

#29Y
YC

S.E. - Counties - York - Biography - Hill, Col. William

Early Iron Miner Was Soldier, Too

(One of a series of articles on mining in York County area.)
By ELIZABETH REED
In Charleston's Battery Park

stands a small, stubby-looking cannon. In modern warfare, it would be useless. But that cannon, made in York County, is one of the few Revolutionary War cannons still extant. The cannon and three cannon balls, the largest weighing 25 pounds, are the only definite Revolutionary period iron specimens existing to this day, so far as is known.

J. Clyde Bigger of Allison Creek, who lives near the Billy Hill property, says his father, James M. Bigger, who died in 1938 at the age of 89, picked up the cannon balls when a boy.

Bigger also owns other old iron: a buggy step, door keys as large as knives, stirrup holders, inlaid twister plow points, a foot adz used for hewing the corners in log houses and a unique tool used to hold a horse's hoof steady while the hoof of a horse, or mule was trimmed.

Iron is still found in York County, but since the days of the War Between the States very little iron mining has been done in this section. Just a few years ago, remains of old workings could be found where ore was smelted in wood furnaces to supply acute needs during the War Between the States.

As late as 1826, Robert Mills had this to say of Nanny's Mountain in York county:

"There is a mine near Hill's old iron works that is inexhaustible. It rises like a mountain from the plain and is quite isolated, but from the top you have a considerable view for 20 miles. The whole is a mass of iron, one about two miles in circuit."

Buried in Bethel Churchyard is Col. William Hill, wizard of the Revolutionary period; patriot, soldier, ironmaster, judge and legislator. In 1919 a suitable marker

to indicate his iron works was erected by the Kings Mountain Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution and Winnie Davis Chapter United Daughters of the Confederacy of York on Buster Boyd bridge road.

The story of iron in York County is really a story of Col. Hill.

He was born in 1741 of English stock and came to York County before the Revolution from York County, Pa.

He acquired a tract of 5,000 acres near the Catawba nation which was to be increased to

24,376 acres before hard times came upon him following the war.

In sight of Kings Mountain at Nanny's Mountain he built a forge and started to make iron from a small seam of excellent ore. Soon he was supplying the scantily furnished kitchens of the South Carolina backwoods with skillets, pots and other wares and the equally needy husbands with nails, tools and other implements of priceless value at that time.

He had no difficulty in selling his products but could not get ahead enough to build a furnace. Iron was made by beating the metal from the heated ore with great, water-driven forge ham-

mers — instead of casting finished goods by pouring melted iron in molds, says Dr. Hampton M. Jarrell of Winthrop, whose study of Billy Hill has been one of the delights of his life.

While working hard to supply the material needs of his neighbors and friends, Col. Hill was also working with Pat Calhoun (father of John C. Calhoun) for the rights of the backcountry for participation in government. He was an ardent Whig.

The Revolution came. Hill borrowed money to construct a furnace and expanded his operations to include the casting of swivel guns, cannon and balls and other desperately needed war materials. By 1799 he had 100 men working on his backwoods iron plantation. It is said he brought some skilled labor from Pennsylvania. Production reached a peak in the spring of 1780.

He brought his ore from Nanny's Mountain by a clever tram to the nearby point on Allison Creek where he was to build a self-sufficient industrial center on his broad acres.

But if things were booming at Billy Hill's iron works, things were gloomy for the patriots. Savannah, then all of Georgia, fell; Charleston fell and soon the only resisting part of the state was Hill's district, then called the "New Acquisition" (so called because a 14-mile by 65-mile upcountry tract had been given to South Carolina in 1772 by a boundary adjudicating committee.

As British troops closed in, local militia held a meeting and agreed on a time to meet at Hill's and hear the terms of surrender. At the appointed time Hill interrupted the reading of the surrender proclamation to plead passionately for resistance. Hill was named colonel of a local regiment.

When Capt. Christian Huck — a Philadelphia lawyer in civilian

life — with 120 men, fell upon the iron works, he left them in ruins, taking off most of Hill's help.

Hill retaliated by attacking Huck and his forces at Williamson's Plantation (now Brattonsville). He was also on hand at other engagements of the Revolution: including Camden and Kings Mountain.

The war was to leave Hill's self sustaining community a mass of ashes, his wife and children living in a log hut.

After the Revolution he rebuilt and expanded — some think he had some financial aid from the state. There he lived and worked until his death in 1816.

Col. Billy Hill and his wife, Jane McCall, had six children, Robert and William, who never married, Andrew, who married Juliet Campbell, Solomon who married Nancy Cabeen, Elizabeth who married Dr. John Allison and Rachel, who married William Ross. Several of the families left many descendants.

Legends Told About Early Iron Miner

There are a number of interesting stories told about Col. William Hill, whose name is synonymous with iron mining in this section.

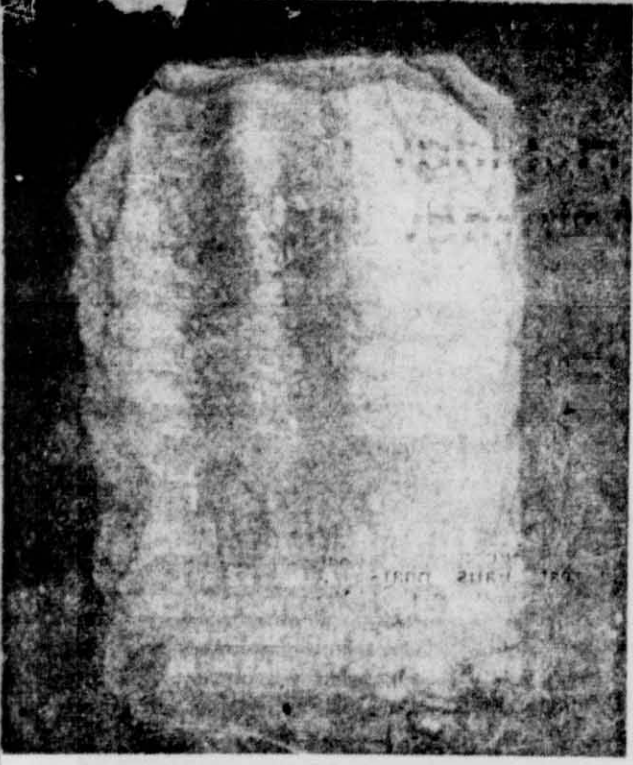
When Huck attacked the iron works, William and Robert, mere lads, mounted one of papa's cannon on an old stump and prepared to put up a strong defense. The British came in from their rear, took the boys prisoners.

So great and so widespread was confidence in Billy Hill that a good Whig over in Rutherford County, N. C., is said to have made a prayer which concluded with: "Good Lord, if ye had na suffered the

cruel Tories to burn Billy Hill's (Billy Hill's) iron works we would na have asked any more favors at Thy hands—Amen."

Billy Hill was opposed to a state church and when a blank petition came into his hands for one, he did an unbelievable thing for his day — he got women's names on the petition saying he did not "believe in the doctrine of the church that women had no souls."

In Rock Hill Public Library are wonderfully well preserved papers relating to Billy Hill. They were placed there by Mrs. I. A. Bigger of Rock Hill.



Granite Marker (L) At Site Of Old Iron Works Near Big Allison Creek Bridge
Odd Shaped Cornerstone (R) Stands On Lawn Of Jack Burrell Home



J. Clyde Bigger Holds 25-pound Cannon Ball
One Of Three He Owns From Col. Hill's Iron Works
Evening Herald, Rock Hill Monday, July 27, 1959

Death Takes W. L. Hill, 87

William Lawrence Hill, 87, well known Sharon merchant and farmer, died at his home October 6th after a 10-day illness.

He established his mercantile business in Sharon 65 years ago and is considered the dean of merchants in York County. In addition, he had a wide farming interest in York county.

Funeral services were conducted at 4 o'clock Friday afternoon from Woodlawn Presbyterian church, of which he was a member for about 50 years. Burial followed in the church cemetery.

He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Mary McMurry Hill; five children, W. L. Hill, Jr., Miss Jean Hill, James J. Hill and John M. Hill, all of Sharon, and Mrs. A. J. Simpson of Encinit, Calif., and one sister, Miss Orrie Hill, of Sharon.

Born in the Blairsville section of York county, he was the son of the late Nathaniel Hill and Jane Minter Hill, York county natives. Although starting in business in a small way he prospered and his present three-story building erected in 1914 was at one time said to be the largest store building in South Carolina. He manufactured the bricks for the store building himself.

His wife, Mrs. Mary McMurray Hill, was the daughter of the late Rev. John A. McMurry, pastor of Woodlawn church for many years. He took a great interest in the schools of Sharon and donated the land on which the grammar school building stands. As a boy he rode through York during the Reconstruction days.

The Chester (S. C.) News, October 15, 1953

over