

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site
Saugus, Massachusetts



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The Roland W. Robbins Excavations, 1948-1953



Edited by William A. Griswold, Ph.D. and Donald W. Linebaugh, Ph.D.

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Roland W. Robbins. (Photograph 105 by Richard Merrill, 1949.)

Cover photograph: Saugus Iron Works shortly after the reconstruction was completed. (Photograph 1281 by Richard Merrill, 1954.)



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Massachusetts Bay Colony Tercentenary sign at the Saugus Iron Works. (Photograph 153 by Richard Merrill, 1950.)

Robbins showing discoveries to a group of Bluebirds and Camp Fire girls. (Photograph 245 by Richard Merrill, 1950.)



Preface

This book had very humble beginnings. Initially, I was simply looking for archeological information about the site in order to plan for some anticipated construction activities at the National Park Service's Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site. The management at Saugus was planning to make the site more accessible to visitors through the construction of Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant paths and internal structural improvements. The accessibility project had the potential to affect archeological resources. As a result, I was asked to draw up an archeological scope of work to comply with the legal requirements of Section 106 of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act. This was by no means an unusual request, but it was difficult because Roland Wells Robbins, who excavated at the Saugus Iron Works from 1948 to 1953, never published a final report on his work at the site. During his tenure at Saugus, Robbins conducted a very aggressive archeological project, often using heavy machinery to clear large areas of the site. His work provided the foundation for the reconstruction of the Saugus Iron Works in the early 1950s.

Several earlier studies on the Saugus Iron Works had summarized Robbins' work, often identifying areas where he had excavated, but there was still a great deal of ambiguity as to the location of all his excavations and what might remain.¹ As a result, it was very difficult to plan an effective testing strategy for archeological compliance. Speaking from experience, there is nothing worse from an archeological viewpoint than digging a test unit where one has been dug before. It makes for a good deal of expense to cover labor, cataloging, and reporting with little or no reward. Therefore, it became essential for me to delve deeper into the records to try and assess where Robbins had excavated. Ultimately, while I was still unable to map out all of the areas impacted by Robbins, I was able to put together a testing program for the Section 106 review. On the recommendation of the Massachusetts Historical Commission, which reviewed the archeological scope of work for the accessibility project, I contacted Dr. Donald Linebaugh, who had written his dissertation on Roland Robbins and his career in archeology.

Don's dissertation, which focused on Robbins' exploits in industrial archeology, and his subsequent book, *The Man Who Found Thoreau*, made for fascinating reading.² The more I read about Robbins and looked into the Saugus project, the more I became convinced that it was time to publish a book on the Saugus excavations. Linebaugh's expertise on Robbins' life and works made him a natural candidate for inclusion in the project and Don graciously agreed to be a co-editor and contributor to the volume. Several individuals at Saugus, including Carl Salmons-Perez, Curator; Janet Regan, Museum Specialist; and Curtis White, Interpretive Ranger, provided extensive and essential knowledge about the earlier project. Naturally, they would also need to be part of the book. Don and I also sought the help of Brigid Sullivan, Chief Collections Conservator for the Northeast Museum Services Center, National Park Service. In addition to these team members, the project would not have been possible without the support of Steven

Kesselman and Patricia S. Trap, retired and current Superintendents of Saugus, who agreed to fund the publication of this book.

In delving into the archives at Saugus Iron Works and the Roland Robbins Collection at the Thoreau Institute, it became clear that there was a huge volume of material pertaining to the earlier excavations. Robbins had captured much of the excavation through daily log entries, maps, drawings, letters, photographs, slides, and movies. Given the amount of information available, I am not quite sure why other enterprising archeologists never published a final report for the project. The large volume of material may have dissuaded interested individuals from tackling the project; even a very devoted, highly-organized graduate student would find the project a daunting one.

Roland Wells Robbins, a part-time house painter, window washer, and jack-of-all-trades turned vocational archeologist, did an extraordinary amount of archeological work in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and even into the 1980s. His interest in early industrial sites and his proven ability to produce archeological results meant that he was nearly always in demand for restoration projects, even without any academic credentials. Robbins worked at Saugus early in his archeological career. Prior to beginning the project, he had already gained some notoriety for his excavations of Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond.³ Because of his success at Walden Pond, he was invited by the First Iron Works Association to excavate at Saugus. Even though Robbins left the project before its completion, partly because of health-related issues, he went on to investigate many additional sites within New England, many of them ironworking sites.⁴

Robbins' work at Saugus was supported by the First Iron Works Association (FIWA), a core group of individuals formed to manage the historic Iron Works House. The FIWA was the first group organized, primarily by local supporters, to keep the house and grounds intact. The FIWA Reconstruction Committee, a small subgroup of interested individuals, was led by Quincy Bent, a former vice president of Bethlehem Steel. It is clear from Robbins' logs and associated correspondence that Bent, whose primary mission was the reconstruction of the Iron Works to venerate the American iron and steel industry's beginning, called the shots. While Robbins had some latitude in excavating areas that he found interesting, his primary role was to uncover remains associated with the seventeenth-century ironworks to aid in the reconstruction efforts.

Even though he never produced a final report, Robbins left a well-documented legacy on the Saugus Iron Works excavations. He kept an extensive daily log, noting what he did and where he did it. These detailed entries contain numerous sketch maps and illustrations documenting Robbins' discoveries. In addition to archeological information, the entries contain a great deal of extraneous information about Robbins' health, the weather, thoughts about other people working for the project, contractors, pro-

curement of services, his call to jury duty, etc. To his credit, Robbins took, or had taken, a large number of black and white pictures. The large-format photography done by Richard Merrill, the photographer hired by the FIWA, is truly incredible. Many of the Merrill photographs have been included in this volume. In addition to several thousand still pictures and slides, Robbins also took moving pictures of his excavations, some of which have been incorporated into the visitor orientation movie at Saugus.

In addition to Robbins, the FIWA hired a wealth of experienced professionals to aid in the reconstruction. For example, Dr. E. Neal Hartley, a historian from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was hired to write the history of the original ironworks. The result of Hartley's efforts, *Ironworks on the Saugus*, details the history of the facilities at Braintree (now Quincy) and Lynn (now Saugus).⁵ Hartley examined the total realm of the Hammersmith ironworks from its inception, through its three managers, and into its eventual decline. However, *Ironworks on the Saugus* also deals with the technology used, the lives of the workers, and the functioning of the company and its sponsors. This exceptionally well done book uses a plethora of historical documents to bring to life the social and legal relationships of the management, workers, and investors in the early iron manufacturing experiment.

I would certainly be remiss if I did not mention others to whom Robbins and the FIWA turned for help, analyses, and advice on the project. Dr. Herbert Uhlig of MIT aided Robbins in metal conservation and analyses and Dr. Elso Barghoorn of Harvard's Biological Laboratory did the same for wooden items. Other individuals included Dr. Laurence LaForge (geology), Barbara Lawrence (faunal analysis), Ruth Watkins (ceramics), Malcolm Watkins (ceramics and artifacts), Jack Lambert (forestry), and many, many others.

Robbins wrote final reports for many of the sites that he excavated and the lack of one at Saugus is somewhat puzzling. Certainly no one would have been in a better position to write a final report than Robbins, but he never produced one. It became clear in the final months of his involvement with the project that he felt intimidated by the management at the First Iron Works Association. This intimidation led Robbins to the conclusion that a final report would never be politically possible, but he never really elaborated on why he thought this way. Robbins' role changed toward the end of his employment with the project. He thought that the archeological discoveries no longer drove the reconstruction effort. Many of the decisions made by the architects and FIWA members flew in the face of the archeological discoveries. The reconstruction of the forge was a case in point. While Robbins found two anvil bases the final reconstruction included only one. Robbins became almost despondent that he could not convince the association that the forge would have had two hammers.

It is perhaps a bit fortuitous that the project is only now coming to fruition. This is not to say that Robbins would have produced a bad report if he had done one (although it may have been short on details),

but the advent of computer technology has greatly facilitated and enhanced the completed project. Janet Regan, Carl Salmons-Perez, and park volunteers have scanned and digitized most of the information about the project including Robbins' logs, maps, photographs, and correspondence. This has made the study and assessment of the records and photographs possible at a distance and has allowed the various authors to work on their respective chapters without rummaging through the collection.

Robbins focused on the seventeenth-century remains to the near exclusion of other periods, the precontact period being a case in point. While Robbins' notes occasionally mention the discovery of precontact finds (most from historic-period deposits), Robbins never devoted much time or energy to them. The compliance work done for the accessibility project hints at the importance of the site for the precontact era. For example, in a single one-by-one meter unit, close to 1,000 lithic flakes and tools were identified; other one-by-one meter units exposed intact pit features. Indeed, even briefly comparing the collection housed at Saugus with other systematic archeological collections illustrates the wide variety of tool types and materials that could have been reported more completely.

While Robbins paid only passing attention to the precontact-period resources, he focused on the larger seventeenth-century elements of the site with great success. Robbins unearthed numerous building foundations, waterwheels, and activity areas at Saugus. Although only a select few were reconstructed, Robbins' excavations greatly shaped the reconstruction for the furnace, forge, and to a lesser extent the slitting mill. The three buildings associated with the Jenks' area were never reconstructed, nor were the buildings on the plateau above the ravine, including a charcoal house and other miscellaneous structures.

Trained archeological crews would have recorded the discoveries in greater detail than Robbins did—that is indisputable. However, it is doubtful that trained archeologists would have made as many archeological discoveries or fulfilled the mission of the FIWA as completely as Robbins did. Rarely do archeologists get a chance to excavate as much of a site as he did at Saugus. Usually money and time constrain archeological projects. While some monetary and time constraints were placed upon Robbins, he operated on a budget and schedule that would make most professional archeologists jealous. While a few professional archeologists conducted large projects at the same time in various areas of the world with great proficiency, many of those projects were not nearly as well recorded and documented as Robbins' work at Saugus. His infamous reputation among professional archeologists is not entirely deserved.

In the last couple of years of the project, Robbins began to complain about his health and sought medical help. While no biological abnormality was found, the symptoms that he describes in his log entries seem to be stress related. Often the doctors would tell Robbins to get away for a while and leave Saugus alone. At times Robbins took their advice, if only for a limited time. In some instances, it seemed to help.

In his log entries, Robbins describes a multitude of duties that often required his attention at all hours of the day and on all seven days of the week. This schedule, coupled with the dysfunctional nature of many of the personalities involved with the project (at least as far as Robbins was concerned), would have served to stress almost anyone filling Robbins' shoes. He lived to a ripe old age so it seems that none of the stress that he experienced at this point in his life had any long-term health implications.

The archival collections used for this book primarily come from two places. The Saugus Iron Works contains a large and rich archival collection. This collection includes most of the FIWA papers and correspondence; Roland Robbins' logs, field note cards, maps, and personal slide collection; Richard Merrill's photographs; Charles Rufus Harte's papers and photographs; many of the Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, Kehoe and Dean drawings and sketches for the reconstruction; the Lencicki and Sherman filmstrip on Saugus ironworks; Charles Overly's paintings; several reels of Robbins' period excavation footage; and taped interviews with Roland Robbins, J. Sanger Attwill, and Conover Fitch. The Thoreau Society/Thoreau Institute in Lincoln, Massachusetts, also has an extensive collection of documents pertaining to the Saugus project and other projects that Robbins engaged in throughout his life. While most of the Saugus Iron Works collections have been cataloged, the Thoreau Institute collections have not. We have tried to provide as much information as possible in the citation of sources to aid researchers who may want to continue the research.

The following chapters tell the story of the Saugus excavations through the lens of over fifty years of hindsight. They depict the dramatic highs and lows of the project and document the thoughts and actions of the individuals involved. As extensive as the book may appear, the reader should realize that this is only the beginning. Numerous studies and theses are concealed within the vast archives, waiting for others researchers to tell more stories. Toward this end, Saugus Iron Works will continue to put these resources on line to spur the interest of individuals willing to undertake the very rewarding task of additional analyses. We hope that the following pages provide as much enjoyment to readers as the team had in putting together the book.

William A. Griswold

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without the cooperation of many individuals. The editors would like to extend a word of sincere thanks to those individuals who helped make this book possible including former Saugus Iron Works Superintendent Steven Kesselman, who agreed to support the project, and current Superintendent Patricia S. Trap, who found money to pay for the printing and distribution of the volume. The contributors to this book (Janet Regan and Curtis White of Saugus Iron Works and Brigid Sullivan of the National Park Service's Northeast Museum Services Center) deserve special recognition for their devotion to the cause. The expert knowledge of park resources embodied in these individuals instills completeness to this work. Carl Salmons-Perez, Curator of Saugus Iron Works, and Jeff Cramer, Curator at the Thoreau Institute, both shared their various resources without hindrance. Special thanks are also extended to Suzanne Linebaugh who did the technical editing for the completed manuscript. Thank you all!

We also wish to thank the Thoreau Society for access to the Roland Robbins Collections. Established in 1941, The Thoreau Society is the oldest and largest organization devoted to an American author. The Society has long contributed to the dissemination of knowledge about Thoreau by collecting books, manuscripts, and artifacts relating to Thoreau and his contemporaries, by encouraging the use of its collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, and by publishing articles in two Society periodicals. The Thoreau Institute, where the Society's Collections reside, is owned and managed by the Walden Woods Projects (for more information, visit www.walden.org). For more information about The Thoreau Society, visit www.thoreausociety.org.