

Old South iron built on slaves' sweat. Archaeological find: Remains of 15 cabins are evidence of workers at Alabama blast furnaces.

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McCalla, Ala. — Archaeologists sifting the ruins of a small cluster of slave cabins in central Alabama have unearthed an oft-forgotten facet of Southern slavery.

In the South, slavery has been most closely associated with antebellum plantation life. But here, on a hillside just a stone's throw from the massive blast furnaces of the Tannehill Ironworks, the remains of a cluster of simple cabins attest that slaves were also pressed into service in the South's first industrial labor force.

The slaves who lived in these meager cabins — and others like them who labored in Alabama's ironworks before and during the Civil War — were the backbone of an industry that made the iron for Confederate gunboats, cannons, shot and shell.

"This was the beginning of the South's effort to develop the industrial base it needed to catch up with the industrialized North," says archaeologist Jack Bergstresser, the director of the Tannehill Iron and Steel Museum.

Although a nearby slave cemetery, and the general location of the slave housing at Tannehill, has been recognized before, Bergstresser was the first to identify the actual remains of the quarters in the heavily forested 1,200-acre park.

"I was just walking along the slope last winter, and I saw this pile of rocks," Bergstresser said, pointing toward a heap of rock left by the collapse of a stacked stone chimney.

"Then I saw another, and another. It was really exciting."

By the time he had finished, he had located many more rock heaps — two rows on the gently sloping hillside that were the only visible remains of 15 cabins built nearly 150 years ago along the banks of Roupes Creek.

"The homes of men who toiled long, hard hours in the works have lain virtually unnoticed for over a century," Bergstresser says.

"We don't have many records of what happened here when the first blast furnace was built in 1859, but that double row of cabins for the slaves looks exactly what you would find on a plantation," Bergstresser says. "It looks like they simply took the plantation model and applied it here to an industrial setting."

Excavations at the site last month by the University of Alabama's Alabama Museum of Natural History suggest entire families of slaves were moved from the plantation of Ninian Tannehill to provide the initial labor force — perhaps as many as 60 — for the iron works.

Scattered among the rubble of the collapsed chimneys, the excavation team found clear signs of family life: an iron spoon, a child's marble, a copper ring, glass beads, and fragments of cups, plain stoneware, and cheap imported English tableware.

Bergstresser says the production of iron at Tannehill was probably even more grueling than the plantation life the first slaves at Tannehill had been accustomed to.

Huge blocks of sandstone had to be carved from the hillside to build the furnaces. Tons of iron-rich brown hematite had to be excavated from the nearby ridge tops — and hauled by tram to the blast furnace. Acres of trees had to be felled and charred to produce

charcoal to stoke the blast furnaces. Molten iron had to be cast into 90-pound ingots — and then hauled by mule teams to the nearest railroad more than 18 miles away. Sketchy records of the period suggest the first laborers may have had it better than those who followed. By 1863, in a desperate effort to shore up its war machine, the Confederate Congress took control of Southern manufacturing and ordered the construction of two more blast furnaces at Tannehill.

Increased production of pig iron required more workers, which the government acquired by paying plantation owners \$30 a month for the use of their slaves. At the height of production, as many as 600 slaves may have been pressed into service.

Bergstresser says no one knows where or how so many were housed, but he suspects it was in a camplike setting far less comfortable than the cabins now being excavated.

"What we do know is, that by the time Union troops arrived here to destroy the blast furnaces, all of the men had fled," he says. "I suspect that many of them made their way north and put their newfound skills to work in Northern industries."

And there is one other thing that history records — the journal entry of Sgt. George Monlux, 21, of the Eighth Iowa Cavalry, as three companies of soldiers arrived to destroy the iron works on March 31, 1865:

"As we rode up to the works, there was a large collection of colored women in front of the building and one of them addressed me saying, 'What are you all guine to do?'

"I said we were going to burn the iron works and she replied 'I am powerful glad for that.'

" Too many men, she said, had died there in the brief six years that the furnaces had been making iron.

Although Alabama's iron and steel industry continued to grow, the Tannehill works never produced another ounce of iron.

The blast furnaces were restored in the 1970s as the centerpiece of the state park.

But so far, the jumbled remains of 15 cabins — and a slave cemetery with 50 stone markers — are the only tangible evidence of those who labored there.