Iron Gate

The James River is mythic in Virginia. It is the site of the first permanent settlement of the English in North America. It is the largest river in the Commonwealth, and its mouth remains today to be one of the largest harbor systems in the United States. The history of the country began to unfold on its banks. It holds the cradle of England's attempt to propagate itself to the New World.

Its origins are ancient Indian routes of travel. Formed by the Jackson and Cow Pasture Rivers, whose heads connect the Potomac and Shenandoah River Valleys to that of the James, variations of the Great Warrior's Path came down current US 220 from the Susquehanna River at Williamsport, Pennsylvania following the Jackson River. State Route 42 from Harrisonburg provided an inland passage free of the major fords and swamps of the route down the Valley of Virginia.

Yet this most English of American rivers starts at a most unEnglish named location, Iron Gate Virginia. Within the concavity of Rich Patch Mountain carved by the Jackson River just before it joins the Cow Pasture to form the James lies the massive water gap and Town of Iron Gate. How could this be? What are the origins of this place name? If the name is not derived from British culture, then from which national heritage does it come?

IRON GATE OF THE JAMES

One of the most historic places in Europe is Iron Gate. It is where Europe's longest and deepest rivers, the Danube, passes through the Carpathian Mountains. Romania lies on its north bank, and Serbia on its south. Known for its beauty, it is also the mythic site of the first development of the iron industry in Europe at about 400 BC.

COURSE OF THE DANUBE

The iron age put a rapid and dramatic end to the Bronze Age. It is recorded in the Old Testament. New cultures that had learned how to smelt and shape iron swept aside the older civilizations that fought with bronze weapons. The world was quickly turned upside down by this event.

The technology to make iron was discovered in a few widely separated places in the world. However, the Middle East, the Mediterranean World, and Europe all learned how to make iron from peoples from Persia, or modern Iran, who discovered iron technology about 1300 BC. Some of these peoples migrated to their northwest, to the region of the Black Sea. The Danube River empties into the Black Sea, and its valley provides ready access to the core of Central Europe. Here lie the great plains of Hungry, and of Scythia. The trade routes leading to the Rhine River, and the Rhone River of France connect with those coming up the Danube from Constantinople, and the Silk Road to China.

To the ancient Central Europeans Iron Gate represents the ancient gateway through which came civilization, culture, and conquerors. It is the "hole in the earth" from which their ancestors emerged. Foremost among these peoples who view the Iron Gate of the Danube in such a manner are the Germans. Even though

Iron Gate is not currently part of Germany, during the beginnings of the European Iron age it was (1).

IRON GATE OF THE DANUBE

This reality is reflected in the German language, which is much richer in its vocabulary in matters relating to the iron industry than, say, English. As but one example, in German there are three words that translate into only one English word. The simple word 'smith' in English is represented in Old German as either 'Schmidt' (blacksmith), 'Eisenhauer' (hewer of iron) (2), or by 'Stahlnacker' (hewer of steel)(3). Indeed, one begins to see the origins of the term 'Iron Gate' in Virginia when one considers that Smyth County, Virginia is named after a German family originally named Schmidt; that Samuel Stahlnacker was an Indian trader in Southwest Virginia before the French and Indian War, and that General Eisenhower's father came from Pennsylvania, and his mother from Virginia.

Germans were among the Picaroons of Tangier Island, whose arrival date is unknown, but who preyed upon the Spanish Main from before the settlement of Jamestown (4). There is evidence that at least one of these Germans found his way as far west as Marion, Virginia(5). The first well-documented immigration of Germans in Virginia was at Jamestown, itself, in 1608(6). There was a German sawmill community on the James in 1620 (7).

Again, it was the German physician, Dr. John Lederer, who led three expeditions into Virginia west of the English settlements in 1669[8]. He had been preceded by Abraham Woods, who in 1654 got to the New River, well west of Iron Gate[9].

Governor Spotswood, around 1709, while making surveys of Virginia above the fall line, with an eye toward economic development, discovered iron ore deposits on the upper Rappahannock. In 1713 he brought over from Europe a group of 40 German ore miners. The Governor built them a fort and settlement on the Rapidan. Eleven men mined iron ore there from 1716-1718, at which point the immigrants began to spread out into the interior countryside[10].

In 1716 Spotswood led an expedition to the vicinity of Balcony Falls on the James, which is where the James cuts through the Blue Ridge near Buchanan[11].

The first well-documented settlement of Germans in the Valley of Virginia was that in the Shenandoah Valley made by Joist Hite by way of Pennsylvania in 1732[12]. This settlement was already in place when Col. William Beverly tried to locate the first Scots-Irish settlement in the Valley, for Beverly had to relocate his claim to Staunton because of Hite's settlement[13].

The first documented settlement at Iron Gate on the James was made by John Salley at about 1736-44, who settled "at the forks of the James River below Natural Bridge"[14].

In 1749 the German Brethren from Pennsylvania settled Dunkard's Bottom at Claytor Lake on the New River, well to the west of the James(15).

Like the Iron Gate of the Danube, the Iron Gate of the James proved to be an area of iron ore deposits. A series of iron furnaces were built before records were kept at places around Iron Gate, Virginia, such as Longdale Furnace, Clifton Forge, Oriskany, Rebecca Furnace, and Jane Furnace.

The Forks of the James at Iron Gate were about in the middle of the routes of immigration in from the Great Valley of Virginia. Those pioneers coming up the Potomac would have followed the Jackson River, and those from the German settlements around Harrisonburg would have come down the Cow Pasture. The James itself provided a direct route for the German settlers from Jamestown(16).

No one knows which European first beheld the Forks of the James, and who had earlier in his life seen the Iron Gate of the Danube. He obviously knew of the association of iron with both places. He likely held within him a reverence for the atavistic symbolism of those two river gaps in the mountains. Even today, when a Virginian speaks of the Iron Gate, he raises his voice in reverence a note higher to convey the significance of the natural shrine.

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