal that fueled the furnaces.

An 1855 traveler after seeing the wasted land around the King’s Mountain Iron Works, said that it “presented as far as the eye can reach, the most desolate and gloomy appearance. The lands having all been bought up by the Company for the sake of fuel.”

The same could have been said about the Hill’s Iron Works and Nanny’s Mountain area. Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal proved to be both cheaper and superior to York County’s charcoal.