



Batsto Village
Jewel of the Pines

Barbara Solem

Photographs by Albert D. Horner



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To Budd Wilson,
the person who knows and loves Batsto best
and who graciously shares his knowledge
with anyone who asks

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Introduction

Batsto Village, located in the heart of the New Jersey Pine Barrens, is an historic site teeming with early American history. The story of Batsto is the story of how hearty men and women harnessed the natural resources of the region and used them to help build a nation. First used by Native Americans for short visitations, Batsto became an ironworks village in 1765 when Charles Read, a prominent businessman and farmer, and a gentleman involved in all aspects of New Jersey colonial government, built an iron furnace there. Read, who was familiar with the Pine Barrens landscape, knew there were large stores of bog ore on the edges of the streams and rivers. He also knew there were vast stands of pine woods which could be turned into charcoal to fuel the furnace. And there was plentiful water in the streams and rivers to operate the water wheel that powered the furnace bellows.

The village, established 10 years before America declared its independence, was crucial in helping a young colony free itself from the yoke of the mother country. Batsto played an essential role in the Revolutionary War by being a principal arms supplier for the Continental Army. Its shipping landing, located at The Forks on the Little Egg Harbor (now referred to as the Mullica River), less than a mile from the village, was a haven for smugglers and privateers considered so important that a British fleet was sent to wipe it out. Even Benedict Arnold, well known for his betrayal of George Washington, made an appearance.

Eighty years later, when a richer ore and a more efficient fuel in the form of anthracite coal was discovered in Pennsylvania, Batsto's dying iron industry was replaced with a glass works, an industry also dependent on the natural resources of the region. Batsto, now a tourist destination deep in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, was once a place vital to the burgeoning independence and economy of a new nation.

Today, Batsto is an open-air museum where visitors can travel back in time to experience a bygone era. Nestled near the southern border of Wharton State Forest, the village is surrounded by thousands of acres of dense pine forest. Adding to this natural landscape, meandering, tea-colored streams and rivers course through its thick woodlands. With Batsto's unique ecology and history, we are most fortunate that the state of New Jersey has seen fit to preserve it for the enjoyment and education of all its citizens and, indeed, for posterity.

In the Beginning

Batsto lies within the geologic region known as the Atlantic Coastal Plain. Approximately 100 million years ago this area was covered by oceans that were alternately rising and retreating. With each submergence a new layer of earth was laid down, resulting in more than 15 strata of silts, sands, and clays. Approximately five million years ago the seas receded from the Atlantic Coastal Plain for the last time, leaving the porous and nutrient-leached silica sands and the deeper water-saturated sands that today make-up the huge fresh water aquifers beneath the Pine Barrens.

During the Ice Age, which began about one million years ago, there were sub-arctic conditions in the area of southern New Jersey. This created a prairie, tundra-like environment, a landscape devoid of trees. With the retreat of the last glacier, approximately 10,000 years ago, the plant and animal species that inhabit the area today emerged.

Archeological work done at Batsto from 1957 to 1967 indicates that the site was repeatedly visited by humans during the Archaic (6000 to 1000 BC) and Woodland periods (1000 BC to 1200 AD). Though no archaeological work specific to prehistoric habitation has taken place at Batsto, occasional finds during excavations focusing on its industrial history support this theory. Future archaeological excavation geared specifically to prehistoric study may someday yield more detailed information regarding early usage of this site.

Legend tells us that the Lenni Lenape Indians maintained a summer village on a stream in Pleasant Mills, a neighboring village to Batsto. They called the village Nescochague, and a nearby lake and river still bear this name.

The word Batsto is said by some to be of Native American origin, but historians believe that Batsto is a derivative of a Scandinavian word “Badstu” meaning bathing place. In his book, *Heart of the Pines*, John Pearce notes that the area surrounding Batsto was referred to as “Swimming River” as early as 1720. An even more interesting conjecture, and perhaps a more accurate one considering Batsto’s location on two rivers at the head of navigation, is its meaning in Norwegian. Batstø, with a slash through the o, translated means “a place of small harbor.” To add to the speculation, a small town on the west coast of the Oslo Fjord in Norway, bears this same name. Regardless of the origin, the name stuck and has been attached to this place for as long as its history has been recorded.

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

In 1758 John Munrow, a local land speculator, purchased three tracts of land that would later comprise the Batsto plantation from the Council of West Jersey Proprietors. Three years later the land was sold to John Fort who established a lumber-cutting enterprise and sawmill on the site. Unfortunately Fort was unable to make a go of it, and, after just a few years of operation, the property fell into foreclosure and was sold at sheriff sale on May 9, 1764.

Richard Wescoat, owner of a nearby tavern, purchased the property for £300 and a year later sold a half-interest to Charles Read III, who had been the associate judge presiding at the sheriff sale. In partnership with Wescoat and with backing from four investors, Read quickly built an ironworks on the Batsto property.

Charles Read III, who is often called the Ben Franklin of New Jersey, was born in Philadelphia into a prominent family. His grandfather, Charles Read I, had immigrated to the new world in 1679 from his family’s ancestral estate, Trevascan in Cornwall, England. Though on his arrival the elder Read first resided in Burlington City, New Jersey, he subsequently settled in Philadelphia. His son, Charles Read II, became a well-known Philadelphia merchant and shopkeeper and served a one-year term as mayor of the city, from 1726 to 1727.



Trevascan, the ancestral home of Charles Read I in Cornwall, England (photo by Albert D. Horner)

Charles Read III was educated in Philadelphia as well as England and when he was a young man joined the British Navy. He was sent to Antigua in the West Indies on his first assignment, where he met his wife Alice, the daughter of John Thibou, a wealthy planter. After they married, Alice and Charles returned to America, first residing in Philadelphia and later settling in Burlington City.

Read, who had established a law practice after moving to Burlington, soon became involved in public life, eventually serving in each branch of colonial New Jersey government. He was a long-time member of the Assembly, a onetime Secretary of the Province (making him second in command to the governor), and a judge of the New Jersey Supreme Court, also for a time serving as Chief Justice. He was a Commissioner of Indian Affairs and was involved with the establishment of Brotherton, the only Indian Reservation to be established in New Jersey. He was known to be a close confidant to three Colonial New Jersey Governors: Lewis Morris, Jonathan Belcher, and William Franklin, son of Ben Franklin. To round out

his public life he served as commander of the Burlington Militia with the rank of colonel.

Aside from his political career and law practice, Read was involved in the timber industry and operated several sawmills on land that he owned. He also possessed several plantations, one in Springfield Township called Sharon and another near Mt. Holly named Breezy Ridge. He was very interested in innovative farming practices, maintaining copious notes on the farming methods of the day.

Along with his many other enterprises, Read was a land speculator, purchasing and selling over 35,000 acres of land in his lifetime. At some point it came to his attention that large stores of bog ore were accumulating in the swamps, rivers, and streams in the area of Batsto; it seems likely that at the time he purchased his half interest in the property he was well aware of these rich ore beds and their potential to support an ironworks.

After establishing the works at Batsto, Read in quick succession built three other ironworks. He built an iron forge at Atsion, located in what is now Shamong Township, an ironworks at Aetna (originally known as Etna), in what is today known as Medford Lakes, and another at Taunton, in what is now Medford Township.

By 1768, Read had over-extended himself financially and was bankrupt. In an attempt to stay afloat he sold his share of Batsto to several of his partners. Though he managed to keep his other ironworks operating for a time by bringing in new investors, his life continued to spiral out of control. He was experiencing serious health problems and for the better part of a year was bed-ridden. On November 13, 1769, his wife, Alice, passed away at the age of 55, following a long illness.

Facing mounting pressure from his creditors, Read decided to go to Antigua in an attempt to gain some much needed cash by settling his wife's estate. Before leaving the country he sold his shares in Atsion and deeded the Aetna Ironworks to his son Charles Read IV. He turned his remaining assets over to his trustees for assignment.

Not much is known of Read's dealings after his departure, though it was later learned that he had returned to America within the year, opening a small shop in Martinsburg, North Carolina. His new life would be short-lived, however, as he died on December 27, 1774.

At the time of his death no one, including his family and close associates, knew of his whereabouts. It was a sad end for this once prominent man who had made such a significant contribution to early American industry.

PROCESS OF MAKING BOG IRON

The advent of the French and Indian Wars (1754–1763) had created a high demand for iron. With all the natural resources needed to make iron available in abundance in the colonies, capital soon began to flow in to support the expansion of the iron industry.

As Charles Read had been keenly aware, there were large stores of bog ore growing on the edges of the rivers and bogs in the Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey. Bog ore, which is a renewable resource, is formed when iron-rich soils are carried into swamps and bogs by continually flowing streams. By complex processes, water soluble iron salts become oxidized either by exposure to air or by being acted on by certain bacteria. The resulting iron oxide is deposited along the edges of streams and bogs where, mixed with mud, it accumulates and becomes bog ore. Bog ore, originally thought to renew itself every 20 years, takes considerably longer than that to replenish. As a result, many of New Jersey's Pine Barrens ironworks of the 18th and 19th centuries were importing ore from other states by the end of their runs, after their ore beds had become exhausted.

Aside from bog ore, pine wood (which was turned into charcoal) was needed to fuel the iron furnaces. Charcoal was made in pits that resembled an upside-down bowl covered with turf. An eight- or nine-foot pole was set vertically in the ground and eight to 10 cords of pine wood were stacked closely around the pole, then covered with turf and sand. A hole was left open at the top to allow smoke and gas to escape. A collier would light the pit by dropping burning kindling into the apex. The wood would then smolder in a slow controlled burn. After the fire burned out, which took about a week, the collier would wait several days for it to cool before raking out the finished charcoal. For centuries, charcoal was the only fuel available that could produce temperatures high enough to melt iron ore.



Bog ore ledge on the Mullica River (photo by Albert D. Horner)



Bog ore after mining (photo by Albert D. Horner)

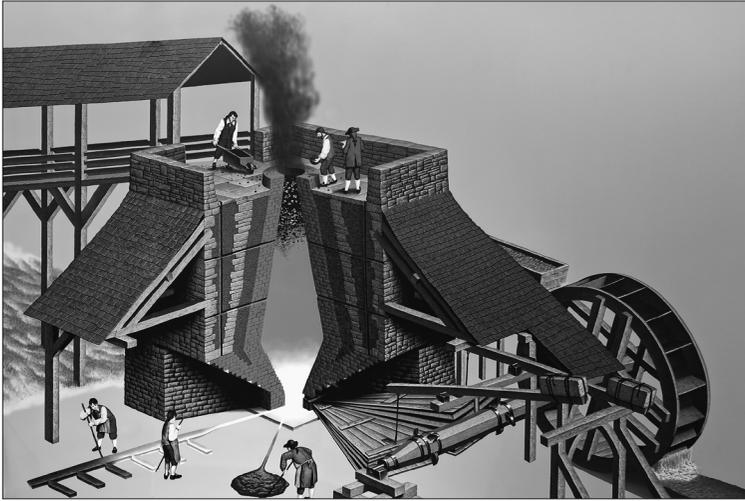


Collier at charcoal pit (illustration by Berminna Solem)

Oyster and clam shells (lime) were brought in to be used as a flux, or reducing agent, which assisted with the separating of the impurities (slag) from the molten iron during the smelting process. Water which could be dammed and diverted to operate the water wheel was the fourth component needed to operate an iron furnace.

Iron furnaces of the day were built of stone, brick, and iron. These massive structures, towering over 30' high, resembled a pyramid with its top cut off. The Batsto furnace typically operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The fillers or bank men worked ceaselessly carting the carefully weighed out ingredients—bog ore, sea shells, and charcoal—across the trestle bridge to the furnace where it was dumped into a hole in the stack. Though the recipe for making bog iron was closely guarded by most ironmasters, traditionally 2½ tons of bog ore and 180 bushels of charcoal were required to produce one ton of iron.

Below in the furnace chambers, the fires were fanned to very high temperatures by bellows sending strong gusts of air into the stack. As the mixture of ingredients or “charge” moved through the furnace stack it was reduced to a molten mass. The impurities or “slag” floated to



Iron furnace cutaway (photo by Albert D. Horner of a Batsto Museum image)

the top and the bog iron sank to the bottom. When the gutter men tapped the furnace the molten iron flowed out and was guided into roughly drawn trenches in the ground called pigs, so named because the trenches were said to resemble a mother sow suckling her young. When the pig iron cooled and hardened it was taken to the forge for further processing.

At the forge, the brittle pig iron was hammered into more durable iron products like bar iron, tools, horseshoes, and wagon rims. In addition to pig iron, the furnaces in the Pines produced cast-iron products such as stoves, fire backs, kettles, sash weights, water pipes, and, during the war years, military munitions.

SMUGGLING AT THE FORKS

For many years the British attempted to control manufacture and trade in the colonies by enacting laws that restricted what the Americans could produce as well as with whom they could do business. In the British view the colonies existed only to enrich the mother country, therefore any laws passed by the Parliament were



Pig iron (photo by Albert D. Horner)

designed to favor British trade. Britain also had an interest in keeping the colonies dependent on the monarchy for manufactured goods which it could sell to them at inflated prices.

The Iron Act of 1750 was passed by the Parliament of Great Britain as a way to encourage the manufacture of pig iron and iron bars by allowing untaxed importation from the colonies. These raw materials, however, could only be sold to British manufacturers. The Iron Act also prohibited the colonies from producing finished iron products, allowing these goods only to be fashioned in England. The finished iron products had a higher value than did the raw materials, thus this law highly favored British trade.

Other British statutes such as the Navigation Acts (1650 and 1696) also restricted American trade by allowing only British ships to transport imported or exported goods to and from the colonies. The only people allowed to trade with the colonies were British citizens, and commodities such as sugar, tobacco, cotton, and wool produced in the colonies could only be exported to British ports.

These restrictive trade laws irritated the colonists, who soon began to circumvent what they perceived as unfair regulations through smuggling. Most early American merchants who were involved in foreign trade were engaged in this practice to one degree or another, and the custom of smuggling became an intricate part of the colonial economy.

Before 1763 the British were preoccupied with their war with France and other problems at home and did little to enforce the Navigation Acts. But the French and Indian Wars had depleted the British treasury, and it was noticed that America was experiencing an unprecedented era of prosperity. At the time it was costing the British £8000 a year to collect £2000 in import duties. It was estimated that £700,000 of merchandise was being smuggled annually. In 1763, the government of King George III—who had just come to the throne—began to clamp down on the colonists as a way to replenish the British coffers.

With the enforcement of the Navigation Acts, the mother country began to make serious efforts to collect the import taxes owed them. With the added tax burden placed on them by the Stamp Act (1765) and Townsend Acts (1767) the colonists began to rebel, citing “taxation without representation.” The colonists were creative in their resistance and utilized a variety of methods, including forging clearance papers, bribery, and mislabeling cargoes. The best method, however, for avoiding the hated taxes was to unload goods at ports not patrolled by the British.

The Forks, located on a remote, navigable river less than a mile from Batsto, was one of the smugglers’ best kept secrets. Ships of lighter draft could dock there and unload barrels of sugar, molasses, tea, and coffee. The goods would then be transported overland through the woods to Philadelphia. Countless illegal cargoes were brought up the Little Egg Harbor—later called the Mullica River—and carted by horse and wagon to Philadelphia markets.

All was going well for the smugglers of The Forks until an unidentified spy informed custom agents in Philadelphia of the illicit happenings on the Little Egg Harbor. When the locals learned of the betrayal, a contingent of sailors was dispatched to seize the spy. After being tarred and feathered and placed in stocks for a



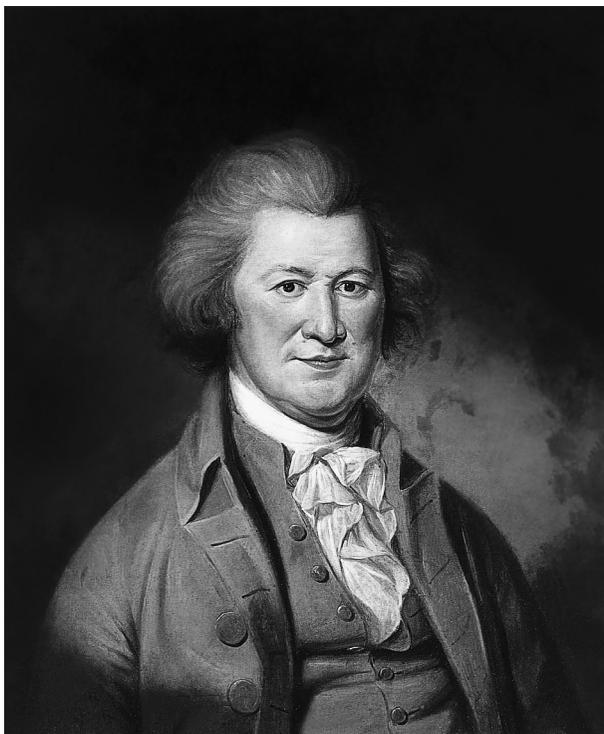
The Forks (photo by Albert D. Horner)

few days, the spy was freed and told to “go and sin no more.” It’s not likely he ever again betrayed his colonial countrymen.

With the colonists outsmarting the British in their efforts to control commerce in the colonies, the cold war between the two adversaries began to heat up.

JOHN COX

In 1770, a Philadelphia merchant and trader named John Cox purchased the Batsto Ironworks for £2350. Charles Thomas, Cox’s silent partner in the deal, would hold a one-quarter share of the works until Cox bought him out three years later. Given his involvement in trade, it is likely that Cox was himself involved in the smuggling business and knew of the illegal activities at The Forks. He was a staunch and effective patriot, a member of both the first Committee of Correspondence and the Pennsylvania Council of Safety. By 1774 the latter organization had, for all intents and purposes, become the operating government of the colony as royal officials were expelled.



John Cox (painting by Charles Willson Peale, 1792)

In 1760 John Cox married Esther Bowes, the daughter of Frances Bowes, who was the owner of the Black Creek Forge in Bordentown, New Jersey. With these familial connections, Cox was clearly aware of the lucrative market of the iron trade, especially if the colonies were able to free themselves from the domination of Great Britain.

By 1773 Cox had expanded the products produced by the Batsto Ironworks from pig iron to a wide variety of commercial and household articles. This decision was in clear defiance of the Iron Act of 1750, which banned the production of finished iron products by the ironworks in the colonies. The following advertisement appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on June 7, 1775.

Manufactured at Batsto Furnace: In West-New Jersey, and to be sold either at the works, or by Subscriber, in Philadelphia. A Great variety of iron posts, kettles, Dutch ovens, and oval fish kettles, wither with or without covers, skillets of different sizes, being much lighter, neater and superior in quality to any imported from Great Britain— Pot ash and other large kettles, from 30 to 125 gallons; sugar mill-gudgeons, neatly rounded and polished at the ends: grating bars of different lengths, grist-mill rounds; weights of all sizes, from 7 lb to 56 lb; Fuller plates; open and close stoves of different sizes, rag-wheel irons for sawmills' pestles and mortars; sash weights, and forge hammers of the best quality. Also Batsto Pig Iron as usual, the quality of which is too well known to need any recommendation. John Cox

It appears that John Cox was not alone in his defiance of the Iron Act. By the onset of the Revolution, the American iron industry accounted for one-seventh of the world's output of pig iron, wrought iron, and castings.

Before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Cox had a contract with the Pennsylvania Council of Safety to provide large quantities of cannon balls to the Continental Army. Cox had agreed to make delivery by water, but the British blockade of the Delaware River made that impossible. With this deterrent in place Cox found another solution, as evidenced by his letter dated May 22, 1776, to Owen Biddle, who at the request of the Pennsylvania Council of Safety had procured six wagons and teams for Cox.

Six wagons are now loaded and ready to start, and I expect will be at Cooper's Ferry (Camden) by tomorrow Evening. My manager sent off three loads this morning, and I am in hopes that my Overseer, who is gone in Quest of Teams, will return sometime tomorrow with a sufficient number of wagons to take the remainder of the Committee's Order up in the course of next week. You judged well in sending Teams from Philadelphia, it being almost impossible to

procure them here at this season of the year, most of the Farmers being busily engaged in planting, and those, who make carting a business, all employed in transporting goods from hence to Philada., Brunswick and New York. P.S. All the Shot ordered by the Committee are Cast.

As the call for independence reverberated across the American colonies, the Batsto Ironworks turned from peacetime products to weapons of war.

About the Author and Photographer

Author **Barbara Solem** has an undergraduate degree in psychology from the College of New Jersey (formerly Trenton State College). She has completed graduate work in education administration and has been a special education teacher, a trainer, a principal, and an administrator. Barbara retired from the State of New Jersey Department of Human Services, Office of Education, in 2002, having worked as an education administrator for 15 years.

A popular Pine Barrens speaker and resident of Shamong, New Jersey, Barbara is the author of two previous Plexus books: *The Forks: A Brief History of the Area* and *Ghost Towns and Other Quirky Places in the New Jersey Pine Barrens*. She is a member of the Batsto Citizens Committee, Inc. and a tour guide at the Atsion Mansion.

Please write Barbara at barbsolem@aol.com.

Albert D. Horner, who contributed his photographic talents to *Batsto Village*, is a resident of Medford Lakes, New Jersey. A self-taught photographer since the late 1970s, Al currently spends his time capturing intimate landscapes of his favorite subject, the New Jersey Pine Barrens.

Al's work is frequently exhibited in local galleries, and he conducts photography workshops and gives talks based on his images as well as his knowledge of the local environment. He believes that, "Although the Pinelands does not have mountain peaks or lush valleys with babbling brooks, it has a beauty and uniqueness all its own." It is his greatest ambition "to capture the beauty of the Pine Barrens and then have those images help preserve it."

Many of Al's photos may be viewed at www.pinelandsimagery.com.