

## THE ROUGH AND READY IRON FURNACE 1836-1855

Although "gold fever" was running high along Contrary Creek around 1800 gold wasn't the only mineral to catch the attention of the miners. A considerable number of iron deposits were found along the ridges between all branches of Contrary Creek.

In 1835 Mr. James C. Dickinson had been doing some gold mining on his land located on the north branch of Contrary Creek. He called his mine the Triple Fork Gold Mine since it was located where the three spring branches came together that make up the headwaters of the north branch of Contrary Creek.

There is no record of any sizeable amounts of gold being found at the Triple Fork but they did uncover a bed of iron ore.

This must have looked very promising because in June of 1835 Dickinson sold out to Mr. William W. Mitchell, a Fredericksburg lawyer, for \$5,000.00.

It didn't take long for the news of the iron "find" to get around.

In 1836 the Virginia and New England Mining Co. was organized with Stephen Dunnington of New England, Watkins James of Goochland County and Elias Baker of Washington County as partners. Dunnington also brought along several of his brothers. This company traded under the firm and style of W. James & Company.

In October of 1836 they bought a 196½ acre tract of land on the headwaters of north Contrary from William Walton. This tract of land joined the lands of the Triple Fork Gold Mine on the south.

An iron furnace, which they named Rough and Ready, was built in the side of a hill on the north end of their property in sight of the Triple Fork diggings. The tax records show that the buildings were assessed at \$500.00 which indicates that they had a sizeable operation.

At this time the Louisa Railroad's new track had been laid as far as Tolersville and Reuben B. Davis had a "turnout" built for his use. At the request of the Virginia & New England Mining Co., the Louisa Railroad agreed to extend the "Davis Turnout" over to the Rough and Ready Furnace, a distance of some 2,700 feet.

The Rough and Ready seemed to prosper for a time. Their pig iron was stated as being of very high grade and bringing the top price at the Richmond market.

Much of the ore processed at Rough and Ready was mined on their own lands at the beginning. As their own ore supplies dwindled, they bought ore from other iron mines in the area. The Abraham Estes mine, and the Chiles mine along Route 703, and the

### *The Rough & Ready Iron Furnace*

Charles Groom mine along Route 522. There were probably other suppliers as evidenced by many pits located on private farms in the area.

Stephen Dunnington and Virginia Johnson, a daughter of Lewis H. Johnson, were married in 1838. At a sale of his father-in-law's estate Dunnington bought a 153 acre tract along Route 522 and middle branch of Contrary Creek. (Present day Kennedy and Butler farms). He built a house under the large oak trees directly across Route 522 from Dr. Kosmaley's office. He ran a store which was situated in the back yard of the present day Kennedy home, as a commissary for his furnace operation. The store building was probably built by Lewis Johnson about the middle 1820's since he had applied for and received a tavern license at that time.

In 1843 Dunnington bought 113 acres of the Triple Fork Gold Mine property from Mr. Wm. M. Mitchell. Evidently there wasn't as much iron ore on this tract as was expected.

It is interesting to note in passing that in all of his money borrowing deals he always set aside about 8½ acres or so surrounding the furnace and railroad track. These were never included in any of the deeds of trust he gave his creditors.

In 1846 one of his creditors had Dunnington jailed for debt, at which time he lists 311.5 acres. This was put up for sale in January 1847 by Sheriff Patrick Michie and sold. At the auction on 12 January 1847 Watkins James was the highest bidder at \$14.00 for this land! It is not clear how Dunnington came up with the money but he bought out Watkins James' entire interest in Rough and Ready for \$1,902.00. This made Dunnington the sole owner of the Rough and Ready Furnace but it certainly didn't improve his financial problems. In November Watkins James bought back fourteen and seven eights acres from Charles Thompson being part of the Triple Fork land adjoining Dunnington's land. Reuben B. Davis bought the remaining 35½ acres from Thompson on which the Mineral Baptist Church is built today.

In April 1850 Watkins James deeded the 14⅞ acres to Dunnington but reserved the mineral rights.

The iron business must have been at a standstill by 1850. It is possible that the supply of ore had run out. At any rate his creditors were very much alive and complaining.

Dunnington was sued again. This time they listed all his creditors and demanded that he include all his assets including the furnace, the railroad track and the "safety land" around same (8¼ a.). This was the last straw.

In late December of 1850 Dunnington sold three tracts of land

adjoining the Rough and Ready Furnace to three local men, James Holmes, James B. Walton and James Hart. This was a total of about 282 acres at six dollars per acre.

In the summer of 1853 Robert T. Gooch as Trustee sold the Rough and Ready tract (8¼ a.) along with the furnace and the railroad to James Hart.

In the fall of 1853 Hart bought out his partners' interest in the Rough and Ready lands.

Evidently Hart had attempted to operate the furnace for a time. He was buying ore from the mine of Mr. Charles Groom, running up a sizeable bill.

In 1855 Hart deeded Mr. Groom the 153 acre tract on which he was probably living at the time. This was the tract Dunnington had bought of his father-in-laws estate in 1838. (Present day Kennedy and Butler farms).

This was a bad year for Mr. Hart. He probably knew little or nothing about operating an iron furnace and furnace men were in short supply I expect. At any rate he was having financial difficulties and probably marked the end of the line for the Rough and Ready. I have found no record of it having been operated at a later time.

In a deed of trust given to his creditors in 1855 Hart lists all the Rough and Ready lands on west side of Victoria Furnace Road to Tolersville in addition to a 400 acre tract he had bought of Henry Harris in 1854.

Mr. Hart was living with a sister at Marven in Louisa County in 1860 and according to Dr. Harris he died there.

At a sale of James Hart's property in 1866, Christopher Johnson was the highest bidder for all of what had been the lands of Stephen Dunnington - some 518 acres. Johnson had the land transferred immediately to Stephan A. Dunnington of NYC, son of Stephen and Virginia Johnson Dunnington.

In September of 1867 the Dunnington tract was sold to Frederick A. Hemmer, a German mining engineer.

The ruins of the old Rough and Ready can still be seen. A poplar tree has grown up on one side of the furnace wall causing the exposed side of the wall to collapse.

The graded portions of the old railroad are still clearly visible as is the old wagon road which runs parallel with it.

At one point in the wagon road Mr. Hemmer chose to sink a hundred foot mine shaft in the middle of the road. I don't quite understand the logic of this but there it is!

This part of the old furnace land is presently owned by Judge Harold H. Purcell.