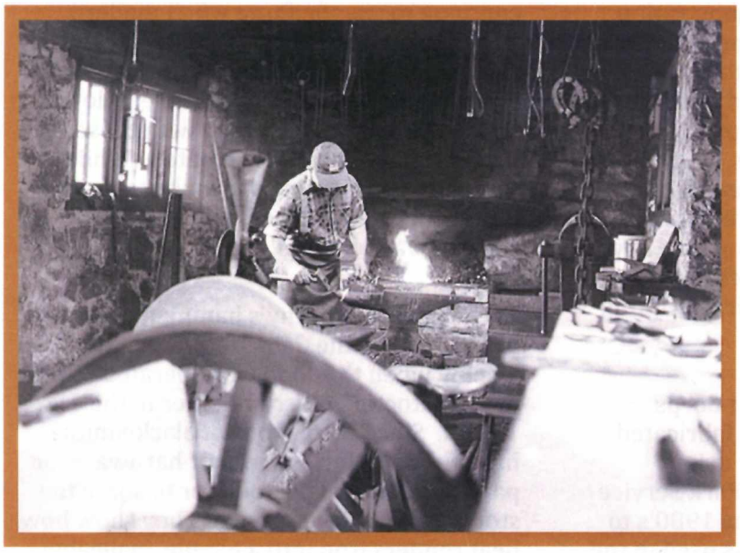
Catoctin Mountain

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Catoctin Mountain Park

The Blacksmith in Society

The glow from the blacksmith's forge led civilization from the dark ages and brought humankind to the standard of living enjoyed today. The blacksmith was the only craftsman to work with the four elemental substances of fire, earth, air and water, which according to the ancients, were combined to create our world. The raw material, iron, came from the earth, the forge held fire, the bellows controlled air and water was essential to cool heated iron and to temper steel. Carpenters, leather workers, farmers, stone masons and every family depended on the blacksmith to craft, repair and maintain metal tools and objects. The skills of the blacksmith made possible the Industrial Revolution that drove him into obscurity.



His hair is crisp and black and long,
His face is like the tan;
His brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns whate'er he can
And he looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man

Week in, Week out from morn to night,
You can hear his bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,
With measured beat and slow,
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,
When the evening sun is low

From "The Village Blacksmith"
By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The First Blacksmiths

It is likely that the first human to discover "magic dirt," that turned to iron when heated, became the first blacksmith. Archaeological evidence shows that iron was probably discovered around 2000 BC. Early ironworkers quickly learned that iron could be heated, shaped and sharpened with relative ease. Those who worked with this "black metal" came to be known as "blacksmiths."

Ironmaking and forging developed during the same time period but independently in Africa, Asia and Europe. People who worked iron comprised an elite social and occupational caste apart from the agricultural worker.

Early blacksmiths were called upon to mediate disputes and perform religious rites. Similar metalworking techniques evolved throughout the Eastern Hemisphere as ideas were shared via trade and war.

The Iron Age came to North America along with the Europeans. Native American Indians had developed architectural and agricultural tools and techniques using stone as a medium. Even today, many applications can be per-formed with equal efficiency using either stone or metal. However, metal is more readily available and lends itself to shaping, tempering and remanufacture.

"What manner of a man was the blacksmith of those early days...?[1]

Most colonial blacksmiths were engaged in a virtual "black market" by the time of the American Revolution. British law prohibited the the manufacture of any iron product with the exception of rough bars. Blacksmiths were determined individuals who ignored this regulation and produced mass quantities of tools and weapons, many of which contributed to American independence.

Blacksmiths were a racially diverse group of whites, mulattos, free blacks and slaves who were valued for the quality of the work performed regardless of their race. It was not unusual for slave blacksmiths to purchase their freedom with wages earned from working extra hours.

Although stereotyped as massive, physical specimens, blacksmiths were of all statures. A typical day involved twelve hours of swinging a heavy sledge, working near extreme heat in a poorly-lit, dirty building. Successful blacksmiths utilized imagination and visualization to fabricate items without manuals or specifications. Blacksmiths who lacked the ability to improvise, or whose workmanship failed, did not stay in business for long.

Since everyone depended on his services, townspeople gathered at the blacksmith shop at all hours of the day. It was a place to talk, to argue politics and to gather gossip.

[1] Watson, Aldren, *The Blacksmith*, pg.3

What did the blacksmith actually make?

Before 1860, it was virually impossible to survive without the services of a blacksmith unless you reverted to the Stone Age. Until mass production, the smithy's most important function was to make the tools of civilization and war.

The smith made hammers, axes, sickles, bits, files and carving tools for farmers and craftsmen; welded and fitted wagon tires and made metal accoutrements for the vehicles of a horse-drawn society; produced nails, without which it would be difficult to construct buildings; designed and fashioned special utensils for cooking.

Eventually, factories turned out tools that were once handmade . The blacksmith developed a new niche, sharpening tools, and repairing equipment for the mining, quarrying, printing and railroad industries.

After World War I, automobiles and technological advances rendered the smithy obsolete. The shoeing of horses, which had been a minor part of the smith's trade, became a major function. Although farrier is the correct term, many people today believe the sole function of the blacksmith is to shoe horses.

Blacksmiths in Catoctin Mountain Park



In 1936, Catoctin Mountain Park started as the Catoctin Recreational Demonstration Area. This Roosevelt-era jobs program employed displaced workers to build cabin camps. Hardware was salvaged from razed buildings to mitigate cost and preserve natural resources. Blacksmiths, employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) reworked this hardware into hinges and latches. This recycled metal may have been used to complete the Blacksmith Shop, one of the first buildings and first working shop to be built in the park.

WPA and Civilian Conservation Corps workers sharpened, repaired , fabricated parts for tools and equipment using traditional methods. National Park Service employees used the forge in the 1980's to create functional fireplace tools used in the park's historic buildings.

Why did National Park Service employees continue to use the forge when modern oxyacytelene and arc welding tools were available? As a traditional organization, the National Park Service strives to employ historic methods consistent with those used when the park was created. While there are cheaper ways to make tools, the forge still provides the best and most reliable way to merge and shape iron.

The ring of the smithy's hammer resounded from the Catoctin Blacksmith Shop weekly when the shop was operated as part of the Catoctin Folkcraft Center in the 1970's. Since then, modern black-smiths have fired the forge to repair hardware for park buildings, make tools, or to share the story of their predecessors. They show how heat renders iron into a pliable, malleable material as part of the park's interpretive program.

The End of an Era

For 150 years, the blacksmith was so entwined with daily life, that he was taken for granted. Most were intelligent, highly creative people who lacked formal education, and because of their success, could not find the time, to document their lives or occupation. They were usually ordinary, law-abiding citizens that seldom earned mention in the local news. Many of the labor-saving devices that grace our lives were developed or improved by a smithy. The transition from smithy to factory was so subtle that few people mourn the passing or even notice that the town blacksmith shop is gone.

My sledge and hammer lay reclined,

My bellows, too, have lost their wind,

My fires extinct, my forge decayed

And in the dust my vice is laid;

My coal is spent , my iron gone

My nails are driven--my work is done.

From *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book, April 1854*

Preserving a Tradition

Nearly a century has passed since the village blacksmith was a vital part of everyday life, still the sounds and smells of the blacksmith shop live on. The forge has passed to artists who have rediscovered the magic powers of heat and hammer that transform iron into visually attractive, durable and functional forms. While traditional apprenticeships remain a practical way to learn the trade, modern craftsmen use modern means to learn and promote their craft. Blacksmith guilds, found throughout the country offer instruction, written guidance and competitions. Several National Park Service Units, including nearby Gettysburg NMP and Harpers Ferry NHP present period blacksmith demonstrations.

Volunteer blacksmiths demonstrate basic forging techniques at the Catoctin Blacksmith Shop on selected dates each year. A series of lesson plans, focusing on the blacksmith and based on the 4th through 8th grade public school curricula, as well as use of the Catoctin Blacksmith Shop are available, upon written request to educational groups. Further information can be found on the NPS website at www.nps.gov/cato or by calling (301) 663-9388