

HISTORIC HABERSHAM IRON WORKS AND MILLS HABERSHAM COUNTY, GEORGIA

SUBMITTED BY ROBERT M. CAIN

LOCATION

Habersham Mill is nestled at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains and is located directly on the Soque River in Habersham County in northeast Georgia between Clarkesville and Demorest and is Habersham County's oldest industrial site. The mill is situated on a 50-foot fall in the Soque. See maps.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The property consists of twelve structures totaling 191,500 square feet of space. The structures that are no longer extant are the Machinist House [MH], all Mill Village houses [on this property], hotel/boarded house for ballplayers [see photo], one-room "Little Red" school house [see photo], Habersham Mills School [see photo].

These historic buildings sit on 45+ acres of rolling hills with two streams, a spring and meadows. The main thoroughfare through the property is now privately owned by the Habersham Mills Homeowners Association [HMHA] (of which Habersham Mill is a member) whose members now own the 1400 acres of former mill property.

HISTORY

Iron

For 168 years, this site employed the citizens of Habersham County with the maximum employment in 1945 of 300 individuals. When Habersham County was settled by white settlers in the early 1800s, a great demand for iron products was created. There was no known iron in Northeast Georgia, however, and iron implements were shipped by boat up the Savannah River to Augusta and from there by wagon to Athens and thence to Habersham County by wagon, a four-day trip. Later, lured by reports of iron ore deposits, Jacob Stroup moved to the area in the mid 1820's. Stroup, a Pennsylvanian who created iron works in South and North Carolina, started Stroup Iron Works in Habersham County in 1831 (which, after financial difficulties, acquired new investors and became Habersham Iron Works and Manufacturing Company) building the first iron furnace in the state of Georgia. Jarvis Van Buren, a cousin of President Martin Van Buren and a pioneer eastern railroad man, arrived in 1838 to operate the Iron Works for its stockholders who included John C. Calhoun. The iron mill operated for a few years, closed and reopened during the War Between the States when guns, cannon and ammunition were urgently needed for the Confederacy. Some researchers claim the works were destroyed by Union troops after the war was over.

The Iron Works consisted of "...a forge and furnace, and various workshops, to consume that part of the iron which is not sold in bars and castings." The low dam on the property crossing the Soque diagonally above the falls was probably constructed for use by the iron foundry, supplying water for the water wheel which operated bellows that furnished air for the foundry's blast furnace. Although no major portions of the forge and other facilities remain, the current owners of the Mill have found extensive slag, a byproduct of the smelting process, as well as casting and pig iron artifacts on the south end of the existing mill and river fall immediately adjacent to the old water wheel site. The furnace was constructed of stone and most likely was re-

used in building the foundations for the Porter Manufacturing Company woolen textiles mill.

Jacob Stroup and his family left Habersham County in 1837, established an iron foundry on the Etowah River (now known as Cooper Iron Works---the restored Cooper Iron Works furnace indicates how Habersham's furnace was constructed), then continued on to Birmingham. His knowledge and expertise was critical to establishing iron foundries across the South.

Wool

By 1882, Habersham Iron Works and the property were acquired by J. H. Porter under the corporate name of Porter Manufacturing Company. Porter Manufacturing Company also used the trade name of Soque Woolen Mills. A water wheel powered, stone foundation-walled, wood-framed woolen spinning and weaving mill (Mill1) was built on the site of the former foundry and soon after a similar second mill (Mill2) as well as a wooden dam were built upstream. Porter constructed 25 Mill houses, a company store/post office, a church and a school (originally called Falling Waters School, renamed Habersham Mills School). Almost all the mill houses and the school have been demolished.

Cotton

In 1906, S.Y. Stribling Sr., President of Roswell Manufacturing Company (representing majority shareholders Abner W. Calhoun, Alex C King and Jack J. Spalding), came to Habersham to look at the possible purchase of Porter Manufacturing, and on February 7, 1906 purchased the company for \$38,000.

After the purchase, one of the first changes made was to convert the mill from wool to cotton yarn. In the process, Mill2 was disassembled and moved to the site of Mill1.

In the early years of the cotton mill's operation, bales of raw cotton [11 cents/lb] were received at the Habersham Station of the Tallulah Falls Railroad located on US 441 at the intersection of Habersham Mills Road three miles south of Clarkesville [where Mount Carmel Baptist Church sits today] and transported by wagon to the mill. Manufactured yarn was sent back to Habersham Station for shipment.

Until 1915, when it was converted to electricity, the mill was powered by a water wheel. All employees who lived in the mill village were provided electricity free of charge. The mill village originally had 25 houses. In time an additional 95 houses, a company store and a one-room schoolhouse were constructed. In 1921 a new schoolhouse was built for grades one through seven. The mill had its own baseball field, stands and team. Johnny Mize, a future Hall of Famer from Demorest, played on the field during the late 1920's and later played first base for the St. Louis Cardinals and New York Giants.

Historical Significance

- The Habersham Mill site as the oldest industrial site in Habersham County, the first iron foundry in Georgia, and historical links through the foundry builders and investors (Jacob Stroup, John C. Calhoun and Jarvis Van Buren) to other early foundries across the south are a landmark in the development of the industrial base of the South.

- Habersham Iron Works' manufacturing contributions to the Confederate war effort during the Civil War are of historical significance and measures should be taken to preserve any remaining components and artifacts.
- Habersham Mill represents a considerably intact collection of southern industrial mill and outbuilding types and was the largest employer in Habersham County until the date of closing in 1999. Through the ingenuity and flexibility of the various mill owners the mill successfully made remarkable transitions to various types of industrial production (from water driven equipment to electrical power through construction of the mill's own dam and generators), industrial use transitions (including production of a variety of iron products to woolen yarn and fabrics to cotton fabrics and yarn and finally to cotton/polyester yarn) thus staying in operation considerably longer than almost all comparable facilities in the region.
- Investors in the conversion of the Porter Manufacturing Company works to cotton yarn (Abner W. Calhoun, Alex C. King and Jack J. Spalding) provide a case study in how the business interests of Georgia's post Civil War leaders influenced the development of the state.

Architectural Significance

- Habersham Mill's heavy timber and masonry gable-end construction represents a historic building type rapidly disappearing in the region. The mill's old growth heart pine timbers are significant in their own right as insitu examples of a vanished building material.
- All of the houses in the Mill village were wood frame and most were "shot-gun" houses, a vernacular to the American south.
- The Post Office was built in the late 1800s, had its own zip code [30544] and operated continuously for 109 years. It was also the gathering spot for the villagers and housed the company store, meat market, canteen and ice house.

Social Significance

- Habersham Mill, for many decades the largest employer in the region, remains a social touchstone for regional residents. Almost all of the current residents of the area worked for or have family members and friends who worked for the mill. Reminiscences and stories regarding the mill and mill life are pervasive in the culture and a Mill "Homecoming" is celebrated every year wherein village workers and their descendants reconnect and visit the Habersham Mill graveyard to lay wreaths. Two books have been published about the life of the Mill and its workers: *A Story That Shall Never Die – Habersham Mills History & Gossip* published 2007 and *The Time That Was-The Habersham Mills Story* published in 2012.
- Every day of the entire 93 years of the Mill's existence at least one member of the Stribling family was employed by the Mill. The Stribling, Calhoun, King, Spalding and Banks families and their descendants were bound to the Mill.

