

BRIERFIELD FURNACE
(Brierfield Ironworks)
(Brierfield Ironworks Park-Tannenhill
Historic Park)
(Bibb Naval Furnaces)
Birmingham Industrial District
AL Route 25
Brierfield
Bibb County
Alabama

HAER No. AL-30

HAER
ALA
4-BRIER,
2-

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, DC 20013-7127

ADDENDUM TO
BRIERFIELD FURNACE
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(Brierfield Ironworks Park--
Tannehill State Historic Park)
(Bibb Naval Furnaces)
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State Highway 25
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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ADDENDUM TO
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(Brierfield Ironworks Park-Tannehill State Historic Park)
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Location: 8 miles south of Montevallo on AL 25, Brierfield, Bibb County, Alabama. Brierfield Park is reached from I 65 by travelling southwest on Bibb County 25 eight miles from Montevallo. Montevallo is 33 miles south of Birmingham.

Ownership: State of Alabama, operated as part of the Tannehill State Park by the Tannehill Furnace and Foundry Commission, until 1991 operated by the Brierfield Ironworks Foundation.

Date of Construction: 1861-1880s

Builder/Architect/
Engineer: Multiple

Project Information: This report is based upon written documentation donated by the Birmingham Historical Society, reformatted to HABS/HAER guidelines.

Description: The park consists of several historic industrial structures. The base of the brick furnace is situated at the foot of a hillside on the western portion of the Brierfield Park property. Behind it are foundations of the charging bridge, foundry operations and a reservoir. Furnace Branch Creek crosses the property on the eastern side where a tramway bed leads two and one-half miles to the foundations of the 1863 rolling mill and of an 1880s nailery, a superintendent's house and cemetery.

Significance: The Brierfield charcoal blast furnaces, financed by the Confederate government, produced exceptionally good foundry iron suitable for casting into rifled cannons including the South's most important naval artillery piece: the Brooke cannon. Brierfield's brick-walled blast furnace built during Reconstruction produced the first commercial scale runs of coke pig iron in the state. This furnace, the base of which remains, marks the transition between charcoal-fired stone furnaces and modern steel-jacketed coke furnaces.

Remaining foundations of Brierfield's Confederate-financed rolling mill are considered the most intact remnants of a wrought iron rolling mill in the state. The railroad linking furnace to mill also remains.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In 1861, Caswell Campbell Huckabee, a Greensboro, Alabama planter and Jonathan Newton Smith, a Bibb County planter, constructed a 36' high stone blast furnace on a large tract of land purchased from Jesse Mahan. (Ellison, 130) Richard Fell was employed to construct a furnace. (Armes, 170) He gathered machinery from Montgomery and from Brierfield, Mississippi, Jefferson Davis' hometown, a coincidence which some say led to the naming of the furnace site. (The site was also said to have been amply covered with briars.) Huckabee furnished most of the capital and also the slave labor. When it was discovered that manufacture of wrought iron was more profitable than casting iron, in 1862 the company began construction of a rolling mill near the Alabama & Tennessee River railhead two miles to the east at Shelby. The furnace operation provided its owners a lucrative business providing farmers with iron implements. Albert and Richard Fell, Jr. assisted their father in construction of the rolling mill. Fell, Sr., a well-seasoned builder of rolling mills in Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri, had also built the Shelby rolling mill (Everse, 19-20).

Owing to the high quality of the iron and its suitability for making guns, the Confederate government purchased the Brierfield works in 1863 at a "force sale" for \$600,000. Renamed the Bibb Naval Furnace, the plant greatly increased in productivity through construction of a second blast furnace (a 40' high brick stack equipped with hot blast) and the rolling mill. A railroad connected the rolling mill and the main line of the Alabama and Tennessee Railroad to the furnaces two and one-half miles to the east. (Everse, 23) The entire output of the furnaces and rolling mill was shipped to the Confederate Arsenal at Selma and much of it used to build more than 100 Brooke cannon, considered by many the South's "most awesome weapon." (Tepper, Selma Gun Foundry, in Everse, 26) The furnace turned out 25 tons of iron daily, the largest output of any Alabama ironworks of the era. The rolling mill, the only one in Bibb County, reached a capacity of 10 tons. (Armes, 186) The furnaces and rolling mill were destroyed March 31, 1865 by the Tenth Missouri Cavalry. (Ellison, 139)

In 1865, General Josiah Gorgas, former chief of ordinance for the Confederate government, a Pennsylvania native who had married an Alabama governor's daughter, gathered a group of investors, led by Frances Strother Lyon and Daniel Prout of Demopolis. Known as the

Canebrake Company, they purchased the ironworks and approximately 5,000 acres of land. Gorgas superintended operations, while Welsh ironmaster Giles Edward undertook the rebuilding of the ironworks and began construction of a nailery. Furnace Number Two was recharged on November 2, 1866. The ironworks became officially known as the "Brierfield Ironworks" at this time. Plagued by difficulty in locating investment capital, retaining labor, and by high freight rates and competition from other operations, in 1869 Gorgas accepted an administrative position at the University of the South at Sewanee, and later became president of the University of Alabama.

During the next two decades, numerous individuals including Thomas Alvis, an experienced specialist in rolling mills backed by Selma capitalists; investors from Louisville, Kentucky (W. D. and Kearsley Carter and William Douglass) and others from St. Louis, Missouri attempted to make a go of the ironworks. Beginning in 1870, the furnaces, having depleted supplies of area charcoal, were operated on coke. (Everse, 39) By 1883, things were popping and the town of Brierfield was officially subdivided. Under the management of Major Thomas Jefferson Peter (1835-1896), a big-time railroad engineer-contractor and mining man from Kansas, together with his associates and investors, Brierfield became the "Magic City of Bibb County." From 1882 to 1894, Peter rebuilt the furnace, remodeled the rolling mill and erected a nailery, coke ovens and a washer. Investment capital came from a group of U. S. Senators headed up by Alabama Senator John T. Morgan and Peter's brother-in-law, a Kansas Senator. Coal mines were opened and additional railroad tracks built. Skilled labor was imported from Pennsylvania, with 500 names appearing on the payroll at the height of the boom. Brierfield produced a good quality "Bibb" iron. However, just as Brierfield nails were entering the market, steel cut-wire nails from the Pittsburgh area undercut them. Due to this competition and national financial difficulties in the 1890s, the furnace was blown out for the last time Christmas eve of 1894. (Armes 324-329)

For decades, the industrial plant lay crumbling in the Bibb County woods. After World War II, when brick houses were in vogue, thousands of bricks were scavenged from the site. In 1976 members of the Bibb County Heritage Association went to the county commission. The county created a park to preserve the ruins. Kimberly-Clark Corp., which owned the 100-acres surrounding the furnace ruins, gave the county the right to use the site as a park on a long-term lease and contributed funds for its development. Ownership of the rolling mill and nailery site is in multiple public and private hands.

In the late 1970s, Dr. Kermit Hunter, dean of the School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University and author of more than 30

outdoor dramas, wrote a drama entitled "Brighthope" about the furnace. For several years Brierfield Park and the drama department of the University of Montevallo produced the out-of-door summer drama in a 600-seat amphitheater built at the park site. (Stallworth, 21-24)

The Brierfield Ironworks, listed on the National Register in the early 1970s, has recently become part of Tannehill Historical State Park. Portions of the original 400-acre site remain in private ownership. Ruins of the No. 2 brick furnace are located on the 45-acre park site. Furnace No. 1 appears to have been destroyed with construction of Furnace No. 2 in the 1880s.

BRIERFIELD HISTORIC INDUSTRIAL STRUCTURES AND SITES:

1. Furnace No. 2, 1880s
First built during the Civil War by the Confederate government, this brick furnace equipped with hot blast was rebuilt in the late 1860s by Gen. Josiah Gorgas and again in the 1880s by Tom Peter. The furnace is currently in ruins.
2. Tramway Bed (1860s)
Runs two and one half miles from Furnace No. 2 to the site of the rolling mill and Alabama and Tennessee River railhead at Brierfield. The tramway is overgrown but clearly visible.
3. Rolling Mill (c. 1862, 1880s)
First constructed by Richard Fell, Sr. for C. C. Huckabee in 1862 and completed by the Confederate government, this rolling mill was rebuilt by Thomas Peter in the 1880s. It is located near the Alabama and Tennessee railhead on Mahan Creek. The foundations remain but are too densely covered by overgrowth to be adequately photographed. Corners were marked by archaeologists James Parker and Cailup Curren in a 1980 survey for the Alabama Historical Commission.
4. Nailery (1880s)
Construction was begun by Gorgas and completed by Thomas Peter in the 1880s. The foundations of this nailery may remain.
5. Coke Ovens (1880s)
The coke ovens constructed by Thomas Peter are thought to have been obliterated.
6. Cemetery (1850s)
This cemetery includes sections for blacks and whites and is well maintained.
7. Superintendent's House (1870s)
This is a one-story frame house.

OTHER STRUCTURES MOVED TO THE PARK AND CURRENTLY LOCATED ON THE
GROUNDS OF BRIERFIELD IRONWORKS PARK:

1. Ashby Post Office-Oakley, Lilly House (c. 1900)
Moved from Ashby
2. Cahaba Trace Commission/Brierfield Ironworks Park Office (1884)
Original vestibule, Brierfield Catholic Church in Brierfield.
Moved from Brierfield in 1981
In 1905, a cyclone destroyed all but this portion of the church.
This part was then moved to the bank of Mahan Creek and set up
as an artist studio for Adelaide Mahan, daughter of Jesse Mahan.
3. Hayes, Wilson House (c. 1900)
Frame farmhouse moved from Six Mile Creek area of Bibb County
in 1986.
4. Jones, J. Henry General Store (c. 1900)
Now serves as a mercantile store and photographer's studio
Moved from Six Mile Creek in 1986, named for owner James Henry
Jones.
5. Lightsey Cabin (1840)
Single-pen log structure built by Merchant family, served as a
stage coach stop on the Tuscaloosa-Wetumpka Road
Donated by Joe Lightsey family of Centerville who had removed
it from its original location.
Rented for overnight use
Moved from Merchant's Crossing between Randolph and Maplesville
in 1988.
6. Sims-Hubbard Log Cabin (c. 1850)
Used for overnight rental
Originally served as Little Page Sims Home
7. Billy Mitchell Cabin (1880s)
Scheduled to become a museum
8. Mulberry Baptist Church (1897)
Moved from southern Bibb County in 1988

OTHER SITE IMPROVEMENTS:

A variety of other improvements have been made to the Brierfield
Ironworks Park site. These features include:

1. Gate House
The Gate House is located on the western edge of the site at the
entrance to the park.

2. Blue Grass Stage
The Blue Grass Stage is located immediately to the north of the entrance road.
3. Amphitheater
The amphitheater is located adjacent to and to the rear of the Brierfield Ironworks Park Office.
4. Musket Range and Pavilion
The Musket Range lies on the northern edge of the park site.
5. Parking Lot
A parking lot is situated to the east of Furnace Branch Creek.
6. Barbecue Shed
A barbecue shed is located in the center of the park site. It contains tables and benches.
7. Swimming Pool/Pavilion
A swimming pool and pavilion lie to the south of the entrance road.
8. Bath House
A bath house is associated with the swimming pool facility.
9. Park Manager's Residence
The park manager's residence is situated at the southern edge of the park site.
10. Road Network
All structures and activities on the site are reached by travelling along a dirt road that winds through the park.

CONDITION

The base of Furnace No. 2, a large pile of bricks and foundations of associated structures, is in a state of ruin. Grass and brush cover the remains. Corners of the rolling mill have been established through an archaeological investigation. No archaeological work has been done to locate the nailery. The rolling mill site and right-of-way for the tramway are heavily overgrown, but identifiable. The cemetery, with white and black sections, and the superintendent's house are well-maintained. Due to recent acquisition of the property by Tannehill State Park, a master plan for site development has begun.

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