The Rise and Fall of Fenwick Mines and the Low Moor Iron Company

Lorraine Taurassi

Anthropology 377
At the start of the nineteenth century, Virginia could still be considered agrarian, self-sufficient with a barter economy, family oriented, and isolated. It was still relatively unsettled, but by 1925 the same people could be characterized as an industrial labor force, dependent on resource extraction industries with its cash economy. It was often nucleated into sex specific task forces, and living in company towns (Barber, p.2).

Coal and timber were key resources in changing southwestern Virginia from the self sufficient, agrarian society that it had been to one with the infrastructure controlled by capitalistic urban industrial centers (Barber, p.1). Iron also played a role, although to a lesser degree.

The iron industry evolved in southwest Virginia through a series of seven periods: Early Settlement Period (1750 - 1830), "Iron" Plantation Era (1830 - 1849), Period of Decline I (1849 - 1860), Civil War Rebirth (1861 - 1865), Period of Decline II (1865 - 1881), and Coke Production Period (1881 - 1920). It was this last period that saw the development of the Fenwick Mines and the Low Moor Iron Company. Both were developed in the late 1800’s, reached their peak in the early 1900’s, and then met their demise in the late 1920’s. By researching these two mining complexes hopefully some clues will be picked up that help us to understand the Longdale Mining Complex better.

No records have been found that explicitly date the beginning of the mining activity at the Fenwick mines (Barfield, p.4). Some
believe that operations began in 1890 or possibly even 1875, but this seems unlikely because the Fenwick Mine Complex land transfer was not made until 1899 (Barfield, p.4). Some mining operations could have occurred prior to this date, but if so it was nothing substantial. Also, a 1907 publication states that mining operations began in 1900 (Barfield, p.4).

The lifespan of the Fenwick Mines falls between the heyday of Virginia’s iron industry, from the years 1900 - 1920 (Barber, p.7). Of the four mines operated by the Low Moor Iron Complex at the time, Fenwick had the most depth. The deposits of iron ore were so “tough and elastic” that crews of men were needed to come into the mine each afternoon to blast in order to break the ore loose for another crew of men to remove it the next day (Barfield, p.9).

The method of mining used in the Fenwick Mines was one that was quite rare to the Oriskany ore mines, called top sliding. William H. Brown Jr. described the method:

“Rooms are driven into the ore and timbers are laid close together on the floor. Upright timbers are also put in to support the roof. After all of the ore is taken out of the room, the timbers supporting the roof are dynamited and the roof and over-burden is allowed to settle. A new room is now driven as before, using the floor timbers of the room above as the roof in the new room.” (Barfield, p.9)

In addition to the iron deposit, the area offered an abundant supply of water that came in handy for ore washing. Also, there was plentiful timber which served to provide lumber for the construction of dwellings and company buildings. There were several structures located close to the main shaft. There was a power house that supplied steam power for lifting cages and
compressed air for the drills, a laboratory used for the immediate analysis of the ore to determine if it was of good enough quality to be mined, and a blacksmith shop (Barfield, p.10).

A Low Moor Iron Company map was discovered which reveals the presence of the spur railroad line from Fenwick Station (also called Barbour's Creek Station) to Fenwick Mine Camp and then up Mill Creek to some of the furnaces at Fenwick (Barfield, p.11). Ore was removed from surface pits and shafts by hand, by mule, and with steam shovels and was then loaded on the dinky line and transferred to the spur line. The ore contained large amounts of sand and clay and the washing operation was necessary to remove these before it was shipped to the furnaces (Barfield, p.11).

About halfway between where the ore was washed and the mine camp there is an area with a pile of rocks on both sides of Mill Creek. These rocks used to support a bridge for a road which forked, one going to Fenwick and the other going up Bald Mountain (Barfield, p.13).

The 1900 census schedules report 37 whites and 30 blacks were listed as mine workers. Nearly all were born in Virginia and all lived in the New Castle Magisterial district. The mining camp grew by four times in the next ten years and the ethnic composition changed to include native born whites, Italians, and blacks (Barfield, p.13). In 1910 Craig County was divided into four census divisions, and this included Simmonsville, Allegheny, New Castle #74, and New Castle #75. In #74 57% of the housing was rental and in #75 40% of the housing was rental. The total amounts to 249 housing units with at least 138 of them easily identified as mine worker houses which are clustered (Barfield, p.13-14).
The clustering seen in these houses suggests that they are company houses, and the majority of the male members living in these dwellings list their occupations as related to mining activities. 1910 was the last year that a census with detailed reports of the mining complex was released. It was during this year that 70 Italians arrived at Fenwick (Barber, p.11).

The most intriguing aspect of the entire mining complex is the human interaction. There were three types of people living and working at Fenwick: blacks, native whites, and Italians. Within the company towns there were three clusters of domestic structures or neighborhoods, and each race dwelled together (Barber, p.12). Native whites resided in the mining town proper while the blacks and Italians lived on the other side of the tracks, practically isolated. Blacks and Italians were also isolated from each other by blocks.

For reasons that are unknown at this time, each nationality lived in different colored houses as well. Whites (including Italians), lived in gray houses, while blacks lived in houses painted red. It has been suggested that due to the linguistic isolation of the Italians, they were considered to be of lower status than the native whites and blacks and were therefore given the most dangerous jobs (Barber, p.12).

Of the 70 Italians living in the mining camp, 63 were male mine workers. The majority of the men were unaccompanied by their families, and evidence of this shows up in that there were no foreign born children attending the school district. Apparently the Italians’ goal was to save $1000 and then to return to Italy where they would be considered rich.

Although the Fenwick mines appear to be racist, informant
interviews reveal that the town was more integrated than the surrounding population centers and that certain activities were completely integrated (Barber, p.13). For example, there was a playhouse in town which was open to the general population, and whites and blacks attended events there together frequently. There were other various social events as well that were attended by both whites and blacks. Even though this seemed to work for the tiny community, this egalitarianism was not readily acceptable outside the small town. It has been suggested that members of the Klu Klux Klan eventually drove the blacks out of town, while the fate of the Italians remains unknown (Barber, p.13).

Production of the mines was greatly reduced in 1913 and the mines were idle in 1914. It is unknown at this point why there was a temporary closure, but in an interview with Kate Layman she said that the miners were loaded on the train and removed from the area during a bad snowstorm and local folklore has it that "they never looked back" (Barfield, p.6). Mining operations started up again in 1915.

With the demise of the iron extraction at Fenwick, the superstructure of the town was effectively erased (Barber, p.13). It seems impossible that so little physical evidence remains where a thriving mine town and mine complex once stood. The U.S. Department of Agriculture aerial surveys show little or no evidence of cultural remains only eleven years after the mines were closed down (Barfield, p.19). There are a few explanations for this. One is that the Low Moor Iron Company sold all of the mine houses to local inhabitants. The labor force moved on while members of the town stayed behind. In some instances the buildings were torn down and rebuilt in other locations keeping
the same exact design. Machinery was relocated, and things like rail cars, rails and even the underground water pipes were dug up and removed as scrap.

Also, in an interview with a man who reportedly worked for the person who bought all of the equipment from the Low Moor Iron Company, he said that the railroad cars and rails were cut up and removed. Even the pipes which supplied water for the ore washer were dug up and removed (Barfield, p.20).

After a mere 76 years, the only surface evidence revealing the past location of Fenwick Mining Complex are tipples, (soil piles), a concrete abutment, and a couple of rocks along the banks of Mill Creek (Barfield, p.20). The heavy forest has grown over what used to be deep mining shafts and a few foundations of structures. When the field was plowed to uncover cultural material objects such as railroad spikes and broken bits of crockery and mason jars were uncovered, but little more. The black cemetery still remains adjacent to the location of the black church, the concrete foundation of the ore washer still can be found, and portions of the railroad bed have become trails (Barber, p.14). One of the most interesting features is the open pit mines that have filled with water and now serve as ponds.

The second site to be looked at is the Low Moor Iron Company. Although in many ways it is very similar to the Fenwick Mines, there also certain aspects about it that vary greatly. For example, Low Moor seemed to be plagued by many more problems than the Fenwick Mines. It was in operation from 1872 until 1930, and it produced only pig iron. It lasted much longer than the Fenwick Mines. Low Moor never made an attempt to produce finished iron
products (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.4). They received their coal from the Kay Moor Mines, a complex located in West Virginia, and had their own limestone.

Low Moor’s fortunes fluctuated during business cycles between 1880 and 1930. It existed through two different time periods, the Period of Decline II and the Coke Production Period. Even though it was one of the larger producers of pig iron in Virginia, it was still minuscule compared to other companies outside of Virginia. Virginia’s mines were just not important nationally, while places like Pennsylvania and Ohio were used throughout the country. The prevalent method of selling products was to use agents, but sometimes Low Moor officials sold their products themselves (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.4). From 1890 to 1910 Dalton Nash & Company were the exclusive eastern agents. Following that Low Moor was handled by Philips Isham & Company in New York.

Low Moor was a company town in every respect. Workers lived in company owned houses, bought their food in company owned stores, and went to a company church (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.3). Like the Fenwick Mines, residents of the Low Moor Iron Company were paid in scrip which they then exchanged for goods and services. Low Moor also had seven or eight stores with quite large inventories.

Low Moor was so under the influence of the mining company that one of the Low Moor Iron Company’s assistant managers also served as the town sheriff (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.4).

One aspect that is practically identical to the Fenwick Mines is the human interaction. Much like Fenwick, the Low Moor Iron
Company apparently was divided into three groups of people: native whites, blacks, and Italians. There was the same color coding for the house and each different nationality was separated. Native Whites and Italians lived in gray houses, and blacks lived in red houses (Klatka).

As mentioned before, many problems stunted the growth of the Low Moor Iron Company and hindered them in more ways than one. The biggest problem over the years was obtaining railroad cars for transportation of the finished stacks. It had its own cars for shipping products and materials from one facility to another, but when a longer haul was needed, the company used the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company. Unfortunately this wasn't a very happy relationship at all times. For instance, Low Moor was constantly complaining to the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad about discrepancies between long haul and short haul rates, and they also were constantly having problems obtaining cars (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.5).

Low Moor also had problems acquiring labor. Sometimes they would try to hire immigrant laborers and then send the men directly to Low Moor from New York City (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p. 6). Many times they would request certain nationalities, assuming for some reason or another that they were better workers than other nationalities. For example, one time "ten Greeks and ten Italians" were requested. Many fled when they learned they would have to work underground (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p. 7).

There were also numerous problems with the labor force that was already employed. The Great Coal Strike of 1902 hurt Low Moor's coal mining operation but by 1903 things were reported as
being "nearly back to normal", according to the mine superintendent (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.7).

The Low Moor Iron Company grew along with rest of the Virginia industry during the 1890's into the 1900's. Although they started with only one furnace in the 1870's, a second was opened in Covington in 1891 followed by a third at Low Moor in 1911. The Low Moor Iron Company soon afterwards became known as the "Pittsburgh of Virginia" (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.7). The production of pig iron at Low Moor rose from 9000 tons in 1870 to 544,034 in 1903. Their most prosperous period fell between 1895 and 1909, right in the middle of the Coke Production Period.

Although it was a time of prosperity of the Low Moor Iron Company, a series of problems still managed to befall them from 1907 to 1917. William W. Hearns, the president of the Virginia based Princess Pig Iron Company, wrote a letter to U.S. Senator Thomas S. Martin, in which he stated:

"There is not a blast furnace in Virginia that is making any money from the manufacture of pig iron. The cause of this is there is an exceedingly low price on pig iron in the country at the present time, and the increased cost of manufacturing is due to the increase in wages in all lines." (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.8)

Prices rose dramatically with the onset of World War I, but in a market report dated November 11, 1916, it was stated that:

"In spite of the high prices, it is not a picnic to be in the iron industry. There is a desperate shortage of cars and equipment in the coal and iron districts, and in consequence there are troubles of all kinds to get materials shipped." (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and
When America became involved with the war, Low Moor received a boost. The government assisted in procuring labor and helped repair its furnaces. The problem of supplies and cars for their shipments, however, plagued them more than ever (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.8). Following the end of the war, the demand for iron fell and a short but extremely severe depression ensued from 1919 until the year 1922. Prices took a huge drop due to the lack of demand and many prewar contracts were forced to be revalued (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.9). It was this four year period that determined the fate of the Low Moor Iron Company.

The company lay idle for approximately 20 months, and then in November 1922 the furnaces were fired up again. Even though prosperity gradually returned, the doomed Low Moor Iron Company never quite recovered. The production of pig iron declined from 544,034 in 1903 to 148,053 in 1923 (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.9). In February 1926 Low Moor officials considered merging with two other companies but it never occurred. By late 1926 the company was in the process of liquidation.

On April 30, 1927, there was a huge warehouse sale at Low Moor, where thousands of screws, pipe fittings, valves, etc. were sold. The last piece of correspondence with Low Moor is dated 1929, dealing with the sale of a machine (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.10).

There are many different opinions and theories as to why Virginia’s iron industry declined. Some say lack of speed,
efficiency, and a decent transportation system caused the demise. C.E. Bertie, secretary of the Virginia Pig Iron Association, claimed it was the tremendous rise in the cost of transportation, stating that “Virginia had no home market” (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.10).

Another problem arose with the increase in taxes that they received. Virginia furnaces were recognized as southern furnaces, but instead of receiving the cumulative 50% increase for southern furnaces, they received an 85% increase equivalent to the northern furnaces (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.10).

The conditions for mining in Virginia were practically ideal. There was an abundance of land and resources for expansion and resources for the manufacture of the iron (Aber, Berkely, Hoerl, Landon, Marowitz, and Parella, p.12). The major internal problem was that of transportation, but it was external developments that caused the final demise of the Low Moor Iron Company.

In terms of actual physical evidence that has been obtained from the site, it appears that there has not been a lot in terms of retaining artifacts. Only a visual survey was carried out in examining the Low Moor Iron Company, and if there was any kind of excavation at Fenwick the topic has been well avoided. It appears that the only surveying that has been done there has been visual as well.

At Fenwick it is mentioned in the report by Lori Barfield that when the field was plowed, railroad spikes, broken bits and pieces of pieces of crockery and mason jars and other bottles were uncovered (Barfield, p.20). Other than that, the forest has taken
the initiative of covering all the other remaining structures and foundations that had been left behind. Without the plowing, little evidence exists that man and this once thriving industry had ever been there (Barfield, p.20).

The Low Moor Iron Company has a substantial amount of documentation on the artifacts that they observed during their visual survey of the mining complex. Among the artifacts observed were domestic structures, three cemeteries, a blacksmith shop, and a church (Klatka). Things such as foundation stones, brick fragments, glass sherds, undecorated whiteware/ironstone ceramic sherds, metal cans, broken canning jars, bottles, and a collapsed brick chimney were removed from the surface of the earth throughout the various structures.

The Low Moor Iron Company and Fenwick Mining Company are great venues of comparison for the Longdale Mining Complex. Coke furnaces were first introduced at Longdale, giving Alleghany County the lead in iron production in the state. Alleghany was the iron capital for several decades, gaining recognition both nationally and locally (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.11). The county’s population increased over 65% in the 1870’s, similar to the growth experienced by the Fenwick Mines in the early 1900’s (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.12).

The Longdale Company operated their own private railroad, approximately 4.25 miles in length and connecting the Longdale Furnace and the Longdale Mines (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.12). Similar to the Low Moor Iron Company, the Longdale Mining Complex made use of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. It was an eleven mile line that ran from its juncture with the railroad at
the confluence of Simpson Creek and the Cow Pasture River, through Longdale, past the Longdale Furnaces, and up to the Longdale Mine (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.12).

It is not stated whether the relationship between the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad and Longdale was a positive one (unlike the Low Moor Iron Company). Regardless, the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad delivered goods to the Longdale community. Things like car loads of lumber were delivered for houses and other construction, and possibly for use in the underground mines (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.13).

Operations at the Longdale mines ceased with the failure of the Longdale Iron Company in 1911. Low Moor leased the ore-lands from 1914 until 1919 (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.14). This was during a period of prosperity for Low Moor, but also the last time of success for the company. 1919 was the year that started the severe depression from which Low Moor never recovered. The failure of the Longdale Iron Company is attributed to its inability to compete with the giant furnaces and steel mills controlled by corporations such as U.S. Steel corporation in Pittsburgh (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.14). Since these corporations were so immense, their mass production of steel drove the value of Virginia iron down to $12.25 per ton, and in the end made the Longdale furnaces noncompetitive and obsolete (Russ, McDaniel, and Upchurch, p.14).

It seems that the Longdale Mining Community followed a path quite similar to that of the Low Moor Iron Company and the Fenwick Mines. It was just about ten to fifteen years earlier. It had the same period of prosperity and experienced a similar decline. It appears that each of these furnaces experienced the same fate.
because of a reason common to all three: that Virginia, although it had the right resources and plenty of them, was just not the industrial giant that it needed to be in order to keep up with the other huge corporations. Surrounded by a multitude of lesser reasons, it all comes down to the fact that Virginia was not prepared to compete with the bigger industries, and met a sad demise because of it.
Bibliography


4. Klatka, Tom. Research Center for Archaeology, Archaeological Site Inventory Forms. Site numbers 44AY262 - 44AY310 Virginia Division of Historical Landmarks.