

Black Iron from the Backcountry:  
Enslaved Ironworkers and the Forging of Community on a Piedmont North Carolina Plantation

**Introduction**

Often credited as cradle for trade and commerce the inland south, the Piedmont region of North Carolina sustained a remarkable legacy of iron ore production. Iron works such as the Vesuvius furnace of Lincoln County produced beautifully crafted iron works as well as other useful resources. The production of iron ore is a laborious task. Men and women often risked their lives to produce iron crafted objects. Currently on display at The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) is this fire back from the Vesuvius furnace.



Two floated pilasters, suggesting classical virtue, support the decorative arch over the furnace name. The name “Graham” as it appeared on the fire back referred to the decorated Revolutionary hero Joseph Graham, but was he virtuous? It would depend on a point of view, certainly he was rich from the production of scores of unskilled and skilled African American

laborers. Yet, scholarship on the Lincoln County furnace has all but silenced the possibility of industrial work of slaves. Recently however, an account ledger of the property was found dated to 1850, the approximate time that Vesuvius furnace was reblasted into action. The intent of this scholarship is to use the Vesuvius Iron Works and specifically the decoratively engraved fire back to explore an uncharted area of North Carolina backcountry history.

This research is twofold as it first seeks to demonstrate that in fact there were slaves that participated in the production of iron ore at the site. Secondly, this research positions the Backcountry South as a major player in the industrial realm of the nineteenth century. By focusing on these two angles the research will ultimately, explore the possible realities of race, class, and the harsh climate of producing iron ore in the inland South.

### **Forging an empire: the techniques of making Iron and those who mastered the art**

In the nineteenth century, the state of North Carolina, in particular its Piedmont region, served as a vessel for iron ore production and thus iron works plantations. The primary reason the flourishing of iron ore production in the Piedmont region was due to the abundance of the four necessary natural elements to produce iron. First, iron ore deposits had to be on the landscape. Once ore deposits were located, there needed to be hardwood forests used for charcoal production; rapids and fast moving streams to harness power to fuel machinery; and finally limestone the key element that allied to iron ore stripping it of impurities and enabling the ore to be molded and crafted. Additionally, the Piedmont region had a wealth of crystalline rocks which were used to build the furnace stacks that held the molten ore.<sup>1</sup> All of the above natural

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Stine, Martha Zierden, Lesley M. Drucker, and Christopher Judge. *Carolina's Historical Landscapes: Archaeological Perspectives*. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997). Pp 113.

features were present in large deposits in what are Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, and Lincoln counties.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this research the county of specific interest is Lincoln County.

The idea of an iron works plantation in theory was centered around an iron ore deposit. Iron ore was the glue for the operation to function. For that reason, early iron plantations appeared around mining sites. Moreover, each additional element then fit into a pattern of harvest and production to supplement iron ore. For instance, the limestone was important as a fluxing agent, while fast moving water, powered turbines and water wheels, and hardwood produced charcoal as an essential agent in the continual operation of furnaces for up to six months at a time. Large crystalized stone supported the structural integrity of the furnace that housed iron ore.

Naturally, a culture of iron workers emerged due to the numerous isolated detailed professions at a furnace. The continual segregation of a unit or group fuels social and cultural dependency. The products of those interactions are often seen with songs and stories. For example, the job of collier required seclusion in the foothills and mountains as a collective unit for months responsible for turning timber into charcoal. The even created their own shelters often assembling clay huts to protect from the weather.<sup>3</sup>

Once a furnace was in blast (the start of operation) the core elements were systematically combined to create iron. First the limestone was melted using the charcoal in a process commonly referred to as batch processing.<sup>4</sup> This involved pouring a mixture of limestone, charcoal, and iron ore into the top of the furnace. While this process is done, workers continually

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<sup>2</sup> Terry A. Ferguson and Thomas Cowan. "Investigations into the early Ironworks of South-Central North Carolina," Under Grant No. 37-86-10390. Report Submitted to North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh North Carolina, 1987. pp. 6

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 6-7, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

fanned it to increase and maintain the temperature of the blast. Once the molten iron was detached from the furnace it was treated in two principle ways. The first involved creating various shapes, styles and patterns to cast the molten ore. This step created fire backs, including fire backs from Vesuvius plantation. It also created oven and stove plates, iron bowls, pots and other items. The second treatment was to pour the remaining iron into long narrow trenches, commonly referred to as “trough”.<sup>5</sup> This created pig iron. Pig iron were thick bars of iron that could be reheated at a later time and hammered into various shapes.

Vesuvius Furnace was constructed c. 1795 and is believed to be the idea of Peter Forney. In May of 1795, Forney sold one third interest of Vesuvius Plantation and land to Joseph Graham, Alexander Brevard and John Davidson. From 1795, Vesuvius and nearby Mount Tirza Forge remained in either the Brevard or Graham families until after the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> Joseph Graham married John Davidson’s daughter Isabella while Alexander Brevard married Rebecca Davidson, another of John Davidson’s daughters. In 1808, John Davidson sold his interest of Vesuvius Furnace. This transition was crucial because according to Ferguson and Cowan in their work, “Investigations into the early Ironworks of South-Central North Carolina,” Davidson wrote two separate deeds. In one deed Davidson sold interest in Vesuvius to Joseph M. Graham and listed Alexander Brevard as a member. Davidson in reverse sold interest in Mount Tirza to Brevard and named Graham a member. These extended family relations explain in part how the furnace and forge remained successfully within the family through continual decades.

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Jason Sharpe, Director of the Lincoln County Historical Society, July 3, 2017 (location the Lincoln County Historical Society). Sharpe noted that several long-time furnace operators refer to the narrow lines where pig iron was constructed troughs. This reference was in large part because of the term for the remaining iron which was pig iron.

<sup>6</sup>Ferguson, Terry A and Thomas Cowan. “Investigations into the early Ironworks of South-Central North Carolina,” Under Grant No. 37-86-10390. Report Submitted to North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh North Carolina, 1987. pp. 48.

Furthermore, these families created a production area rather than separate entities. Both properties combined, spanned over two thousand acres. Joseph M. Graham built a plantation house at Vesuvius. Grahams' family resided there, among that family was son William Graham, later Governor of the state of North Carolina in 1845.<sup>7</sup>

In 1814, Alexander Brevard Sold his shares of Vesuvius to Joseph Graham. Then In 1837, Joseph Graham Died leaving Vesuvius to his son John D. Graham. In 1847, John D. Graham died placing Vesuvius in the hands of his sons Charles C. Graham and James Franklin Graham who control the plantation until 1851 until they collectively sell Vesuvius to Ephraim A. Brevard. In 1855, Ephraim A. Brevard sells Vesuvius to Robert Alfred Brevard. Although there is a bill of sale for this transaction, other records indicate that Ephraim still held some holding in the plantation. Finally, In 1857, Ephraim and Robert Alfred Brevard sell Vesuvius and holdings to James Madison Smith, at which point the plantation leaves the two families control. Although Joseph M. Graham and the Graham family are entrenched within the records of the Vesuvius from the 1790s through 1840, an Account book of Vesuvius for the 1850s clearly records that Alexander Brevard is in control of the furnace and subsequent plantation just a decade before the Civil War.

### **Boy Rufus, Isaac the Potter and the brown hands of production**

It is undoubtedly clear that life at an iron furnace plantation was laborious in nature specifically when producing iron ore. Yet, perhaps the most daunting question that remains across southern landscapes of iron work plantations is dedicated to identifying who did the hard, demanding work. Little has been written about the day to day operation of Vesuvius Plantation.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-50.

However, recent discoveries of records essential to Vesuvius primarily during the 1850s and 1860s shed light on the hands crafting the iron ore of the back country.

The Grahams who took initial primary ownership of Vesuvius were Presbyterian Scotch Irish. According to Daniel Patterson, immigrants born in Ulster were raised in a hierarchal world of landowners, tenants, and under tenants. This fundamental train of thought “institutionalized inequality of power” by tradition, statute, and common law. Thus, the willingness of these Scotch Irish to buy and work slaves implies that they had not seriously questioned this social order. Rather they ascribed to climb to a higher level in a familiar structure. Similarly, Peter Moore argued in a *World of Toil and Strife*, that for the Scotch Irish religion was an important reason why the morality of slaveholding was a non-issue. This attitude was because of the dominant fact that they framed slavery within the “Divine Order”.<sup>8</sup>

According to the 1850 census, Vesuvius Plantation was a massive industrial complex boasting 87,000 acres of property (real estate and personal estate combined) and over thirty slaves with thirteen slave dwellings sprawled across the plantation.<sup>9</sup> These slaves worked the plantation and did so on an industrial scale, like a small city. An 1849 article in the *Carolina Watchman* (Salisbury, North Carolina) clearly defines the roles of people on the plantation. The article stated, “Iron ore is to be found in abundance and is convenient to the works. The hands employed in all cotton factories are young white girls; in the forges and furnaces the labor is performed by negroes.”<sup>10</sup> What did the African American laborers do—all of the physical demanding and dangerous work, as can be seen in this chart of the hierarchy of workers at a blast

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Patterson. *The True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scotch Irish Settlers in the Pennsylvania and Carolina Backcountry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. pp. 330-331.

<sup>9</sup> *Slave Role for Lincoln County North Carolina, 1860*.

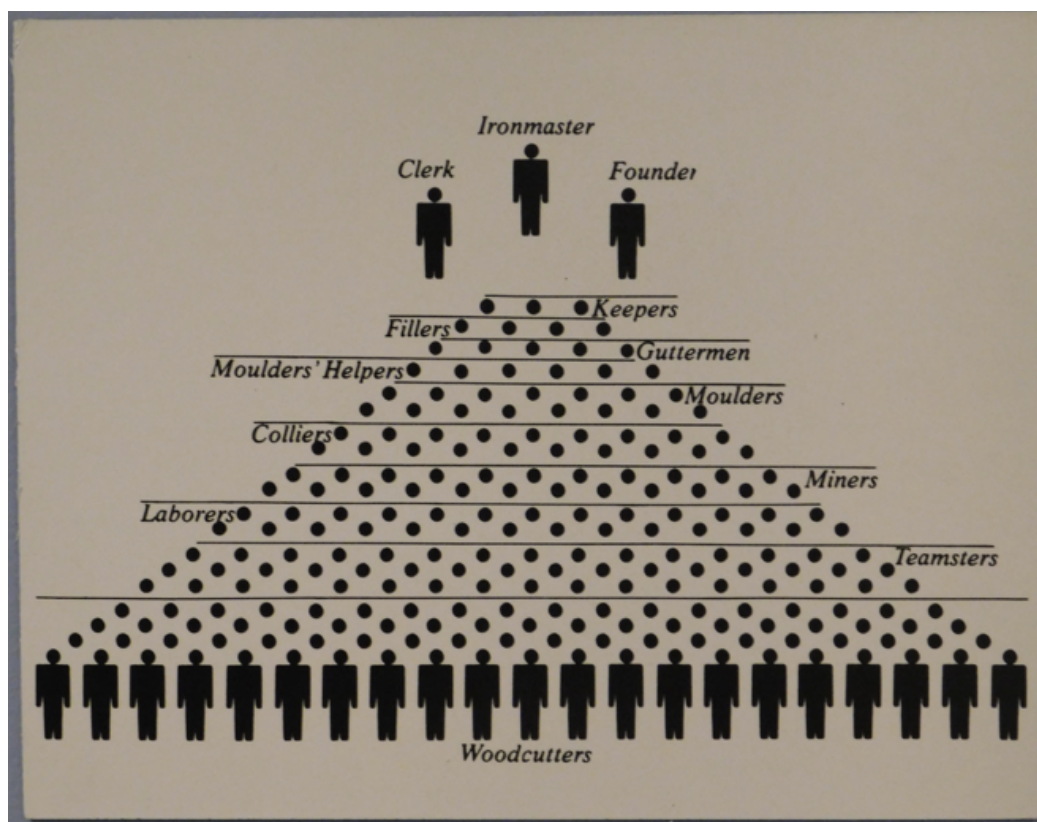
<sup>10</sup> *Carolina Watchman* (Salisbury, North Carolina), Thursday, November 22, 1849.

furnace. What is also interesting about blast furnaces in the south is that the roles of African American women are unclear. Moreover, their physical duties are also uncertain. This uncertainty is also seen on the Vesuvius landscape. The mention of young white women to work the cotton mills is intriguing as it speaks to an eclipsed section of American history. Historically, according to Jaqueline Jones, there were in fact small groups of slave masters that despite owning slaves preferred to use white men and women in substitute for enslaved labor. This substitution was done either to protect their economic investment (slaves) or because owners needed slave labor or skill elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> This argument is evident through the lens of Vesuvius Plantation white women working cotton mills. Moreover, it supports that while the Master(s) at Vesuvius Plantation valued the production of iron over all else, there was still the need to exploit crops, including tobacco, lumber and cotton thus, the use of white women laborers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jacqueline Jones. *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998) pp. 202-203.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.



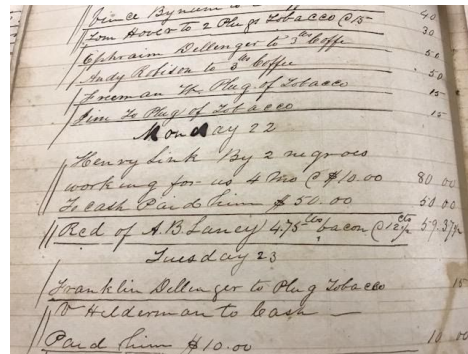
It is clear from the image above that the most laborious job and that which would require the most hands were the wood cutters. In 1850, Alexander Brevard, who was in control of Vesuvius, kept a detailed account book of most transactions during the decade of the 1850s. In numerous accounts, Brevard appears to hire out the services of other slaves to cut wood and to complete laborious tasks on the plantation. According to Charles Dew, iron plantation owners had no incentive to ensure to proper treatment or adequate health of hired slaves.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, overworking hired slaves in industry was all too common during the antebellum century.<sup>14</sup> Add to that the fact that some of these slaves were not paid for their skill. Alexander Brevard's account ledger serves as a key to unlocking essential information about the African Americans

<sup>13</sup> Charles B. Dew. "Disciplining Slave Ironworkers in the Antebellum South: Coercion, Conciliation, and Accommodation," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (Apr., 1974), pp. 393.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth M. Stamp. *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York:, 1956), 84.



experience at Vesuvius. Listed in the account records for Monday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1856, Brevard pays Henry Link a well-established plantation owner in Lincoln county for the services of two of his slaves. The image below of the account stated that the individuals worked for four months at a rate of \$10.00 per month. The following sentence stated, “To each paid him \$50.00.”<sup>15</sup>

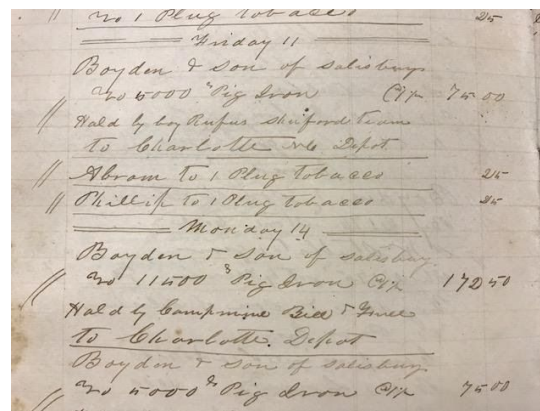


Now whether these slaves retained their earnings of labor remains uncertain. Yet, from account ledger and the newspaper records thus far it is evident that slaves are working the property and are contributing to the production of iron ore in the back country. Furthermore, earlier scholarship including Charles Dew and Kenneth Stamp portray the hiring out process in rural settings and particularly on iron works as an unrelenting cycle. In this cycle unlike urban slavery, the master has already received funds for the rented-out slave. Thus, leaving the slave in a more precarious situation. Moreover, Dew cited numerous accounts of slave owners seeking skilled labor, much in the same light as southern rice planters in South Carolina searched for slaves with knowledge of rice cultivation. Dew also contended that the average salary for hired slaves was approximately \$50.00 per engagement. Yet, by 1855, the price had risen on the east

<sup>15</sup> Account Ledger Vesuvius Furnace Plantation, 1850. Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> 1856 entry (account Ledger does not have page numbers).

coast to almost \$135.00 per slave, whereas that price in accordance with the account ledger from Vesuvius shows a consistent price for hired slaves.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike many iron work plantations, the slaves at Vesuvius are found at more than one level. While wood is the most used resource and therefore probably had the most working to secure it, there are accounts from the ledger that describe slaves as teamsters leaving the property to transport iron and supplies. On September 9, 1857, an account listed in ledger describes a bill of sale of iron to Boyden and Son. Boyden and Son actively purchased iron in massive quantities at a time. The below image of another account stated, “Boyden and Son of Salisbury, 5000 lbs. of pig iron (at \$75.00 per lb.) Hald by Boy Rufus Shuford team to Charlotte Depot.”<sup>17</sup>



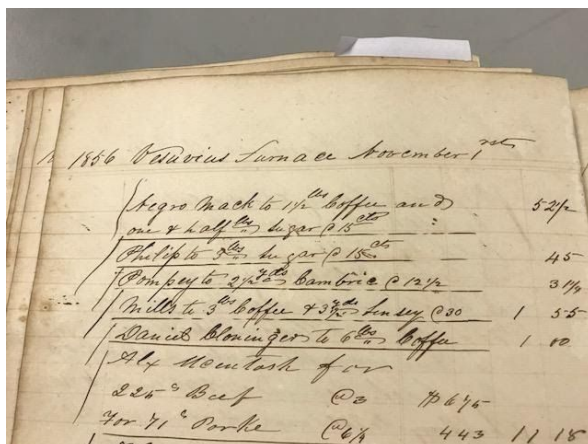
The implications of slaves either hired or specific to Vesuvius permitted to travel off the plantation highlight the enormous profitable enterprise of industrial manufacturing of Vesuvius Plantation but also the high economic range of value of iron. Individuals who traveled to secure or transport goods were referred to as teamsters. Furthermore, tracking the course from Lincoln to Charlotte, the only way to reach Charlotte was to cross the Catawba River. Reports from the

<sup>16</sup> Dew, “Disciplining Slave Ironworkers,” pp. 396-398.

<sup>17</sup> Account Ledger Vesuvius Furnace Plantation, 1850. September 9, 1857 entry (account Ledger does not have page numbers).

early nineteenth century report consistent crossing of the river. Juliana Conner, a Charleston resident, and guest of the Brevard family in Lincoln county, noted her numerous accounts of crossing the Catawba River. Connor was skeptical at the crossing the river because of its size. Yet, she later remarked that the horses appeared to float across the river.<sup>18</sup> Slaves as teamsters and as wood cutters displays the duality of slavery. On the one hand, the physical, dangerous work of iron ore risked slaves lives and thereby economic value of slave owners. Yet, at times, for iron furnace plantations, the reward far outweighed the risk. From the above two entries in the ledger, plantations knowingly risked loss of slaves due to running away and slaves dying due to explosions or exhaustion. The large scale of operation undoubtedly provided an endless supply of slaves, thus, supplying a necessary supply of resources for production of iron.

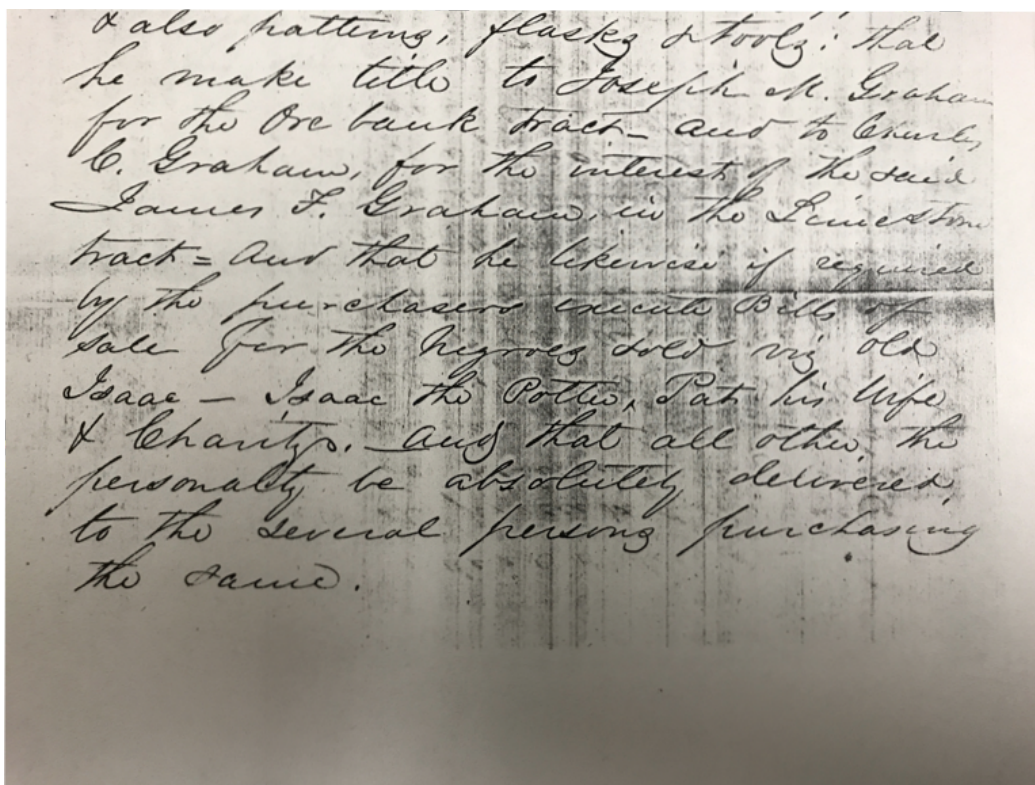
Yet, even though slavery was a crippling institution, slaves found opportunities for trade, and cooperation. Many Iron plantations had a general store where items, clothing, and goods could be purchased. According to the account ledger, Vesuvius also had a general store. The image below depicts an enslaved man named Mack purchasing Coffee, and sugar from Vesuvius.



<sup>18</sup> Diary of Juliana Margaret Conner from June 10<sup>th</sup> to October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1827 (Copied from a Family Bible), pp.7-13.

The complexity of slavery is often deafened by its harsher tones of reality. However, there are accounts like the above ledger entry where a world of cooperation and accommodation is identified.

Perhaps the most sought after slave for the iron plantation was the skilled slave. In many respects, iron plantations mirrored the structure of rice plantations. Both were equipped with slaves that were highly skilled and knowledgeable in the cultivation or manufacture of goods. At Vesuvius, a record appears in a letter sent to James Franklin Graham co-owner of Vesuvius during the latter part of the nineteenth century from Haywood McGuion. The letter states that McGuion is selling a small number of slaves to Graham. One of those slaves was listed as “Isaac the potter”.<sup>19</sup> The below image depicts the identifying title.



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<sup>19</sup> Letter from Haywood McGuion to James Franklin Graham, 1848. Letter copied from Lincoln Historical society, Lincoln county North Carolina.

This gives further credence to the notion that purchases of slaves for iron plantations were an intentional action, much like South Carolinian planters who sought slaves with histories of growing rice. The potter was a skilled position. According to Terry Ferguson and Thomas Cowan, a potter as it related to an iron furnace was a highly skilled craftsman who cast hollow ware at furnaces.<sup>20</sup> This evidence shatters notions that enslaved were simply used for heavy labor. Instead, this research argues that Slaves were needed throughout the entire process of production of iron ore. Moreover, it shows the dynamic of slaves grouped together. For example, we have slaves that were involved in a barter system, hired out slaves, and Skilled craftsman who could have been literate. Vesuvius plantation served as prime location to observe the multifaceted face of slavery in the nineteenth century.

## **Conclusion**



By traveling to Vesuvius, you are visiting a place with powerful cultural, material, and economic meaning. Vesuvius Plantation provides a perfect example of how the people of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ferguson and Cowan, pp. 50.



back country could be revolutionary rather than reactionary, in terms of their involvement and propulsion of various industrial techniques. In 2017, many scholars, me alike say no more... the days of promoting an economic and democratic society and culture without a direct mention of the black and brown hands that took part is over. The mission thus forward is to bring scholars, the public and educators together to study the blended American story through objects such as this fireback. The story is simply incomplete and inaccurate to just mention the Brevards... and the Grahams... Likewise, the story is common to describe the true innovative and tactical individuals enslaved by simply saying that "slaves were slaves". To that I say is a Windsor chair, just a chair made for sitting. If the answer to that question is no then this fireback will serve as the catalyst to truly centering the American story of industrial ingenuity and economic prosperity by examining the material, social and cultural history of the African American and white experiences at Vesuvius Plantation.

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