

STORIES of New Jersey

PREPARED FOR USE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY THE
FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT of the WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

1060 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

THE VANISHED BOG-IRON INDUSTRY

The "Pine Barrens" of New Jersey, a fan-shaped section spreading over parts of Ocean, Monmouth, Burlington, Atlantic and Cape May Counties, is a region of silent woods and bog land, of lazy streams and sluggish rivers. With the exception of cranberries and blueberries, the few crops the inhabitants manage to wrest from the barren swampy land barely yield them a living.

Once these woods resounded with the blows of axes, shouts of workmen and the ring of anvils, as the flames from charcoal burners, forges and furnaces lighted the sky. The streams, now trickling over the flat land, rushed vigorously enough to supply water power for the wheels of gristmills, sawmills, forges and furnaces. The rivers, shallow now and deserted, carried tall ships with heavy cargoes on their way to New York, Philadelphia and other large centers.

Here was the home of the bog-iron industry in New Jersey, an industry that in the early days of the country's history made this one of the chief iron-producing States. Hard iron was mined from the hills of Sussex and Morris Counties. The iron dug from the soil along the banks of the streams and the beds of water courses in southern New Jersey was called bog iron. While softer than the iron from the northern hills, bog iron had the advantage of being more easily mined and more accessible to the outside markets because of the many streams that flowed from the heart of the woods to the sea. Land transportation, depending on horse- or mule-drawn wagons, was slow and very expensive.

In the vast pine woods was an almost inexhaustible source of fuel supply and there were plenty of streams to furnish water power. All the early iron works were on rivers and creeks and in densely forested regions. A successful bog-iron furnace required at least 20,000 acres of timberland for a constant supply of charcoal. The tracts were usually divided into sections of 1,000 acres each, one of which would furnish a year's supply of charcoal for a furnace. By the time the last section had been used up, the trees on the first section had grown enough to cut.

Bog iron is found in the lowlands and meadows of many parts of the State where the waters, tinged with vegetable matter, percolating through beds of marl or strata containing iron deposits form a solution of iron in the form of iron oxide. As the water emerges from the ground and becomes exposed to the air the iron solution decomposes and leaves a reddish muddy sludge along the banks of streams or in the beds of swamps and wet meadows. The process goes on continuously. An exhausted bed will renew itself in from 20 to 40 years.