

Mountain trails pass remains of Wilmington iron mines

Words and pictures by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, May 12, 2006

WILMINGTON — If you keep your eyes open the next time you're walking through the mountains around Wilmington, you may see something surprising: the remains of Wilmington's small, short-lived iron-mining industry.

Last weekend, Guy Stephenson of the Wilmington Historical Society led a tour to one such site up a little-used hunting trail near Stephenson Brook, named for his forebears.

Stephenson showed our group of eight "history tourists" half a dozen small, relatively shallow pits. One of them was filled with water; the others were lined with multiple layers of autumn leaves and moss.

The trail leading to the pits passed through several large, blackened circles, the remnants of charcoal kilns where fuel had been made for Wilmington's iron forges, located alongside the Au Sable River in the hamlet below.

Surrounding the pits themselves, one could still find big chunks of heavy, high-grade iron ore, looking much like any other rocks but weighing much, much more than one would expect for their size.

Stephenson's site, he said, was definitely not the only place

where one could expect to see such pits.

"If you're climbing up the trail from the Wilmington reservoir to Whiteface," said our guide, "you'll walk through an opening that's been made in the stone fence that used to run around the Marble family farm.

"Near there are more of these pits."

The iron-mining pits in the Wilmington hills are more or less circular, but not precisely so, differentiating them from the glacial cirques you'll see all over the Adirondacks. The ones

Stephenson showed his group last Saturday ranged in diameter between 8 and 30 feet, and in depth between 5 and 15 feet or so.

WILMINGTON'S iron industry appears to have been started by the town's first leading citizen, Reuben Sanford. Born in 1780 in Connecticut, the son of immigrants from England, Sanford moved in 1800 to the area that later became Wilmington township, opening a small hotel and setting up a potashery.

Sanford did not get into the



Guy Stephenson stands with three hikers by a 19th century iron-mining pit in the mountains above Wilmington.

iron-making business until about 1820 — but he never mined his own ore.

Several years earlier, Archibald McIntyre had started shipping high-grade ore from Palmer Hill through Wilmington for transport over a new winter road to his iron works in North Elba. Three years after the Elba Iron Works closed in 1817, Sanford started hauling in ore from Palmer Hill, as McIntyre had done.

Sanford operated his forge on the Au Sable, at the present Wilmington dam site, until 1849, using Palmer Hill ore the whole time.

It wasn't until 1868 that Wilmington iron was first made from Wilmington ore.

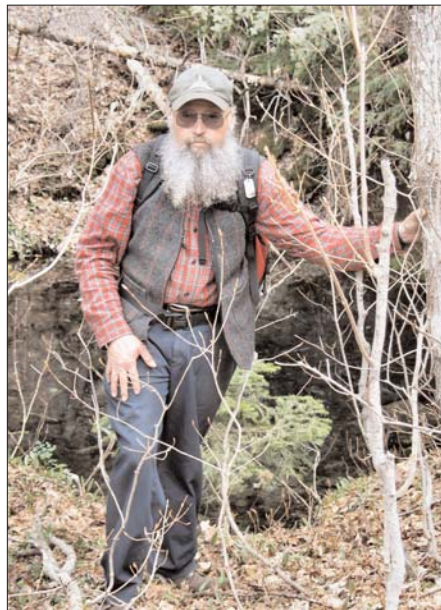
John Nye was the son of Keene iron maker Frederick Nye. When the Saint Huberts dam broke in 1856, John lost his family forge in Keene. It took him a few years to get back on his feet, but in 1863 he bought “the Comstock Forge property in Wilmington,” according to one biographic profile, possibly the same forge first developed by Sanford.

By 1868, Nye had taken on a partner, George Weston.

In his 1869 “Military and Civil History of the County of Essex, New York,” Winslow C. Watson described the shift that had begun the year before in Nye and Weston's operation.

“In 1868, about two hundred tons of iron were made at this [Nye and Weston's] forge,” Watson wrote.

“It consumes charcoal and



Guy Stephenson

produces bloom iron.

“At present it uses the Palmer Hill ore, drawn about thirteen miles, but a bed is now in process of opening, it is represented, with favorable indications in the extent and quantity of the ore.”

A second account, written in October 1868, indicates that the Wilmington iron bed had, by then, started producing workable ore.

“The ore bed at Wilmington, belonging to Mr. George Weston and Frederick [sic] Nye, is opening finely,” read an Oct. 9, 1868 brief in the *Plattsburgh Sentinel*. “It is now ascertained beyond a doubt that it is an immense bed of very rich ore. The iron manufactured from it commands a greater price than any made in this country. Steel and horse shoe nails of the first quality have been made from this iron.”

Nye sold the Wilmington forge to W.F. and S.H. Weston in 1873, “remaining with them as superintendent until they discontinued the business,” said his

profile.

According to H.P. Smith's 1885 “History of Essex County,” the Westons doubled the capacity of Nye's forge the year after they bought it. At the time Smith wrote, he referred to it as a still-active operation.

By 1890, however, most of the small iron works in Essex County had been wiped out by the discovery of the vast Messabi iron range in Minnesota and northern Wisconsin.

OUR REGION is one of great natural beauty, beyond question — but it has also been the home of many generations of people who have worked, farmed, raised their families and died here.

The next time you climb Whiteface Mountain or walk one of the trails through the Stephenson Range in Wilmington township, keep your eyes open for a blackened patch of earth littered with pieces of ancient charcoal, or a small, irregular pit dug into the side of your path, for you are walking through not only a state park but a site of significant 19th century industrial activity.

If you find one of the old charcoal kiln sites or abandoned iron-mining pits, pause for a moment and remember pioneer Adirondack industrialists Reuben Sanford, John Nye and George Weston. Their heritage — and their progeny — live on in the town of Wilmington.

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For more about Wilmington's history, visit www.Wilmington-HistoricalSociety.org on the Web.