A s relations between England and its American colonies deteriorated, Mark Bird, already an important figure in the booming colonial iron industry, built Hopewell Furnace in eastern Pennsylvania in 1771. When the American Revolution erupted in 1775, England’s ministers regretted not having reined in American ironmasters more successfully. They knew the iron industry would now be turned against the mother country. Ever since colonists carried blast furnace technology to America in the mid-1600s, England had been worried by the industry’s rapid expansion and American ironmasters’ increasing skill at turning out cast and wrought iron products. Abundant natural resources in the colonies also favored the creation and expansion of an iron industry. It took an acre of woodlands to make enough charcoal to run an iron furnace for just one day. Pennsylvania’s ancient forests proved ideal for such high demand.

Crown officials wanted to limit the colonies’ iron industry to producing raw pig iron (rough cast bars). The bars would then be shipped to England and processed into profitable goods—that could be sold back to America. But the colonies weren’t about to give up such a lucrative enterprise. When Parliament prohibited the building of more ironworks, Americans simply defied the law. They both cast iron and refined it into wrought iron, from which they made a broad range of competitive products. At the onset of the Revolutionary War, American furnaces, forges, and mills were turning out one-seventh of the world’s iron goods.

With the advent of war, the Pennsylvania iron industry played a critical role in supplying the new nation’s army. In fact, George Washington took his army to Valley Forge in part to protect the supply lines for the products from the iron furnaces along the Schuylkill River. At Hopewell, Mark Bird turned from casting stove plates to supplying cannon and shot to the Continental Army and Navy. Unfortunately, like many American patriots, he suffered economic setbacks because of his support for Independence.

After the war, Bird had difficulty collecting debts from the nation, and he also suffered financial reverses with the general economic depression that followed the peace settlement. A 1786 flood further added to Bird’s financial woes, and in 1788 Hopewell Furnace was sold at a sheriff’s sale. New owners converted to peace-time production, but the operation remained unprofitable. Natural disasters, national recession, and litigation closed the furnace in 1808.

By 1816 protective tariffs and better transportation systems had brightened Hopewell’s future. The imaginative leadership of Clement Brooke, the furnace’s resident manager from 1816–1831, brought Hopewell’s best years, supplying iron products up and down the East Coast. But the financial Panic of 1837 undermined prosperity, and the iron operation never again matched its early success. The Civil War brought some relief in the 1860s, upping demand for pig iron. But changing technologies—the Bessemer steel production process, particularly—and development of urban steel factories doomed Hopewell’s operations. Hopewell Furnace went out of blast for the last time on June 15, 1883.

The property remained a summer home for descendants of the Brooke family, the last owners of the furnace, until 1935 when it was sold to the federal government. Originally made part of the French Creek Recreational Demonstration Area, 274 acres of historic furnace lands were set aside on August 3, 1938 as a national historic site. Today Hopewell has again taken its place as the center of a wider community. It joins state, county, and local agencies in the creation of the Hopewell Big Woods project. The goal is to preserve 72,000 acres of open land in southeast Pennsylvania. Mark Bird’s 15,000 acres form the core of this ambitious project.

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**Touring the Park**

1. The anthracite furnace was a failed attempt at hot-blast technology.
2. At hundreds of charcoal hearths, colliers turned 5,000 to 6,000 cords of wood into charcoal.
3. Teams of horses dumped charcoal into a cooling shed before moving it to the charcoal house.
4. Fellers carted charcoal, lime-clay, and iron ore to the connecting shed to the bridge house. At the base of the furnace the water wheel drove the blast machinery (not visible).
5. Workers’ purchases at the office ate a wage charged against credits for work.
6. In the cast house as molten iron was cast into stove plates and other products.
7. The blacksmith shop provided hardware and homemade goods for sale.
8. A schoolhouse (Foundation School) education was demonstrable but rudimentary.
10. The barn sheltered up to 36 draft animals and sold a year’s worth of feed.
11. In the springhouse and smokehouse, spring water and charcoal were used to cool wood smoke for smoking meats.
12. The overseer’s mansion, built in three stages, starting in 1770–1805, was re-modelled as late as 1870.

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**Enjoying Hopewell Furnace**

Hopewell Furnace is five miles south of Birdsboro on Pa. 345. It is 10 miles from the Pennsylvania Turnpike’s Morgantown interchange, via Pa. 23 East and Pa. 345 North.

The park visitor center and historic buildings are open Wednesday through Sunday and Memorial, Independence, Labor, and Columbus days. Summer hours are 9–5:30. The park’s newsletter provides details on special events and guided tours. (GPS coordinates: lat. 40.20864 N and long. 75.767660 W)

French Creek State Park (814-642-6000) offers picnicking, camping, and swimming (see map).

Hopewell Restored By the 1930s Hopewell and surrounding lands had little market value. In 1935 Louis Clingan Brooke sold the declining property to the U.S. Government. Originally made part of the French Creek Recreational Demonstration Area (RDA), RDAs were a Depression-era program to provide jobs for unemployed people. But a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) architect, Gustavus Mang, recognized the iron plantations historic value. CCC Camp 2131 moved into the area and stabilized the site structures. Thanks to the CCC, Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places June 26, 1970. Designated as a National Historic Landmark August 3, 1938. Directed by the National Park Service, research and restoration continue today.

For Your Safety Beware of bees. Please stay off unstable runways, fences, and the other historic structures that have been eroded severely. Do not enter fenced areas or feed livestock. Do not smoke in the historic site.

Hopewell Furnace is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and the National Park Foundation’s programs in America’s communities, visit www.nps.gov.