



THE VILLAGES GEM & MINERAL SOCIETY – Field Trip Information

MARYLAND



Furnace Town Living Heritage Village

3816 Old Furnace Rd., Snow Hill, MD,
410 632 2032 furnacetown.org

Nassawango Iron Furnace

From 1828-1850 the Nassawango Iron Furnace was in its heyday. Many workers – miners, sawyers, colliers, molders, draymen, and bargemen – labored to make iron. They gathered bog ore from Nassawango swamp, brought clam and oyster shells up the canal via the Pocomoke River from the Chesapeake Bay, and made charcoal in the Pocomoke Forest.

These raw materials were loaded into the Iron Furnace from the top, heated to 3,000 degrees, and the two resulting liquids were drawn off at the bottom of the furnace. Slag was cooled and tossed into the swamp. Iron was poured into molds and loaded onto barges which were towed down the canal by mule to waiting ships for transport to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York.

As you walk up the ramp to the top of the furnace, look at the carts near the ramp base. Imagine them filled with charcoal, bog iron ore and shells, and then pulled up to the top of the ramp. Look in the mirror at the top of the furnace and imagine interior temperatures of 3000 degrees Fahrenheit.

The Nassawango Iron Furnace was erected in 1830 by the Maryland Iron Company to smelt iron from the bog ore formations in the immediate vicinity. It is the only furnace in Maryland ever to make extensive use of bog ore. It operated only until 1849, and was reported to be in dilapidated condition by 1859.

The furnace produced about 700 tons of iron per year, but the quality and distribution of the bog ore may have caused the several financial failures that the ironworks underwent.

The most significant fact about the furnace is that it made use of hot blast techniques only a few years after the idea was developed in England in 1828-1830. If the Nassawango Furnace was built with the hot blast gear installed from the beginning, and not later converted, it would have to be one of the first hot blast furnaces in America. Even if the equipment were added late in the life of the furnace, it would still qualify as a very early example of the hot blast technology. But further research indicates that the blast apparatus was likely added to the existing stack during a time of ownership change, either in 1837 or 1840.





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Furnace Town Living Heritage Village(Continued)

Maryland Iron Company

Furnace Town (also called Nescongo or Nasseongo) was a company town built by the Maryland Iron Company. About 300 people lived and worked here. Families tended gardens, hunted for sustenance, kept house, cooked, and cleaned. Children did chores, went to school (sometimes), and played. Contemporary reports paint a picture of small neat yards and flowers in bloom amid the noisy industry. There were blacksmiths, broom makers, wainwrights, wheelwrights, bakers, cobblers, coopers, and weavers among the skilled workers.

By 1850 bankruptcy was declared. The sale advertisement listed 7,000 acres embracing immense beds of iron ore. Included were the furnace, the grist mill and saw mill, the ironmaster's mansion, houses, store, barns, buildings, tools, 21,000 bushels of charcoal, and 1,650 tons of ore.

Nearly all of the residents moved away to seek employment. A few families stayed on to run a boarding house and the grist mill. By 1929, only the foundations of the buildings and the furnace remained. All of the wooded structures had rotted away. Restoration work began with the Worcester County Historical Society in the 1960's. In 1982, Furnace Town Foundation Inc. was formed to own, operate, and interpret the museum historic site.

Furnace Town Living History Village preserves our shared cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations. With our collection of historic nineteenth-century buildings and artisans' studios surrounding the Nassawango Iron Furnace, we are a learning center for the study of our history, and it provides a concrete basis for ideas and traditions that help inform who we are and where we came from.

