

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## The Sapona Iron Company Of Chatham County

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After the Civil War began, there were several valiant efforts expended to exploit the coal and iron resources of Chatham County for the benefit of the Confederacy, largely because of the previously documented, glowing descriptions of those resources that had come to the attention of the Congress of the United States in the late 1850s.<sup>1</sup> One such venture was the Sapona iron furnace at Ore Hill (now Mt. Vernon Springs).

After pulling together the documentary material available to me as a basis for preparing this story, it became apparent that there were two loops of information, seemingly about the same furnace—both based on contemporary documents—instead of one seamless set of data where all of the dates, names, and events would fit together chronologically when assembled, regardless of source. The two loops of data surely describe the same furnace, yet are as disassociated as are the similar poles of two magnets. One loop consists of information about the Sapona Iron Company's ownership of the "Sapona furnace," and the other loop describes operations of undoubtedly the same furnace, during the same overall time-span, under the name "Deep River Ironworks" by Benjamin J. Jordan & Co. Here, I will attempt to describe the original entity and the two later entities, "Sapona" and "Jordan," which introduce the confusion.

### The Chatham Ore Hill Company

The earliest reference to what was later called the Sapona furnace appeared in the Fayetteville *Observer* on 8 July 1861: "At Ore Hill, 10 miles north of Deep River, a furnace is being put up and will work in about two weeks. Ore here is very superior and was used during the Revolution."

On 30 September the *Observer* reported: "...[the]

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blast furnace is now in operation using brown hematite ore...one mile from Mt. Vernon Springs...Mr. Babbington in charge...in operation casting pots, pans and andirons."

On 14 October the *Observer* reported that: "The first consignment of pig iron from Ore Hill—1600 pounds—[was sent to] a foundry in Wilmington. The property is owned by a Chatham company, Hugh W. Dixon is agent, Col. Babbington is Superintendent...present 15 tons/week to be more than doubled in 2 weeks after hot blast is complete. Casting of pig will be the principal business." An advertisement by the Chatham Ore Hill Company in the *Observer* on the same day stated essentially the same facts but added, belying the last sentence of the news item, "ovens, plow castings, sad irons, wagon boxes and mill and factory gear."

Hugh W. Dixon was referred to as the agent of the Tick Creek-Ore Hill Company in a deed that transferred the mining rights on an ore tract on Ore Hill and the adjacent furnace tract upon which now stand the ruins we call the Sapona furnace, and between January and September of 1861, that furnace was built.

Dixon and three others sold the two tracts to the Sapona Iron Company on 5 July 1862.<sup>2</sup> No further information was found about the Chatham-Ore Hill or the Tick Creek-Ore Hill Company, but clearly the operations predated and used the same furnace as the later operations of the Sapona Iron Company.



Sapona Iron Furnace - Ore Hill  
(From photo in prospectus of N.C. Steel & Iron Co., c. 1890)



**List of Contracts made by Secretaries of War as furnished to the Ordnance Bureau and now on file in this office.**

| By Whom Made            | Names of Contractors | Date of Cont.         | Nature of Contract        |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Secry of War            | Mark A. Cooper       | Ap <sup>l</sup> 21/61 | Columbiads &c             |
| D <sup>o</sup> (L.P.W.) | J.R. Anderson & Co   | May 2/61              | " Carriages &c            |
| D <sup>o</sup> (L.P.W.) | Jones McElwaine & Co | July 13/61            | Muskets & Rifles          |
| D <sup>o</sup> (L.P.W.) | Geo. H. Giddings     | " 16/61               | Apt <sup>d</sup> Supplies |
| D <sup>o</sup> (J.P.B.) | J.R. Anderson & Co   | Octo 26/61            | Shot & Shell              |
| D <sup>o</sup> (J.P.B.) | Spiller & Burr       | Nov 30/61             | Revolving Pistols         |
| D <sup>o</sup> (J.P.B.) | James E. Hoyt, et al | Jan 6/62              | Iron                      |
| D <sup>o</sup> (J.P.B.) | B. J. Jordan         | " 24/62               | Pig & Gun Iron            |
| D <sup>o</sup> (J.P.B.) | Colin McRae          | May 14/62             | Iron, Guns, Shot&c        |
| D <sup>o</sup> (J.P.B.) | Sam P.C. Marshall    | June 6/62             | Pig & Iron (Guns)         |

...[total of 18 entries]

Ordnance Office  
Richmond, Dec 13, 1862

**Hoyt, Murdock and the Washingtons**

James E. Hoyt, William Murdock, John C. Washington, and George Washington of North Carolina contracted on 6 January 1862 with the Secretary of War to furnish iron.<sup>3</sup> Their contract was the seventh ordnance supply contract written after the formation of the Ordnance Bureau.<sup>4</sup>

A month after signing the iron contract with the government, Hoyt, Murdock, and the Washingtons began jointly to purchase properties, probably thought to be ore-bearing.<sup>5</sup> Several of the deeds for these tracts were witnessed by B. B. Babbington, the furnace operator of the Chatham-Ore Hill Company.

Hoyt, Murdock, and the Washingtons then incorporated the Sapona Company on 9 May 1862.<sup>6</sup> The incorporators were granted advances of \$10,000 on 24 May and another \$10,000 on 27 May 1862 toward their ordnance contract by the Secretary of War.<sup>7</sup> These advances were probably used for the purpose of purchasing the 12-acre tract with the furnace and mineral rights on the 137-acre ore tract adjacent to the furnace.<sup>8</sup>

Now the Sapona Company had access to proven deposits of ore close to the furnace. The adjacent ore tract was part of a 606-acre tract owned and used by John Willcox as the source of ore for his furnace on Tick Creek at Ephraim's Creek (now Evan's Creek) during the Revolutionary War.<sup>9</sup>

The Fayetteville *Observer* reported on 3 June 1862 that the Western Rail Road was surveying a line for its extension to Thomasville and that the road was taking bids for its construction. On 13 October 1862 the *Observer* said that the railroad contracted with Washington and Company to extend the road from Egypt [now Cumnock] to Ore Hill. On the same day, John Washington and William Murdock advertised in the *Observer* "to hire 100 able bodied men" to build the extension, but the road was not extended to Ore Hill until 1879. On 9 May 1864 the State authorized the Sapona Iron Company to increase its capital stock to \$3.0 million.<sup>10</sup>

The only record I have found of iron sold by the Sapona Iron Company is for about 8 tons of pig iron sold to the Confederate government at Raleigh on 1 January

1863.<sup>11</sup> Its being turned over at that time seems to confirm that the furnace was then also operating under another name, as will be explained next.

**Benjamin Jordan, Cavalier Adventurer**

Benjamin J. Jordan was an ironmaker who had operated the "Dolly Ann" furnace near Covington, Virginia, before becoming the largest stockholder in the Endor Iron Company and the designer of its furnace in Chatham County.<sup>12</sup> The Jordan name was famous in Virginia for ironmaking, several Jordans of several generations having operated furnaces there.<sup>13</sup> Jordan became associated with the Endor Iron Company in January 1862 after contracting singly, in his

own name, to produce pig iron for the Secretary of War.<sup>14</sup> The J&D McRae Company put up \$200,000 as "securities" to cover an advance of \$100,000 made to Jordan by the government to build "his" furnace.<sup>15</sup> He began construction of the Endor furnace on Deep River, 12 miles from Ore Hill, in March, and he left the Endor Company in early June 1862, when the furnace was probably only ten feet out of the ground.

Donald MacRae, the president of the Endor Iron Company, reported to company management in Wilmington on 6 June 1862 that "Mr. Jordan went over to Ore Hill on the 4th. He missed me to inform me before going, and on his return informs me he has bot out Pace's lease of Ore Hill on his own acc't and intends going up there. He says our going on appeared so uncertain that he felt bound to have something to do & therefore bought. He also [saw] Washington & Hoyt as they are in a bad fix as to location and ore [and] proposed they should buy us' out, which they, he says, appeared to favor and promised to come down last of next week to look round & wish us to be prepared with an offer."<sup>16</sup> [Text abridged by author.]

County records show that Jordan misinformed MacRae about buying Pace's lease. Pace sold his interest in the Ore Hill tracts to the Sapona Iron Company on 5 July 1862, not to Jordan in early June.<sup>17</sup> Then, in another letter on 6 June, datelined Farmville, to Col. John McRae, his uncle and a stockholder in the Endor Iron Company, Donald MacRae wrote: "[Jordan] expects to go to Wilmington on next Monday to see Hart & Bailey [owners of a large foundry and machine shop] about iron and to arrange for advances...."<sup>18</sup>

It is uncertain what was going on at that time, but it is reasonable to believe that the Sapona group was, in early June, in a "bad fix as to location and ore," as Benjamin Jordan had suggested to Donald MacRae. Only between 21 June and 5 August had they purchased the mineral rights of a 137-acre tract adjacent to the furnace, and by October they found it necessary to contract for building the extension of the Western Rail Road from Egypt to their furnace.

However, what Jordan did next stretches the imagination. On 4 August 1862, under letterhead of the "Deep



River Iron Works," signed by Jordan as B. J. Jordan & Co., Jordan pleaded with the Secretary of War to exempt his men from the Conscript Act, because the furnace would have to be shut down, after "getting our furnace in operation—which we expect to be able to do (if not interrupted) by the first of next month." He said that such action would be "ruinous [if] the men [were] taken off but for a day...." On 8 August, the Secretary of War endorsed the letter, saying "direct [Major Mallette, the conscription officer] to [approve] exempt services [for those] entitled to exemption."<sup>19</sup> Was Jordan using the name of the Deep River Iron Works to mean the Sapona Ironworks? Why didn't Hoyt, Murdock, and the Washingtons write such a letter in behalf of the Sapona Ironworks? I don't know. Were there two furnaces at Ore Hill? Not likely.

Jordan's phrase "getting our furnace in operation" suggests that the Sapona furnace was suffering some sort of outage. Possibly it had not really been productive since its token launch during the previous October. It seems that if there was only one furnace at Ore Hill, Jordan had moved in on the floundering Washington & Hoyt organization and identified himself—within two months—as being in charge of the operation. Not only that, he identified the Sapona furnace as being the Deep River Ironworks and used his own corporate name, different from the corporate name of those who entered the government contract. The switch in the name of the ironworks without any recorded ownership change was the root cause for considering that there may have been two furnaces at Ore Hill. It is now concluded that such action was an example of Jordan's cavalier attitude toward his associates and undertakings.

In mid-September 1862 "Jordan...found a vein of ore which he is working at Wicker's adjoining the Dye Place [just west of present-day Colon]. He is hauling ore from there now and will get his furnace in blast this [month]. He has been successful at Richmond with the blowing cylinders. I think he might get ready to start by November."<sup>20</sup> The fact that he hauled ore by wagon 15 or more miles, including a river crossing, from the Wicker site to Ore Hill could indicate that he did not have the rights to mine the 137-acre tract which contained Ore Hill.

Walter McRae, the secretary of the Endor Iron Company, wrote to his father Col. John McRae in early November, saying: "Jordan has not got his furnace in blast yet since he burned out his hearth. I guess the trouble is money, he has been in Fayetteville for some time and report says he is on a considerable spree."<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Jordan must have been a mover and a shaker.

While there are no records of production or sale of iron for the Sapona Iron Company after the January 1863 delivery of 8 tons, as noted earlier, there are several documents relating to sales of pig iron by B. J. Jordan & Company. In April 1863 Jordan sold about 80 tons of various grades of pig iron to the Niter & Mining Bureau at Greensboro under the name of B. J. Jordan & Company, which tends to confirm the suspicion that the Sapona furnace was producing

under more than one name.<sup>22</sup> The account book of the Charlotte, North Carolina, navy yard carries a somewhat cryptic entry for the expenses of an agent on a trip from, and return to, Goldsboro from 23 April to 5 May 1863. The purpose of the trip was to visit the "Deep River Iron Mines after iron," and the itinerary included: Goldsboro, Warsaw, Wilmington via steamer to Fayetteville, McIv'er's [Depot, about one mile from Endor] and return along the same route.<sup>23</sup> Because the Endor iron furnace was inoperative at that time, it is supposed that the target of this trip was the Jordan's Deep River Ironworks, by then becoming known to the Navy Department. The Charlotte Navy Yard received about 11 tons of pig iron on 4 May and 20 tons of pig iron on 5 May 1863 from B. J. Jordan & Company.<sup>24</sup>

It is not known when Jordan left Chatham County. The next dated document I found about Jordan placed him in Alabama in September 1865, where he had bought into the three Tannehill furnaces outside of Tuscaloosa.<sup>25</sup>

No documents have been found thus far that directly link Jordan with the Sapona furnace or its owners, although he must have been so linked. The Jordan adventure forms the second loop found in my research, so distinctively separate from the Hoyt, Murdock, and Washingtons ownership of the Sapona furnace.

#### Sapona After the War

No operating records or other documents have been found relating to the Sapona furnace following the war. Because there was virtually no market for iron in a devastated economy and slave labor was no longer a given, the furnace was probably shut down or else operated sporadically. Samuel H. Wiley of Rowan County and Jonathan Newlin of Alamance County purchased five of the Sapona tracts at a Sheriff's auction sale in 1869.<sup>26</sup> The *Branson Directory* of 1869 indicated that Murdock & Washington operated an iron mine at Ore Hill but did not cite the Sapona furnace. In 1870, William Murdock and ten others incorporated the Ore Hill Mining Company.<sup>27</sup> At present I have no information about this company.



Remains of Rock Furnace - Ore Hill (1976)  
(Courtesy of Wade H. Hadley, Jr.)



Thus ended in the depths of the Reconstruction period, without a market, another of the enterprises formed in the Deep River region to support Southern independence. No production figures, lists of products made, or market disbursement information have been found for this company which, at its peak, with any sort of efficiency must have employed between 60 and 100 men.

In this and previous papers I have called into question the reported quantity of ore mined and pig iron produced in the Deep River region. The Sapona furnace, like the Endor furnace on Deep River, was a development within a confederacy of states determined to defend its beliefs, which required the development of such resources as were necessary for that defense. In the long run it was found that the quantity of the resources available in this region, necessary for the ever-increasing demand for iron products nationally, could not be furnished in the volumes to match those available in other sections of the country so as to make economic their continued operation in this region.

### NOTES

1. P. M. Hale, *In the Coal & Iron Counties of North Carolina* (Raleigh: P. M. Hale, 1883). See Emmons, Laidley, and Wilkes reports.

2. Chatham County Register of Deeds, Book AN, p. 414, July 1862. (Deeds hereafter referred similarly as CCRD AN/414.)

3. List attached to letter, Col. Josiah Gorgas to James A. Seddon, 13 Dec 1862. Record Group 109 (Letters Received by Secretary of War, M-437), File 1862-G-872, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (National Archives will hereafter be referred to as NARA.) The original contract has not been found.

4. The sixth contract was to Spiller & Burr for revolvers. Spiller was one of the third group of owners of the Endor Iron Works. Some of Spiller & Burr's machinery is believed to have been scheduled to move from Columbia, S.C., to Gorgas or Lockville in Chatham County at the end of the war. See "A Letter from Chatham County," *Chatham Historical Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1, November 1993, and Robert Wiesner and Matthew W. Norman, "Deep River Bayonet Operations of Heck, Brodie & Company during the Civil War," *Chatham Historical Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 3, November 1993. The eighth ordnance contract was Benjamin J. Jordan's 24 Jan 1862 contract, which was the basis of building the Endor furnace.

5. CCRD: AM/193 (Feb 1862), AM/195 (Apr 1862), AN/413 (Feb 1862), AO/24 (Feb 1862).

6. North Carolina Public Laws, 1862-63, Private Laws, Chapter 21, p. 78, ratified 9 May 1862.

7. Capt. [Smith] Stansbury's vouchers to Jas. E. Hoyt, Attorney, #1763, 24 May 1862, #1770, 27 May 1862. NARA: Record Group 109, Citizens File M-346, under Hoyt. In these vouchers, the contract is stated as being for iron, shot, and shell.

8. CCRD: AN/352 (Jun 1862), AN/414 (Jul 1862), AN/463 (Jul 1862), AO/172 (Aug 1862).

9. George W. Willcox, *John Willcox, 1728-1793*, (n.p.: Historical Research Company, 1988), p. 252.

10. North Carolina Public Laws 1864-65, Private Laws, Chapter 17, p. 25, ratified 9 May 1864.

11. Voucher for delivery of 7.5 tons of pig iron, 1 Jan 1863. NARA: Record Group 109, Citizens File M-346, under Sapona Iron Company.

12. For Dolly Ann Furnace, see J. P. Lesley, *Iron Manufacturers Guide* (New York: John Wiley, 1859), p. 71; for largest stockholder, see Journal of the Endor Iron Company, p. 1, in Hugh MacRae Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (Hereafter cited as MacRae Papers, Duke University.)

13. J. P. Lesley, *Iron Manufacturers Guide*, p. 70-74; Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), Chapter 5 (*passim*), p. 92; Kathleen Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era* (New York: Century, 1931), p. 134, 135, 309.

14. Benjamin Jordan's contract with J.P. Benjamin, Secretary of War. NARA: Record Group 109 (Secretary of War Letters Received), File M-437, Doc. 80-J-1862.

15. Donald MacRae to G.W. Randolph, 20 Sep 1862, NARA: Record Group 109 (Confederate Secretary of War, Letters Received), File M-437, Doc. 1488-M-1862.

16. Donald MacRae at Endor to [Management of the Endor Iron Company in Wilmington], 6 Jun 1862. MacRae Papers, Duke University.

17. CCRD: AN/414 (Jul 1862).

18. Donald MacRae at Farmville to Col. John McRae, 6 Jun 1862. MacRae Papers, Duke University.

19. B. J. Jordan at Deep River Iron Works to G. W. Randolph, 4 Aug 1862. NARA: Record Group 109 (Secretary of War, Letters Received), File M-437, Doc. 302-J-1862.

20. John Colin McRae at Endor to Donald MacRae at Wilmington, 17 Sep 1862. MacRae Papers, Duke University.

21. Walter H. McRae to Father [Col. John McRae], 4 Nov 1862. MacRae Papers, Duke University.

22. Voucher for delivery of 80+ tons of pig iron, 6 Apr 1863. NARA: Record Group 109, Citizens File M-346, under B. J. Jordan & Co.

23. NARA: Record Group 45 (Confederate Naval Records), M-1091, Roll 33, Doc. 0217.

24. NARA: Record Group 45 (Confederate Naval Records), M-1091, Roll 33, Doc. 0267.

25. James R. Bennett, *Old Tannehill* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Jefferson County Historical Commission, 1986), p. 79.

26. CCRD: AN/465 (Sep 1869).

27. N.C. Public Laws, 1869-70, Private Laws, Chapter 44, p. 75.

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