



## BLACKSMITHING OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The word “blacksmith” refers to iron, which was known as the *black* metal, and *smith*, meaning a smitter of metal (as in tinsmith or silversmith). The blacksmith was traditionally held in high esteem, because all trades known to mankind were dependent on the blacksmith. Most blacksmiths were toolmakers. They repaired things for people in the neighborhood and had to know how to work with different metals. In the 18th and 19th century, there were four types of tools. Tools for the farmer were axes, plow points, hoes, shovels, etc. Tools for women included cooking, sewing, and household tools. Tools for hunting and warfare were knives, tomahawks, gun parts, etc. Tools for industry and other trades were needed, including those for the blacksmith himself. Very few blacksmiths made things like railing or iron balconies or gates, except in bigger cities like Williamsburg, Boston, and Philadelphia.



Most blacksmith's shops were small and poorly lit, with little new iron to make any product at all. The main tools were a forge and bellows, an anvil, hammers, and a small selection of files and tongs. British restrictions on the making of iron before the Revolutionary War made it hard for blacksmiths, as well as the Colonies themselves, to obtain iron. Iron that was produced here was sent to England to be made into useable articles, and then sent back to the Colonies and sold to people at inflated prices. Like the gunsmiths in 18th century America, there was no guild system in the blacksmithing trade. Apprenticeships were used in both trades in the Colonies. In Europe, a master could demand a cash payment from the parent and the apprentice was bound by a legal document to serve seven years. This was also called “being indentured.” After seven years, a boy in Europe would be a journeyman and would go from place to place and work for other masters until he became a master himself. In the Colonies, the masters gladly took on an apprentice at no charge, but few boys in the Colonies served seven years. A four or five year term, was the norm and sometimes less if the boy ran away like Ben Franklin did. The master agreed to teach the apprentice the secrets of the trade and to feed, clothe, and supply lodging until the end of his contract. At the end of his term he became a journeyman. In most circumstances, the master let boys attend school in the evening to learn the three Rs. In Europe, the guilds required the journeyman to submit a masterpiece before he could go into business for himself in some other town. A journeyman in the Colonies was not required to do these things but could be hired by plantations to train slaves to do the work at the plantation. Since there was not a lot of money being circulated in the Colonies, the blacksmith might take payment in other ways. For example, if Mrs. Jones needed a roasting fork for her kitchen, she might make a new shirt for the blacksmith to wear.

The making of nails was a big demand. It was busywork for an apprentice, a woman whose husband was off fighting in the Revolutionary War, or for slave children on a plantation. It took very little heat from a fire and very little equipment to make nails.





The blacksmith in the 18th century could make or repair just about anything of that time, but probably his greatest accomplishment was what is known as the American Ax. Sometime around 1700, the blacksmith added a square poll on the back of the ax, which added more weight. Then by the mid-1700s, the ears were added to the eye, the square poll was elongated, and the eye was changed from round to a triangle shape. All of this added to the stability in the swing of the ax and it has seen very little change in the last 225 years.



Another important invention, that took place in the 1740s -1750s, was the pipe tomahawk. These were highly prized by the Native Americans, for they loved to smoke and make war on the settlers. The Native Americans already had the tomahawk, beginning with the first encounters with Europeans. This version added a pipe bowl and hollowed out the handle to create one of the biggest trade items used by Native Americans as well as white settlers. These were produced until well after the Civil War.

Nine out of ten colonists were farmers. With farmers, you had livestock, and with livestock, you needed a blacksmith to shoe them. These men were called farriers and were also the first veterinarians, for they took care of the lame and sick animals. Farriers left the tool-making to the more skilled blacksmiths who concentrated their skills on hardware, implements for the kitchen and the ironing of wagons and carriages.



The making of iron was a trade in itself. Iron was smelted from ore in what is called an iron furnace, which was fired by charcoal (not like the charcoal we know today) and fluxed with limestone. To set up an iron furnace, you had to own vast amounts of natural resources like wood for charcoal making, limestone outcroppings to flux the ore when it was smelted and, of course, a huge ore supply. Most importantly, you had to have the permission of the King. Most iron being made in the Colonies was what was called bog iron. It was gathered in marshes and ponds and was a low-grade ore. Some pit mining was also done.

When a furnace was fired, it was worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for two to four weeks. When a furnace was tapped, the molten iron ran down ditches that resembled a sow and suckling piglets. This was called pig iron. From there, the iron went to a foundry-like shop where pig iron was refined into useable iron for the blacksmith.

At the time of Pricketts Fort, there were no iron furnaces west of the Allegheny Mountains. In 1789, the first furnace was built near Old Fort Redstone (Brownsville, PA). The first furnace near the area of Pricketts Fort was established in 1794 along the Cheat River near Morgantown. Both of these would have had a big impact on iron availability in this area. Previously, iron was in very short supply in this area. A blacksmith would have to obtain iron bars east of the mountains and transport it on pack horses back to where he lived and worked, or he could buy iron and steel from people who were known as ironmongers (someone who dealt in scrap iron). When a blacksmith went to the



frontier, he had to take an anvil hammer, a few pairs of tongs, and a small supply of iron bars in order to set up shop, but due to the small population out on the frontier, he would also have had to farm, or hunt, to supplement his income. In other areas that were more populated, he would work twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week just to keep up with the demand.

Today, there are few blacksmiths who pursue the traditional ways of the early blacksmiths that can be seen demonstrated at Pricketts Fort.

## PHOTO RESOURCES

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