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Back to the Past: A column highlighting the natural history of the Watershed

Travels In the Upper End. - Durham and Its Surroundings. No. III, 1880

ANON.

On the afternoon of September 13th, in company with David Steckel, a life long resident of the place, we set out on a visit to the iron works. We first ascended Rattlesnake Hill to the engine house, said to be fully three hundred feet perpendicular above Durham creek, flowing at its northern base, and to be within one hundred feet of its most elevated summit. The name it is known having been given it more than one hundred and thirty years ago, from those reptiles having abounded here. From the engine house spoken of, the iron ore is brought out about one hundred yards from the interior of the hill by a tunnel. It is found here a hard, bluish looking rock, that has to be quarried. Adjacent is a blacksmith shop for the repair of drills, implements and machinery used. William Mill, the smith in charge, I had well known when a boy, near Bursonville, being about my age, having frequently gone to school together, and living near neighbors. As I had been informed of his living here, I had the advantage of him, but I found that it was impossible for him to recognize me, for we had not seen or spoken with each other for about forty years; thus time works changes, for in this interval I had resided off some distance.

A new tunnel is now being made in Rattlesnake Hill, on the side towards the furnace, having already proceeded about fifty yards, the object is to extend it some three or four hundred yards further in a southwest course to intersect the tunnel mentioned. This will be a great improvement and saving of labor, in having the ore a considerably less distance to convey to the works. The furnace, which is situated near the canal and river, contains some ponderous machinery, and is well worth a visit to see in operation. We were shown a quantity of hematite ores, brought from Spain and Africa, to have made into iron. We were surprised how this could be found possible to pay. Our informant stated that vessels in returning, brought it to Philadelphia as ballast, and there transferred to boats and brought hither by canal. These extensive iron works belong to the firm of Cooper & Hewitt, of New York; B.F. Fackenthall, Jr., being general superintendent. They own here about fifty double houses for their work men, of which about three hundred are now employed. They have at times had as high as five hundred at work. We went also through the firm's extensive machine shops, in which were now probably about fifteen hands employed. Mr. Steckel introduced me to John Young, the master smith, who had been employed here for thirty-five years, and last year, by making overtime had received pay for three hundred and sixty-three days. Such heroes of labor deserve honorable mention from historians, and that there are still industrious men living. As three hundred is no inconsiderable number of workmen, I inquired as to their nationality, and was informed that over half were natives of this section, among the foreigners the English greatly predominating, the balance about equally divided between the Germans and Irish. As may well be supposed, to supply the demands of such a number cannot fail but create a good home market to the surrounding farmers.

The vicinity in this respect being greatly favored, no other iron works having been established elsewhere within the county, while a number have long existed in the adjoining counties of Montgomery, Berks and Lehigh.

We also visited the ancient Durham Cave, situated near the canal, on the land belonging to the iron works. About one half of the rear end still exists, the remainder having been quarried away and

converted into lime. At its far end a never-failing spring of fresh water is found. Mr. Steckel and I had last visited this cave together when boys, about forty-four years ago, and to find it now considerably altered, like ourselves, getting the worse for time. Concerning this cave, I have an interesting reminiscence to relate. About the year 1835, on a visit to a relation near by, from whence we went to see the cave, being the first time I had ever been there. Near its entrance stood two barrels, nearly filled with fossil bones, the remains of animals that had been exhumed here out of the limestone. This, greatly, at the time, exciting my boyish curiosity, and I remember, on looking, seeing numerous other fragments of similar fossils. One of the party remarking that it must have been some time ago when these animals had been alive, to have their remains thus preserved in solid rock. We were informed that this collection had been made by two gentlemen from New York, who had come on expressly for this purpose, to be forwarded to one of the scientific institutions there. This was my earliest personal knowledge of animal remains deposited in their original beds, and have thus reason to well remember it.

Durham post office is in the village, and is the site of the earliest settlement, the furnace having been originally erected here in 1727, on the spot occupied by the gristmill, now owned by the brothers Bachman, who also keep here the store. Reuben K. Bachman being the present member of Congress from this district, is now building for himself a fine, two-story brick residence, on the lot adjoining, which was about ready to receive the roof. As thickly settled as this neighborhood is, there is no hotel here, and no other store nearer than Riegelsville, Monroe and Springtown, fully two and a half miles distant. Persons, I was told, were sometimes compelled to go to some of the hotels at the places mentioned to stay overnight, and return here to finish their business, thus making it particularly inconvenient to strangers. It is to be regretted, with all its other advantages, the place does not possess a suitable site for a town. The valley along Durham creek being too low and level, and the adjoining hills rise up to abrupt or steep to admit of any suitable location, and this is actually the case, from near its entrance at the Delaware, toward its source for near two miles. Respecting Durham, I have more to say in my next communication, this being deemed of sufficient length.

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