

Montevallo Historical Society

Opening the Portals of Our Heritage

540 Shelby Street
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www.historicmontevallo.org



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KING HAD A HAMMER

Marty Everse

Air-up an inner tube, slather-on the sunscreen, jump in Shoal Creek, float downstream and in a couple of hours you will reach what may have been the site of the first iron works in central Alabama.

Sadly, there is nothing there to see now but from about 1825 until the late 1850s, it was something to behold. A millpond behind an impressive log dam, a raceway running to a water wheel adjacent to a large wood frame building housing two stone forges rose out of the forest. Also within the building a massive trip hammer used to pound and shape the molten iron jarred the bones and ears of anyone nearby. All about men hollered and cussed, horses and mules brayed while wagons rolled hauling charcoal, ore, fodder, and vittles.

The first owner of the iron works on Shoal Creek was Samuel Wear, Jr., an East Tennessee fellow who hailed from the same Sevierville neighborhood as the Mahan family. In fact, the Mahan brothers, Edward, John, and Archimedes, served with Samuel during the Creek Indian War in a mounted infantry company commanded by Samuel's father.

In 1831, his wanderlust not satisfied, Wear sold his forge property that by then included a grist mill to John Carroll and Dudley Randall and set-up housekeeping in the Talladega-Coosa County area. Among other things, Randall was the Montevallo postmaster at the time. The very next day, Carroll and Randall sold the iron works portion of the complex to none other than Edmund King.

During his time, King was a superstar. A friend of the Indian leader William Weatherford, and a cousin to William Rufus King, a vice-president of the United States; a devout Baptist and one of the area's largest slave owners and to top it off, according to legend, he built the first house with glass windows in Montevallo in 1823. He was a man to be reckoned with and dabbled in just about anything that might turn a buck. He was a large planter, a merchant, and invested heavily not only in iron works but in the cotton mill of the Tuscaloosa Manufacturing Company at Scottsville, Alabama.

King held on to the ownership of what became known as King's Iron Works until 1851 when he sold it to Jonathan Ware, Pleasant Fancher and Cicero D. R. Woodruff. This



King's Iron Works was prominent enough to make the 1837 John LaTourrette map of Alabama.

concern was a family affair, Fancher and Woodruff were both sons-in-law of Ware. Ware, for his part, was a noted ironmaster having built and operated forges in South Carolina and Bibb County before moving on to the waters of Shoal Creek. Ware's son Horace was an ironmaster in his own right, constructing the famous Shelby Iron Works near Columbiana in the late 1840s.

In the Shelby County tax assessment for 1852, Fancher was listed as the primary operator of the forge with an assessed value of \$1,500. Items produced by P. M. Fancher & Company, at what was then called Valley Forge, were tire iron, horse shoe iron and light plow molds. Everything sold for six cents a pound and unfortunately six cents a pound must not have covered expenses. In 1856, the works, now called Ware's Forge, were sold to satisfy debts to Montevallo merchant Hiram Butler.

There is no known evidence that the forge operated after Ware, Fancher, and Woodruff sold out but it was remembered fondly thirty-nine years later by the well-known Baptist preacher E. B. Teague. "Edmund King made bar iron when I was a boy, forged by a trip hammer, on the large creek flowing by Montevallo. The hammer on its anvil which had for its handle a large square oaken beam, and weighing five hundred pounds, tested the strength of the best men to lift it, few could do so."

Please join us for our next general membership meeting on Sunday, July 21st at 2 p.m. at the Parnell Memorial Library