

1809 BLAST FURNACE AND INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

at the

MOUTH OF THE SALMON RIVER

PLATTSBURGH, NEW YORK

By: David Glenn

September 26, 2005

The first blast furnace for the making of iron in the Clinton County area was erected in 1809 and was located at the mouth of the Salmon River in the Town of Plattsburgh. This furnace was the first located in New York State on the western side of Lake Champlain between Crown Point and the Canadian border.

In 2002 the Town of Plattsburgh erected a blue and yellow NYS historic marker to commemorate the site. This was accomplished through the efforts of Town Historian Arnold "Red" Jubert, County Historian Addie Shields and based on the research of local historian, David Glenn. The marker reads as follows:

FIRST BLAST FURNACE

Erected in 1809 by Alfred Keith.

First on Lake Champlain in
northern NY State. Operated by
Keith 1809-1822, Jacob Sax 1822
until destroyed by the flood of 1830.

Retracing the history of the blast furnace, its associated industrial development, along with the people who owned it, operated it and worked at it, has been on going for the past several years. New information is constantly being found and older data revised as a result. This article is but a stop along the way and is the listing of yearly events as we know them at this date. Later research may very well add to or modify what is written.

I am indebted to my neighbor and friend Mrs. Ruth Davis who lives in the Sax house on the corner of Route 9 and the South Junction Road for assistance in locating data and other persons of interest for this article. She put me in touch with an Alfred Keith descendant named John Keith of Largo, Florida who had developed the outline of an article on the same subject. I am pleased to credit John with much original research and for allowing me to review his writings. In late May of this year, I was contacted by Carol White of New Hampshire, a descendant of Luther Drury and Elisha Clark, both of whom operated the furnace in its early days. Carol led me to additional data on both these men and for that I am also thankful. As always, without the encouragement of our County Historian, Addie Shields, and her admonition to use primary sources, none of this would have been written.

1809

In a Deed dated May 15, 1809 (Vol. C, page 422, CCC) William Gilliland ((1768-1847) transferred to Joseph Brown of Pownel, Vermont three small contiguous parcels totaling 3 ½ acres on the north side of the Salmon River between the Plattsburgh Road (Present NYS Route 9) and Lake Champlain. Included was “the privilege of so much water to be taken from the Gilliland dam as may be necessary to turn a trip hammer and bellows wheel without taking so much water from the dam when the same may be wanted to carry a grist mill wheel or furnace.”

This deed tells us that William Gilliland already had a dam and possibly a grist mill on the Salmon River near the location of these lots. If it were there in May then it had to have been there the prior year of 1808 since works such as these were constructed in the warmer weather and lower flowing water of the summer or fall months, rarely if ever in the high waters of spring or cold weather of winter.

A second transfer occurred later that year. In a Deed dated August 18, 1809 (Vol. P, page 166, CCC) William Gilliland transferred twenty acres of land to Alfred Keith of Sheldon, Vermont. This parcel was described as being just south of the Salmon River, some thirty-five rods (577.5 feet) north and south along the lake and north westerly along the river as it winds and turns sufficient to make the twenty acres. Included was the "privilege of a sufficiency of water for a furnace now erected to be taken and used from the mill dam of Gilliland's whenever the furnace shall be in blast or whenever it shall be for the works of said furnace."

By the wording of this deed we can assume that the blast furnace on the south side of the river below the dam, probably on the rocks near the south abutment of the present NYS Route 9 bridge over the river, was erected in the summer and fall of 1809 and was now ready to go into operation. This would confirm the findings of the chapter "Historical Overview of Iron Making" from the book "200 Years of Soot and Sweat- the History of Archeology of Vermont's Iron, Charcoal, and Lime Industries" by Victor Rolando, published in 1992. At page 13 he states "The first blast furnace erected in northern New York State was built about 1809 at the mouth of the Salmon River, just south of Plattsburgh." The reader is encouraged to look to this book for information on iron making, and the construction of blast furnaces. We are also indebted to Mr. Rolando for much of the data on the Keith, Drury, and Sax families.

The construction of this blast furnace is also confirmed by Peter Saily, Esquire, US Customs Collector of the District of Champlain. He wrote a letter from Plattsburgh

dated September 7, 1809 to the US Secretary of the Treasury that “a furnace is erecting and nearly complete in this vicinity.” This letter is found in the earliest editions of Palmer’s “History of Lake Champlain” at the bottom of page 173.

Alfred Keith married Hannah Drury in 1793. He was thought to be the younger brother of Israel Keith who had built a furnace in Pitsford, Vermont in 1791. Alfred was involved with a furnace in Rossie, New York and had his own works at Sheldon, Vermont in 1798.

1810

No data has yet been found.

1811

An Assessment Roll was developed for the Town of Plattsburgh taken between the first day of May and June in 1811. It is reproduced in Hurd’s “History of Clinton and Franklin Counties” of 1880. Luther Drury is listed as owning a house and lot of 3 ½ acres and 1/6th of a furnace. Joseph Brown is not listed. Keth (sic) and Wood are listed as owners of 18 acres and a furnace. Keth is presumed to be a phonetic spelling of Keith. Such misspellings are common in early 19th century documents. No other reference to Wood has been found. There is a Benjamin G. Wood elsewhere in the Assessment but no connection has yet been made. Benjamin Wood was the Town Clerk from 1812-1814. William Gilliland is listed as having a house and farm of 1,625 ½ acres in Friswell’s Patent.

There is no other mention of anyone else owning a furnace in the town and there is no mention of a grist mill, saw mill or forge on these parcels. Other properties in the town show these last three uses.

What a historian can draw from this data is that Luther Drury appears to be a part owner of the blast furnace in 1811 while Keth (sic) and Wood owned the balance

and Keith retained ownership of the property. We do not know who was actually operating the furnace for the first three seasons from its construction in 1809 thru 1811. Plattsburgh did not have a newspaper until the Republican was first published on April 12, 1811. There were no advertisements for the furnace found in the 1811 editions. It is presumed that if the furnace was in blast during these years then the advertising for it could have been by word of mouth or broadsides posted about the village.

1812

The first mention of the furnace is in the Republican in an advertisement. In those days the letter "s" was often printed as "f" which makes it hard for us to read. The ad states: "Furnace in Blast. The public are informed that the Furnace of the subscriber, at Salmon River, near the lake, is now in blast. STOVES, of various fizes, and all kinds of Hollow Ware, kept conftantly for sale, at reafonable prices. Perfons who have contracted for Machinery, are requefted to call for the fame immediately. ELISHA CLARK, Jun. Plattsburgh, Oct. 8, 1812."

1813

From the Republican, an ad as follows: "Plattsburgh Furnace in Blast. THE public are informed that the Furnace of the subscriber, five miles south of the village of Plattsburgh, is now in blast. He has on hand and for fale a general assortment of HOLLOW WARE, and STOVES. Also, Gales' patent BARK MILLS. All kinds of machinery caft at the fhorteft notice. ELISHA CLARK Plattsburgh, July 28, 1813."

This ad appeared just after Murray's Raid of July 31, 1813 as part of the War of 1812. A British force of some 1,400 infantrymen, sailors and marines under the command of

Colonel Murray had entered the village of Plattsburgh and laid waste to a large amount of public and private property. They also had raided properties on Cumberland Head, Point Au Roche, Chazy Landing and had sailed across the lake

to fire upon Burlington. This action must have greatly concerned Albert Keith and Elisha Clark as their blast furnace and its surrounding works could have been a prime target of such a raid whose purpose was to destroy potential war making infrastructure. The only iron making blast furnace in the area located at the mouth of the Salmon River on the edge of Lake Champlain would have made an easy target.

A later ad states: "Plattsburgh Furnace in blast. The Subscriber gives notice that his furnace is now in Blast, where HOLLOW WARE and STOVES, double and single, of different sizes, can be had. Also different Castings, if application is made soon. Said furnace will hereafter be carried on by the Subscriber. LUTHER DRURY. Plattsburgh, Nov. 18, 1813."

These ads tell us that Elisha Clark operated the furnace in 1812 and for the first part of 1813. By November of 1813 Luther Drury had taken over its operation. Alfred Keith still retained ownership of the property. Murray's Raid may have prompted Clark's getting out of the iron making business.

1814

War had come upon the Clinton County area with the British invasion in the late summer. With all of the events leading up to it, it is no wonder that the blast furnace was not in operation until late in the year after the British had been defeated at Plattsburgh and had retreated north back to Canada. Luther Drury placed an ad in the Republican on November 4th which says that the furnace will be in blast "after a long delay, in consequence of the late invasion."

Did items from Drury's business find their way into the ship building and equipping of the opposing forces of the American and British navies and armies? It would not

come as any surprise to find American made hollow ware used by both sides. Trade to the north by area merchants occurred right up to the time of the invasion.

It is hard for us in the 21st century to imagine the turmoil and disruption to life and business that must have occurred when our fore bearers were faced with an invading army.

1815- 1817

Life had returned to normal in the Champlain Valley and the furnace was in blast each of those years under the operation of Luther Drury and his sons, or Luther alone. Late in 1817 Jacob Sax first appeared as an agent for Elisha Clark who has apparently again taken over the operation of the furnace according to an ad of November 3, 1817.

1818- 1822

Clark's second association with the furnace was short lived as Alfred Keith is operating it by May as shown in an ad of May 19, 1818. At some point Jacob Sax joined forces with Keith and becomes involved in the furnace. By an ad of May 31, 1819 we know that the operators are now listed as Keith and Sax. Sax had married Rowena Keith in 1812. She may have been a sister of Alfred's, at least a relative, so the business was staying in the family. About 1820 Sax becomes the sole operator of the furnace and built the stone house that today sits on the corner of Route 9 and the South Junction road. Alfred Keith and his wife Hannah sold the 20 acre property containing the house, the blast furnace, blacksmith shop, trip hammer, forge, mills and associated buildings to Jacob by deed dated February 12, 1822.

1823-1830

The business prospered as Clinton County grew in population. In 1820 the operation employed 17 men. By 1830 they were employing about 40 which made

this works one of the areas larger employers albeit seasonally. Then disaster struck in the form of a summer flood or “freshet” after a few days of heavy rain in late July. On July 24th, 1830 the river rose until it topped the dam, which lay only a few feet west of the furnace, and washed it out. The torrent carried away all of the buildings along the river including the blast furnace, the forge and trip hammer. All of the buildings, materials and machinery were one jumbled mass of debris carried out into Lake Champlain. The operation was a total loss. The only survivors were the house and blacksmith shop on top of the hill.

Sax never rebuilt his business and sold the property in 1832. This ended the industrial development at the mouth of the Salmon River, in the making of iron and iron ore products, after only 21 years of operation.