

# OF BATSTO AND BOG IRON



by  
JACK E. BOUCHER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR

ARTHUR D. PIERCE  
EDITORIAL CONSULTANT

COVER AND MAP BY  
RAY BAKER

A Publication of

The Batsto Citizens Committee

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# BATSTO, BOG IRON AND BARONS

NEW JERSEY'S HEARTLAND, the "Pine Barrens," are even today a near wilderness, crossed by occasional dusty trails reminiscent of the stage roads of a by-gone era.

Tiny villages, their weather-beaten cedar clapboard houses boasting a sort of timeless atmosphere appear suddenly amidst the forest, their crumbling walls hidden by nature seeking to claim her own. Many are ghost towns, their village folk long since at rest; their memory but an indistinct inscription on a crumbling marker.

Coursing through this natural scenic and historic wonderland are the cedar-water streams, their rich brown appearance only adding to the mysticism of this Down Jersey region. The waters of several rivers trickle lazily beneath the decaying timbers of ancient bridges, carefully hewn by hand a century or more ago, now richly upholstered with mosses and the patina of age.

This venerable area where time has marched so casually was once the realm of the Jersey Iron Barons . . . men such as Charles Read, Colonel John Cox, Joseph Ball, William and Jesse Richards and Charles Pettit. And it was the setting for Jersey's bog-iron industry and furnaces such as Aetna, Atsion, Hampton, Martha, Gloucester, Weymouth and . . . Batsto.

This was a region vital to the burgeoning economy of a new nation, indeed, its products aided dramatically in establishing the new country . . . America!

Batsto Furnace was built in 1766 by Charles Read of Burlington, a wealthy and influential

merchant and speculator active in public affairs of the day. Read had been Clerk and later Collector of the Port of Burlington; Deputy Secretary of the Province of New Jersey; member of the Assembly; Judge of the Supreme Court, and for a brief period its Chief Justice.

Batsto, called also Batstow and Badston in some early newspaper accounts, was located on Batsto River above its junction with the Atsion River . . . ideal for a furnace that would depend heavily on water power to drive the huge bellows providing blast for the furnace. The dense cedar swamps and streams feeding the rivers were rich in raw limonite . . . the bog ore from which iron would be extracted.

The name "Batsto" is derived from the Swedish "Batstu," pronounced "Baat-stoo," and referring to a bathhouse or bathing place. It was apparently borrowed by the Lenni-Lenape Indians that populated New Jersey from early Swedish and Dutch settlers to refer to a bathing or watering place.

William Franklin, son of Benjamin, and then Colonial Governor of New Jersey signed into law an act by the New Jersey Provincial Legislature in early 1766 . . . *"An Act to enable the Honourable Charles Read, Esquire to erect a Dam over Batstow Creek . . . hath proved to demonstration good Merchantable Bar-Iron may be drawn from such Ore as may be found in plenty in the Bogs and . . . in order to erect the necessary Works. . ."* Thus was Batsto Furnace established.

Timber rights for nearly



Batsto

60,000 acres of land were acquired surrounding Batsto to provide the fuel for the furnace. Woodcutters were employed . . . "sober industrious men" . . . accordingly to an advertisement in the Pennsylvania Evening Post of November 14, 1776, to cut pine wood at two shillings and sixpence per cord. Few took the sobriety stipulation very seriously, but nonetheless, wagons, heavily laden with charcoal converged daily on the furnace.

Long, narrow, shallow-draft barges sometimes called shall-ops which were modified "Durham" boats were poled and pulled along the streams, bog ore piled high to the gunwales. It was a Durham boat that was used by George Washington in the famed winter crossing of the Delaware.

Charles Read was in partnership with Reuben Haines of Philadelphia, a brewer; John Cooper of Burlington, gentleman; Walter Franklin of New York, merchant; and John Wilson of Burlington County in the Batsto enterprise. Although he owned but one-fourth interest, he was the driving force behind the endeavor.

Two years later, in 1768, he sold out to his partners Franklin and Wilson, one-eighth share each, and departed from the Jerseys, traveling, it is believed to the South where he later died.

John Cox was to be the next owner of Batsto Furnace, in 1770, and he retained Joseph Ball, later a wealthy merchant of Philadelphia as his manager. A typical advertisement appeared in 1776, in the pages of the Penn-

sylvania Journal offering Batsto's products . . .

**"MANUFACTURED --- AT BATSTO FURNACE: In West-New-Jersey and to be sold either at the works, or by the Subscriber, in Philadelphia. A great variety of iron pots, kettles, Dutch ovens, and oval fish kettles, either with or without covers, skillets of different sizes, being much lighter, neater and superior in quality to any imported from Great Britain—Pot ash and other large kettles, from 30 to 125 gallons; sugar millgudgeons, neatly rounded and polished at the ends; grating bars of different lengths, grist-mill rounds; weights of all sizes, from 7 lb. to 56 lb; Fullers plates; open and closed stoves of different sizes, rag-wheel irons for sawmills; pestles and mortars; sash weights, and forge hammers of the best quality. Also Batsto Pig-Iron as usual, the quality of which is too well known to need any recommendation."**

**JOHN COX**

As the American Colonies became embroiled in the struggle for independence from the British Crown, Batsto Furnace turned from peacetime products to articles for war; cannon and ball, iron fastenings and fittings for caissons, wagons, and ships; large shallow pans for evaporating ocean water to obtain salt for use by troops in preserving already scant food stores; and the countless other products required by the military.

Batsto Furnace frequently completed casting large orders of munitions for the Continental Army only to encounter difficulty in shipping the materials. Not all of South Jersey's citizens were in sympathy with the fight for freedom launched with the

signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia but 30 miles and a half-day's journey distant.

Tory spies were to be found in every community . . . indeed one observed daily the production at Batsto from a house on the shores of Batsto Lake, reporting his findings to the Crown. A tiny scrap of paper . . . an intelligence report from Governor William Tryon to the Earl of Dartmouth on February 11, 1776 recently was discovered in the public archives in England, it tells of the activities at Batsto . . .

*"Shott supplied by John Cox from Batsto Furnace in New Jersey—sent in four waggons*  
*—first load ----- 650*  
*2nd ----- 400*  
*3rd ----- 1128*  
*4 ----- 445*  
*2623*

*Weight — ½ of them 6 and the other 9 Pounds. Sent to Philadelphia for the ships of armed Privateers fitted out from that Port."*

Joseph Ball on one occasion shortly thereafter wrote to Mr. Owen Biddle, a member of the Committee of Safety in Philadelphia . . .

*"Sir . . . Cox informs me he . . . had sent to Engage Teams to Hawl up the remainder of the Bullets . . . he cannot engage any, as the teams this way are employed by the Atsion Compy to Hawl up Iron for the Frigates . . ."*

*Sir, yr H'ble Servt.*  
**JOSEPH BALL**

Spies and manpower shortages were not the only problems to hamper the patriots working Batsto Furnace. Production defects in cannon caused John Cox to write his manager Joseph Ball at Batsto from Philadelphia on October 6, 1776 . . .

*The Ironmaster's Mansion as it appeared about 1870 . . .*

*Courtesy: Susan Richards*





William Richards



Mary Patrick Richards



Jesse Richards

*"I came to town yesterday . . . Out of the 12 Howitzers in the first load 3 burst in proving and out of the last twelve 5 burst. The Captain who tried them and every one who saw them are clearly of the opinion they are by much too thin and that their bursting is owing to that and not the quality of the metal. They must therefore make new patterns much thicker . . . I shall send some powder down by the next stage to try them there . . . It is no purpose to send them up not properly proved. I shall be down at Batsto next week."*

So important did Batsto become to the Continental cause, that John Cox was given a military exemption for his ironworkers. He was authorized to set up a company of fifty men and two lieutenants, with himself as captain. This force was to be free of military obligations except in case of invasion.

Batsto's neighboring village was a hamlet called "The Forks." This was a thriving center for privateersmen and their

vessels which plied the Jersey Coast and Delaware Bay harassing and capturing British shipping. Goods and vessels seized as prizes were brought to The Forks to be auctioned at public vendue, usually at the House (Inn) of Richard Wescoat. Frequently a captured English vessel carrying supplies for the British Army in America would arrive at the Forks. Then the cargo would be taken overland through the pines and delivered to Washington's army for use against the Redcoats.

Chestnut Neck, at the mouth of the Little Egg Harbor River, called also the Mullica, was established as a supply depot for the privateersmen, thereby eliminating a two-day round trip up the river to The Forks for repairs and provisioning.

Anticipating possible British attack on the installation, John Cox, with the cooperation of Richard Wescoat and Elijah Clark, also of The Forks, were commissioned by the Provincial Congress to erect defenses at Chestnut Neck. Earthenwork



*The Ironmaster's Mansion — Batsto*