

1809 BLAST FURNACE AND INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

AT THE MOUTH OF THE SALMON RIVER TOWN OF PLATTSBURGH CLINTON COUNTY, NEW YORK

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The first blast furnace for the making of iron in the Clinton County area was erected in 1809 and was located at the mouth of the Salmon River in the Town of Plattsburgh. This furnace was the first located in New York State on the western side of Lake Champlain between Crown Point and the Canadian border.

In 2002 the Town of Plattsburgh erected a blue and yellow New York State historic marker to commemorate the site which reads as follows:



An early 19th century blast furnace was a stone structure like a large chimney about 25 to 30 feet square at its base and 30 to 40 feet high. It was used to produce an iron hunk, or pig as it was called, which could be reheated and poured into other molds or pounded into shapes to produce hollow ware and other items. Hollow ware would consist of metal table ware, such as bowls, pitchers, and trays, which serve as containers or receptacles. In the parlance of the time it may also have referred to items that could be cast in hollow forms such as hinges, irons, farm implements,

hoes, rakes, kitchen utensils, cooking pots and pans, andirons, and the hundreds of other implements and tools that everyone needed at the time.

One of the largest items of hollow ware demand was a potash pan or kettle. Potash was used in the manufacture of soap, to cleans sands in the manufacture of glass, and to make colors fast when making printed cotton materials. Potash was used as a barter material and one could obtain cash for potash more easily than for wheat. Blast furnaces of the time were producing potash kettles as fast as they could since there was such a high demand for potash and the kettles quickly burned out from intense use.

Other items of manufacture were cast iron stoves, bark mills and castings of whatever design was brought to them by the public.

In a Deed dated May 15, 1809 William Gilliland ((1768-1847) transferred 3 ½ acres on the north side of the Salmon River between the Plattsburgh Road (Present New York State Route 9) and Lake Champlain. Included was “the privilege of so much water to be taken from the Gilliland dam as may be necessary to turn a trip hammer and bellows wheel without taking so much water from the dam when the same may be wanted to carry a grist mill wheel or furnace.”

This deed tells us that William Gilliland already had a dam and possibly a grist mill on the Salmon River near the location of these lots. If it were there in May then it had to have been there the prior year of 1808 since works such as these were constructed in the warmer weather and lower flowing water of the summer or fall months.

A second transfer occurred later that year. In a Deed dated August 18, 1809 William Gilliland transferred twenty acres of land on the south side of the Salmon River to Alfred Keith of Sheldon, Vermont. Included was the “privilege of a sufficiency of water for a furnace now erected to be taken and used from the mill dam of Gilliland’s whenever the furnace shall be in blast or whenever it shall be for the works of said furnace.”

By the wording of this deed we can guess that the blast furnace on the south side of the river below the dam, probably on the rocks near the south abutment of the present NYS Route 9 bridge over the river, was erected in the summer and fall of 1809 and was now ready to go into operation. This would confirm the findings of book *200 Years of Soot and Sweat- the History of Archeology of Vermont’s Iron, Charcoal, and Lime Industries* by Victor Rolando. He stated “The first blast furnace erected in northern New York State was built about 1809 at the mouth of the Salmon River, just south of Plattsburgh.”

The construction of this blast furnace was also confirmed by Peter Saily, Esquire, US Customs Collector of the District of Champlain. He wrote a letter from Plattsburgh dated September 7, 1809 to the US Secretary of the Treasury that “a furnace is erecting and nearly complete in this vicinity.” This letter is found in the earliest editions of Palmer’s *History of Lake Champlain*.

The first mention of the furnace in the local newspaper called the *Republican* was an advertisement: “Furnace in Blast. The public are informed that the Furnace of the subscriber, at Salmon River, near

the lake, is now in blast. STOVES, of various sizes, and all kinds of Hollow Ware, kept constantly for sale, at reasonable prices. Persons who have contracted for Machinery, are requested to call for the same immediately. ELISHA CLARK, Jun. Plattsburgh, Oct. 8, 1812.”

War came to the Clinton County area with the British invasion in the late summer of 1814. With all of the events leading up to it, the blast furnace was not in operation until late in the year after the British had been defeated at Plattsburgh and had retreated north back to Canada. An ad in the *Republican* on November 4th said the furnace will be in blast “after a long delay, in consequence of the late invasion.”

The business prospered as Clinton County grew in population. In 1820 the operation employed 17 men. By 1830 they were employing about 40 which made this works one of the areas larger employers albeit seasonally. Then disaster struck in the form of a summer flood or “freshet” after a few days of heavy rain in late July. On July 24th, 1830 the river rose until it topped the dam, which lay only a few feet west of the furnace, and washed it out. The torrent carried away all of the buildings along the river including the blast furnace, the forge and trip hammer. All of the buildings, materials and machinery were one jumbled mass of debris carried out into Lake Champlain. The operation was a total loss. The only survivors were the house and blacksmith shop on top of the hill.

Sax never rebuilt his business and sold the property in 1832. This ended the industrial development at the mouth of the Salmon River, in the making of iron and iron ore products, after only 21 years of operation.