



The Isaac Camp house, Washington, with later side porch and back addition visible.

## The Archaeology of the Isaac Camp House and Shop, Washington, Connecticut

by Lucianne Lavin

Although agriculture was central to the lives of Connecticut's 18<sup>th</sup>-century farmers, many pursued other activities as well. They may have been builders or fishermen, millers or blacksmiths—all activities that were important to the larger community, but that rarely provided enough income to support a family.

One such farmer was Isaac Camp, who lived in the New Preston section of the town of Washington. His home, built about 1760 and believed to be one of the oldest standing houses in Washington, was the focus of archaeological investigations in 2009 that uncovered evidence of the very beginnings of Connecticut industry.

The Camp house is located in the Macricostas Preserve, a 368-acre nature preserve owned by Steep Rock Association, one of the oldest land trusts in Connecticut. In 2009, the Institute for American Indian Studies (IAIS) received a Survey and Planning grant from the Commission on Connecticut Culture &

Tourism to conduct an archaeological survey focused on the Camp house and its historically associated lands. The aim was to guide the Steep Rock Association in restoring and interpreting the house. The survey was guided by documentary research and a review of the Camp family records, which together provided an outline of the household organization and the location of former outbuildings within the property.

Isaac Camp was born in Milford in 1740. He grew up during a period of rapid population growth in Connecticut's coastal communities, fueled by immigration and booming trade with the neighboring colonies and the Old World. As the shoreline settlements grew, the demand for new arable lands intensified. Isaac's decision to move north into a sparsely populated area only recently purchased from the Weatinock Indians is just one example of the northward shift of people in Connecticut in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Isaac's move was preceded by

at least one older family member. Jonah Camp, Isaac's uncle, purchased the property on which the Camp house sits in 1757. Jonah built the house shortly after acquiring the land, as it is mentioned in the deed when Isaac bought the house and surrounding property in 1761. Isaac was only 20 years old.

Documents give us only the bare outlines of Isaac Camp's life. He married Jane Baldwin in 1763, served in the 8<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Regiment during the Revolutionary War, and died intestate in New Preston in 1793. At the time of his death, he was 52 years old, and a "farmer" whose varied economic endeavors are reflected in fragmentary historical documentation.

Much of what we know about Isaac Camp comes from the brief summary of his estate at the time of his death. His probate inventory lists 165.5 acres of land, on which were several structures, including a dwelling house, measuring 30 feet by 40

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feet, a barn, "cow house" and stable, "hog house," and "horse shed." Isaac's farming interests are evident from the buildings on the property, but the inventory also refers to another of his investments: a "shop," probably located along Bee Brook to the east, where there are the remains of a stone foundation, a dam, a race, and a mill pond. The probate records make no reference to the function of the shop.

Aside from records of his military service and his probate, Isaac's name appears in the account book of Roger Cogswell between 1786 and 1792, documenting purchases that included desk furniture, "clothing work," "sawing 2,000 feet of board for Daniel" [Isaac's son], and iron. Isaac paid for them mainly with farm produce: one scythe, one pound of pork, 17 pounds of flax, one stack of hay, twelve pounds of leather, "arbitration with Tibbits," "order you have for Tibbits," and "cr [credit] by 5 lbs of iron in way of hay." This last reference to the exchange of iron may reflect the use of the "shop" along Bee Brook.

IAIS conducted archaeological tests around the Camp house and along the banks of the nearby Bee Brook, where the presumed ruins of the "shop" listed in Isaac Camp's probate inventory were identified. In addition to the usual architectural materials (like nails and bricks) and domestic refuse (such as ceramic tablewares and bottle glass), the survey uncovered possible structural remains located near the west elevation of the house and extending southward. Heavy concentrations of brick, slag, and charcoal suggesting that a chimney or possibly an iron forge once stood here.

Industrial archaeologist Robert Stewart, who assisted the IAIS research effort, suggested that a building near the main house may have housed a small cupola furnace, a cylindrical furnace capable of melting iron scrap. Supporting this interpretation are several large pieces of iron found amongst the brick fragments. These items were examined by Stewart, who identified a possible support for a forge or furnace and a rectangular iron

"merchant bar." Merchant bar was iron stock formed into several standard shapes and cross-sections and used in blacksmith shops and forges to create tools and implements. The merchant bar found at the Camp House had been cut on a shear, indicating that pieces of the original stock had been removed to create some forged implement before the bar was lost or discarded.

Further evidence of iron working on the property was recovered within and near the foundation remains along Bee Brook. The artifacts from this former building include slag from a furnace or forge, as well as pieces of items worked here: numerous nails and spikes, a hand-formed door backplate, the iron portion of horse bridle. A corroded wheel fragment, a pivot with two eyelets, a cast-iron six-spoke wheel, and a pressure gauge represented fragments of the machinery that was used within the building.

The wheel, 17.5 inches in diameter, has a flat 2-inch-wide outer surface, indicating that it was not used to drive a belt. Instead, it was most likely a fly wheel that imparted momentum to a drive system. The finely made wheel may have been part of a small steam engine, introduced into Connecticut around 1805. It could have smoothed out pulses in a water-powered pump, possibly used to pump water to a forge or cupola furnace in the small building abutting the back of the Camp house.

Perhaps the most tantalizing questions raised by these investigations are those concerning the past industrial activities at the site. The archaeological investigations have resulted in some interesting finds about the

Camp family's contributions to the early Industrial Revolution in Connecticut. How much and in what ways were the Camps involved in ironworking? Was the building abutting the house a blacksmith shop or was it the more specialized forge or cupola furnace of incipient iron entrepreneurs? And what of Isaac's "shop"? What was its purpose? Its location along Bee Brook suggests it was originally sited to take advantage of water power. The archaeological evidence suggests that the shop may eventually have been run by a small steam engine, possibly to drive a water pump supporting a more intensive iron-working operation behind the Camp house. More archaeological and documentary research is necessary to help find answers to these questions.

At a broader level, the current study highlights the varied pursuits of Connecticut's 18<sup>th</sup> century "farmers." Although agriculture appears to have been central to the family economy, the Camps were participants in the development of the early iron industry that would soon after develop into a transformative force in the Litchfield Hills. The roots of this industry, like so many others in Connecticut, are found hidden in our rural landscapes and are tied to enterprising people adapting to a rapidly changing landscape at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. ❧

*Lucianne Lavin is Director of Research and Collections for the Institute for American Indian Studies, in Washington. IAIS benefited greatly from the expertise of Robert Stewart (Historical Technologies, Inc.) and restoration architect Stephen Solley for insights to the story of the Camp family. For more information, visit [www.birdstone.org](http://www.birdstone.org).*



This cast-iron wheel, found in the Camp "Shop," may have been part of an early steam engine