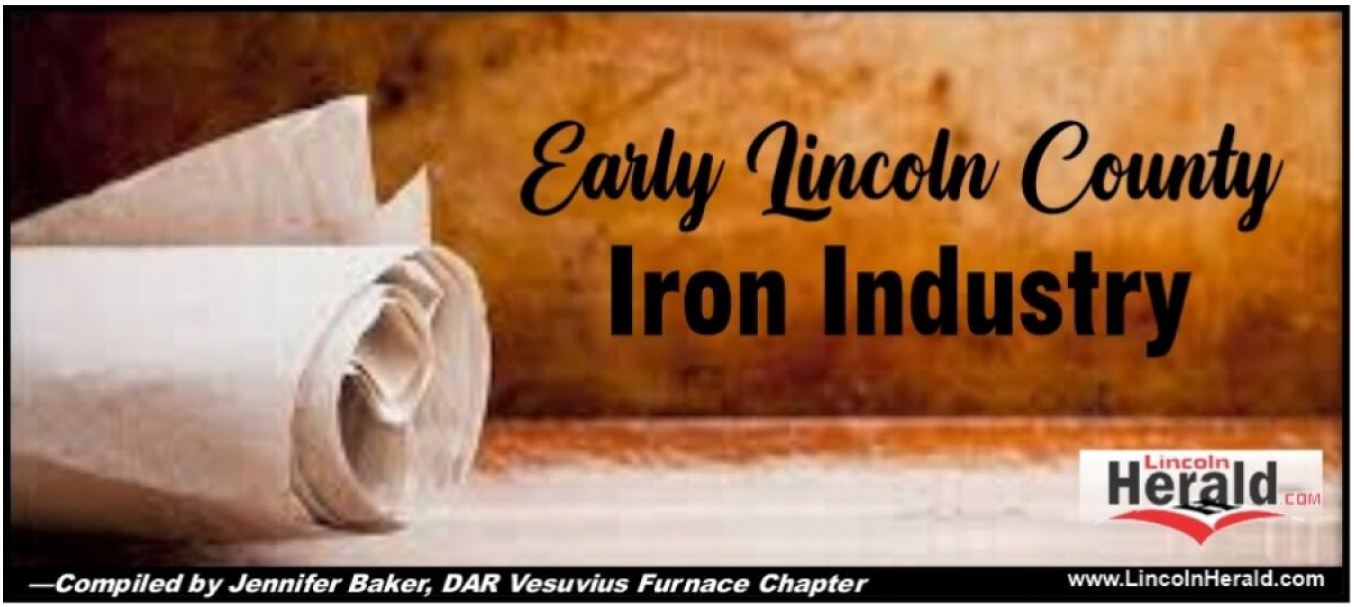


The Iron Industry in Lincoln County has Revolutionary Roots

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As part of the effort to maintain the British colonies in North America as economic dependencies unable to compete with home industries, the British Parliament passed an act in 1750 which prohibited the manufacture in the colonies of any iron product except pig iron and bar iron, which had not yet been forged into useful implements. As relations between the Crown and the American colonies deteriorated, the colonial legislature resolved to encourage the development of a native iron industry. In 1775 the North Carolina Provincial Congress offered a bounty for the establishment of the first colonial iron forge. At the end of the same year the Provincial Congress rented the furnaces and iron forges built by John Wilcox at Ore Hill near the Deep River iron ore deposits in Chatham County in order to supply iron cannons and cannonballs for the revolutionary forces. Operations were greatly hindered by the lack of well-trained, experienced workers, and the enterprise collapsed before any substantial armaments were produced. Congress surrendered its interest in the works to Wilcox in 1777. The structures were heavily damaged by a storm in 1780 and were abandoned.

Farther west in Lincoln County, some of the state's most important bloomeries and forges were successfully established. This region possessed all the necessary resources: a rich and substantial iron ore deposit, hardwood trees to produce charcoal fuel, limestone to extract the impurities from the metal, refractory crystalline rock to build the furnaces, and falling water to power the bellows and heavy hammers of the forges. Equally important, this region was settled by Germans and Ulster Scots, many of them trained craftsmen, who established Lincoln County as a major industrial center in North Carolina during this period by founding the iron and textile industries.

Iron mining in Lincoln County began as early as 1790, supplying much of North Carolina's iron during the early nineteenth century. These sites were built by veterans of the Revolutionary War and their descendants. By 1810, six bloomeries and forges were operating, drawing from the “Big Ore Bank” deposits. The county’s iron production reached its peak in 1830, refining 1,800 tons of iron, mainly near what is now known as Iron Station. However, the Civil War and limited technological advancements contributed to the decline of the local iron industry, which had largely disappeared by 1880.

Iron mine development in Lincoln County was encouraged by the legislature’s 1788 “Act to Encourage the Building of Iron Works.” The act guaranteed investors ten years of tax exemptions, as well as 3,000 acres of non-farmable land for charcoal if their facilities successfully produced iron. In 1789, Peter Forney purchased a large tract of land in eastern Lincoln County at the “Big Ore Bank,” and began to mine the iron ore deposits there. Forney and his associates including Alexander Brevard, Joseph Graham, and John Fulenwider, soon developed multiple forges, furnaces and bloomeries in the area.