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14.1 A dapper Roland Robbins in his Saugus office mid-1953, just prior to his resignation. (Photograph 2160 from the Roland W. Robbins slide collection, 1953, Saugus Iron Works. Courtesy The Thoreau Society® Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.)

Saugus Iron Works Post-1954

William A. Griswold and Donald W. Linebaugh

For over 50 years, the Saugus Iron Works site has provided an unparalleled educational setting for learning about early colonial ironworking in America. Management and interpretation of the site were the responsibility of the First Iron Works Association (FIWA) from 1954 until the site was officially transferred to the National Park Service in 1969. This chapter presents the history of the site following the completion of the initial archeological excavation and reconstruction program in 1954. The management of the site and its archeological resources and later archeological investigations of previously unexplored areas and work done in advance of specific ground disturbing projects receive particular emphasis. While Roland Robbins resigned from the project in 1953, he periodically corresponded with staff and managers of the site in an attempt to help with interpretation of his excavation work.

FIWA History

The initial period of archeological investigations at the ironworks officially ended in 1954 with the opening of the reconstruction and the resignation of archeology supervisor Steve Whittlesey. The resignation of Roland Robbins in July 1953, however, effectively brought the major fieldwork to a close. With the principal excavations completed and the reconstruction of all the buildings, except for the slitting mill, largely finished, Whittlesey and his crew focused on finishing up loose ends, particularly in the dock and slitting mill areas. In the process, they provided what help they could to the architects, who were struggling with the design of the slitting mill (see Chapter 6).

Robbins's resignation in 1953 stemmed from his growing frustration with the project and the site's overwhelming intricacies.¹ Archeologist Marley Brown writes that "it would appear that Robbins's resignation was triggered in part by an argument with Quincy Bent." Historian Stephen Carlson has likewise reported that "increasingly, Robbins came into conflict with Quincy Bent over the extent of the remaining archaeological effort."² Robbins's decision to resign grew out of a variety of obstacles, including his continuing frustration with the decisions of the FIWA, the Reconstruction Committee, and the architects, an extremely complex archeological site, overwork caused by responsibility for many non-archeological issues, and the cumulative effects of these stresses on his physical and mental health.³

It was decided by Restoration officials after much research and consideration, that Saugus marked the first really effective working of American iron ores into useful metal. Here, at Saugus, was the first documented successful and sustained production of cast and wrought iron in the New World. As such, it is the true cradle of our steel industry.

Edward L. Ryerson, Chairman of the Executive Committee, Inland Steel Company, "Restoration Dedicated at Impressive Ceremony," reprinted in *First Iron Works Gazette*, Fall 1954.

Robbins, the Reconstruction Committee members, particularly Quincy Bent, and the architects had regular conflicts about priorities for the excavation. Robbins and his field crew were frequently instructed to move from one area to another for the benefit of the architects as they sought to answer specific questions related to designing the reconstructed buildings. For example, while focused on the forge excavations in 1951 and 1952, Robbins was repeatedly asked to reexcavate areas around the blast furnace as the architects sought to finalize plans for that structure. In addition, some of Robbins' discoveries did not fit into the overall plan for the reconstruction, as understood by senior members of the Reconstruction Committee, and thus were seen as taking time and effort away from the task of reconstructing the principal ironworks structures.

Robbins' work on the Jenks site proved particularly problematic. While working in the dock area, he discovered the foundations of a forge operation along the furnace tailrace that he believed belonged to colonial ironworker Joseph Jenks. He became very interested in this site and eventually identified three separate waterwheels that had powered various components of the operation, as well as Jenks's forge hearth. While this area was exceptionally rich in features and artifacts, Robbins was forced to abandon it to return to work on the forge and slitting mill areas. Robbins notes in his daily log that he received "a copy of Bent's letter to Attwill where he shows concern for 'forge-finery, slitting mill and wharf' restoration, not Jenk's area."⁴ Not surprisingly, Bent was focused on getting the buildings the FIWA had committed to reconstruct finished and opened to the public, while Robbins was intent on uncovering what he saw as the entire archeological story of the ironworks.

In addition to working on the rolling and slitting mill site in early 1953, Robbins also sought to restore the area along Central Street to its mid-seventeenth-century topographic configuration.⁵ He notes that he returned to excavate in the Central Street area in June 1953, running test trenches to "determine the extent of fill" and "pick up contours that existed there 3 centuries ago." This process continued until July, when Quincy Bent ordered him to stop all work. Several days later, Robbins resigned. While his resignation appears to be rather abrupt, in actuality he had been increasingly unhappy with the management style of Bent and others and their plans for the reconstruction. Robbins felt that more work was necessary to fully understand and interpret the complex, particularly the slitting mill site, while the FIWA was anxious to complete the restoration and open it to the public.

With Robbins' resignation in July 1953, the FIWA and the American Iron and Steel Institute turned to his assistant Stephen Whittlesey to complete the remaining archeological work at the site. Robbins had hired Whittlesey as his "civil engineer" in April 1952, so they had worked together on the later excavation areas, including the forge, dock, and slitting mill sites. Whittlesey had no previous archeological experience and was hired to map and document the excavation.⁶ However, he became very familiar with the overall process and frequently served as the site supervisor in Robbins' absence. Robbins later re-

The fill over the wharf sill and in back and under the wall had some small boulders in it, but was for the most part made up of vitreous slag and sandy gravel consolidated in some places into a compact mass. This consolidation is especially evident at the bottom of the wall where iron works fill surrounds the boulders and appears to be the wall's foundation.

Stephen M. Whittlesey, "Observations on Wall Over Wharf Sill," September 10, 1953.



14.2 Workers grooming slope by the Jenks site with reconstructed blast furnace, forge, and slitting mill buildings in background. (Photograph 1184 by Richard Merrill, 1953.)

flected that “inasmuch as Steven Whittlesey had been my civil engineer for the past 15 months and had been with me in the field work, he was my most logical successor.”⁷

While Robbins kept voluminous, detailed daily logs of his activities during his five years at Saugus, Whittlesey provided few documentary records beyond some field drawings and notes of his final field work at the slitting mill site and dock area. As an engineer, Whittlesey produced drawings that provide good detail of the features identified, such as the wharf cribbing and sills. His limited notes also offer clear observations on the final months of work at the site. For example, on September 10, 1953, he records work on a wall foundation over the wharf sill, commenting that they had gotten “a fairly good idea of how the wall was built”⁸ In terms of the overall archeology, however, little is known about the period between Robbins’ resignation in July 1953 and Whittlesey’s resignation in September 1954.

The initial archeological work officially came to an end with the opening of the site to the public on September 17, 1954. Having spent almost \$2 million on the reconstruction, the American Iron and Steel Institute engaged in a major publicity campaign to highlight its participation in the project and organized a gala ceremony on opening day.⁹ The ceremonies began at 2 p.m. on September 17 and included remarks by Benjamin F. Fairless, Chairman of the Board of U.S. Steel Corporation, Edward L. Ryerson, Chairman of the Executive Committee of Inland Steel Company, the Honorable Christian A. Herter, Governor of Massachusetts, and a host of other state and local officials. The *First Iron Works Gazette* reported that “despite a cold rain, more than 1,200 First Iron Works Association members, steel industry official, historians and civic officials were on hand when the ceremonies began.”¹⁰ The speakers addressed the audience from a platform “decorated in red, white and blue bunting” and framed by the restored buildings.¹¹

Those in attendance listened to speeches that touted the site’s far-reaching significance as “the true cradle of our steel industry.”¹² Steel industry executive Ryerson, in a speech that drew on typical Cold War rhetoric, noted that the site’s importance reached well beyond the steel industry.¹³ “Its real significance,” he explained, “arises out of the fact that this extraordinary exhibit is a perfect living illustration of what individual initiative and American freedom can do.”¹⁴ Striking a very similar chord, Governor Herter noted that “perhaps one of the most significant things about this restoration is the fact that it is the very first industrial restoration in the United States.” He continued that “all of us are tremendously conscious of the meaning of industry in the colossal growth of this nation. In fact, it alone has allowed us to remain a free nation, and is our greatest bulwark toward remaining a free nation in the future.”¹⁵ The governor ended by proclaiming that he hoped the site was “only the beginning of a recognition of industry—not as many of us think of it, an inhuman materialistic part of our life, but as an integral part of our existence.”¹⁶ Like the governor, steel executive Fairless touted the history of industrial growth represented by the site and its important linkage to individual freedoms and expressed hope that “it will serve as a living example of how from this humble beginning, there developed the great steel industry of today by

We hope the Saugus Ironworks Restoration will become more than just a tourist attraction. We hope that it will provide an inspiration for our youth as they see again what men with vision, with courage, and with ingenuity built in what was then a wilderness.

Benjamin F. Fairless, Chairman of the Board, United States Steel Corporation. “Restoration Dedicated at Impressive Ceremony,” reprinted in *First Iron Works Gazette*, Fall 1954.

14.3 September 17, 1954, grand opening with U.S. Senator Leverett Saltonstall giving his address. Massachusetts Governor Herter is seated to Saltonstall's right and Inland Steel Chairman Benjamin Fairless is seated to Herter's right. (Photograph 1247 by Richard Merrill, 1954.)



virtue of the freedom of individual initiative equaled nowhere else in the world.”¹⁷ Following the lengthy speechifying, the audience was invited to tour the reconstructed buildings, Iron Work’s House, and the museum.

Robbins and his wife Geraldine were among those in the audience that September day. Robbins’ last entry in his daily log for Saugus briefly records the ceremony, noting that “today was the official dedication of the Saugus Ironworks. Though the weather was bad, it being overcast and rainy, the ceremonies were excellent. Everything went wonderfully well. Gerry and I were there for the preview and the buffet lunch.”¹⁸ Robbins’ log closes by noting the resignation of Whittlesey and the end of the archeological excavation that had run almost continuously since the fall of 1948.¹⁹

More than five thousand people visited the site in the months following the opening ceremony, suggesting that it got off to a great start.²⁰ While attendance grew for the first couple of years, visitation eventually began to decline, causing a series of management issues that would eventually result in the National Park Service’s acquisition of the site.

In September 1954, the FIWA hired Frederick Bonsal as the site custodian and curator. Bonsal worked under the direction of a board of management appointed by the directors of the FIWA.²¹ Bonsal and the Board of Management set out to run the site in a business-like manner, with an eye toward both fiscal responsibility and increased public attendance. The FIWA had a bank balance of approximately \$16,000.00 and showed annual expenses of approximately \$2,000.00 in May 1955.²² By the annual meeting in 1957, however, the organization had an annual operating deficit of almost \$6,000. It was noted in the minutes that many of the early members of the FIWA had died or reached retirement age and were no longer able to support the organization financially.²³ Although the financial side of the operation was showing strain, visitor numbers were growing; Bonsal reported to the meeting that between April and June 1957, approximately 8,000 people visited the ironworks, an increase of more than 3,000 over the same period the previous year.²⁴

Bonsal and Robbins began what would become a lifelong friendship and correspondence shortly after the opening of the site, when Bonsal was asked to check with Robbins about “a loan of artifacts to a Concord school.”²⁵ Robbins responded that if given a bit more information, he would try to “recall its disposition,” as he recalled “arranging for no such exhibit in Concord.”²⁶ While he expressed his sympathy regarding the missing artifacts, he pointedly noted his additional concern

for the thousands of fascinating artifacts that have been denied the classification which they so rightfully deserve. If they are not properly recorded for posterity, they will be meaningless. As it is they have been carelessly handled during the past year,

It is a proud past, and the re-creation of it stands today in Saugus—the great furnace laid up in stone (with cement, alas!) stands where the old did; the water wheels turn (with town water so far); the bellows rise and fall; the hammer drops and the whole integrated ironwork, restored by careful historical research, is there to see. And even the ironmaster might be looking out of the window of the house, in spirit, to see the flame leap out of the furnace top and the oxen draw the finished iron to the wharf.

It is a shrine worth visiting.

“Our Industrial Shrine,” *The Boston Herald*, September 24, 1954, p. 26.

14.4 Crowd watching forge hammer demonstration on opening day, September 17, 1954. (Photograph 1266 by Richard Merrill, 1954.)



adding to the difficulty of the work to be done. This is inexcusable, for I have volunteered to assist with this work, and at no expense to anyone.²⁷

Robbins went on to note that the attention to a few missing artifacts, with an “absence of concern for the vast collection of unclassified artifacts, which represent the greatest array of relics of the seventeenth century yet uncovered in America, can be likened to an awful lot of ‘fiddling being done, while Rome burns.’”²⁸

Bonsal reported to Robbins in 1958 that “everything here is, with the exception of important proposed maintenance repairs or improvements in the Restoration area, ‘tip top.’”²⁹ He added that there was “lots of snow, cold weather, and the usual day-to-day problems.”³⁰ Among these day-to-day problems he included “our mutual friend, JSA.”³¹ A strong and mutual distrust and dislike of FIWA President J. Sanger Attwill was shared by Bonsal and Robbins and emerges in their correspondence of over 30 years; both men clearly credited much of the stress they felt at Saugus to Attwill.

While the general fund of the FIWA was back in the black by 1959, the treasurer’s report noted that the “entire maintenance fund is supported by donations from the Iron and Steel Institute Without the continued support of the Iron and Steel Institute, the available funds of the First Iron Works Association would be insufficient to maintain this property for one year.”³² As will be seen, the reliance on the Institute for annual operating funds became increasingly problematic as the early supporters and leaders of the project, such as Quincy Bent and Louise DuPont Crowninshield, passed away; these individuals had exerted considerable influence on the Institute for continued support of the Saugus site.

In a 1959 director’s report, Bonsal notes that the site continued to garner good public relations, with articles in local newspapers and appearances by staff on Boston TV stations. He also explains that some 15,000 brochures had been distributed to a wide range of libraries, museums, and travel agencies in an effort to further increase attendance.³³ Bonsal reports that the FIWA expected “to get considerable national attention when a book, *Hidden America*, written by our famous archaeologist, Roland Robbins, is published this year.” He explains that “Robbie tells me the longest chapter is devoted to the Restoration.”³⁴ Bonsal also discusses a visitor survey that was done to “determine what kinds of people visit the restoration, why they visit it, and what they think of it.”³⁵ The survey indicated that most visitors found the site hard to find and that they had heard of the site via word of mouth rather than any publicity efforts; it appears that school groups formed a very significant percentage of visitors during the school year.

The biggest single expenditure for the FIWA, other than personnel costs, was the upkeep and maintenance of the physical plant. Although newly constructed, the buildings and their systems, such as the

You will be glad to know that the great shear in the slitting mill works as it should. Yesterday I cut a nail rod with it as easily as cutting cottage cheese and it cut one of A. M. Byers’ best wrought iron flats, ½” x 3 ½” cold, as easily as one would cut a mild cheddar. Neal Harley now wants to cut the long flats in the forge in half since they are too long and he and I will do this on our next visit.

Conover Fitch, Jr., to Charles M. Parker, April 26, 1955.

14.5 Robbins and curator Fred Bonsal standing in front of restored ironworks structures in June 1959. (Photograph 2382 from the Roland W. Robbins slide collection, 1959, Saugus Iron Works. Courtesy The Thoreau Society® Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.)

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working waterwheels, furnace bellows, trip hammers, and slitting mill, all required extensive upkeep, particularly those that were exposed to the water of the waterpower system. While many minor adjustments to the various operating machines and buildings were required in the years immediately after the site opened to the public, within just five years more major repairs were needed. For example, a March 1959 letter from construction contractor W. M. Bogart to Perry, Shaw, Hepburn and Dean noted that

the four uprights holding the counter weight for the bellows on each side of the big doors on the outside of the Refinery Building, were rotted off at the bottom, in a way similar to those at the Casting Shed, and to be repaired in about the same manner.³⁶

In addition to wear and tear and deterioration from weather, many of these systems were designed by architects who had never worked with this type of industrial plant, and thus were experimental. As the various operations, such as the bellows and trip hammer, were put into regular service, it was also necessary to tinker with the original design when it became clear that a component or element was not working as planned. In a 1956 letter, H. M. Kraner writes to Conover Fitch that

I am sending you herewith some sketches showing changes in the Saugus Furnace Hearths and Hearth plates to take care of the expansion of these plates against the masonry walls. I have investigated packing material which would be suitable to use between masonry and iron plates and find that the material called "Fibrefrac" . . . is what would be necessary to use.³⁷

With funding from the American Iron and Steel Institute, the FIWA could continue to maintain its annual operations of the site and keep current with its heavy maintenance demands, particularly in terms of the wooden buildings. However, in 1961, FIWA directors Fred England and E. Neal Hartley were called to a special meeting at the Institute in New York and informed that due to a decline in the steel business, it could no longer finance the ironworks.³⁸ The FIWA asked the Institute to reconsider or to at least consider providing a reduced annual operating budget. In the meantime, talk turned to cost-cutting measures and other sources of funding, such as the Carnegie Foundation; it was noted that a last resort was "turning the Iron Works over to the National Park Service."³⁹

At another special meeting of the FIWA board in November 1961, the talk of budget reduction and fund raising continued. Ideas ranged from asking the town of Saugus to reduce the price of water used by the operation to the addition of a snack bar to increase income. Two principal ideas, a fundraising drive for an endowment and help from the National Park Service (NPS), were the focus of discussion. Although the group held out hope that it could regain the support of the American Iron and Steel Institute with

The final arrangement of plates in the hearths agrees very closely with the number of plates and the total weight of plates carried in the Saugus inventories. It does not seem strange to us that after a full season, during which fires were kept going in the hearths, the plates need a certain amount of re-packing or re-setting.

Conover Fitch, Jr., to H. M. Kraner,
April 26, 1956.

14.6 Fabrication of paddle wheel for forge, November 2, 1953 (Photograph 1041 by Richard Merrill, 1953.)



some lobbying from its members and friends, the board voted to immediately sell some of the properties owned by the FIWA around the periphery of the site.⁴⁰ Bonsal wrote to Robbins in December 1961 that

there is MUCH that I might write you as to the general situation here, especially with respect to the financial status of the Maintenance Fund. Actually, we have enough funds, now, to see us through January so, unless something constructive happens VERY SHORTLY, the Fred Bonsals may be selling apples on the streets of Boston and/or Lynn. And I am not fooling!⁴¹

In early 1962, the board received a reply from the Institute to their plea for future financial assistance. The Institute, wrote President Max Howell, would provide a final \$25,000 in support, provided that the board agreed to devote some of its own funds to the operation and maintenance, immediately seek other more permanent sources of support (including the NPS, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and local funding sources and/or governments), and acknowledge that this was to be the Institute's final contribution to the FIWA. The board quickly voted to accept the offer and began exploring the question of fundraising; a professional consultant reported to the board that it would need some \$2 million to adequately endow the site.⁴²

At a board meeting in March 1962, Bonsal resigned and the board discussed hiring a part-time replacement in order to save money.⁴³ It was also announced that an inquiry had been made to the National Park Service regarding its acquisition of the site. The board of directors learned that a study to consider the site as a unit of the NPS was scheduled for late 1962 or early 1963. While the FIWA tried valiantly to raise funds, it never really succeeded. At a strategy session with representatives of the FIWA and the American Iron and Steel Institute, it was decided to meet with U. S. senators in Washington to discuss the possible acquisition of the site by the NPS.⁴⁴

Attendees at the annual FIWA meeting in June 1963 learned that the Association had an annual deficit of about \$12,000, and that it would only be able to cover this from the organization's treasury for at most another two years.⁴⁵ This meeting resulted in a renewed call for help in contacting members of the NPS Advisory Board and members of Congress to lobby for the support of an NPS takeover of the site; in particular, it was recommended that Senator Edward Kennedy be approached for his support.⁴⁶

A National Park Service Site

As discussed above, a takeover of the site by the National Park Service was not universally accepted by the FIWA membership. In fact, there was open opposition to the idea and several members of the association considered a government takeover of the site an option of last resort.⁴⁷ However, the opposition

The opening you are dedicating here today goes far beyond the borders of Massachusetts. It is, in effect a recognition of the kind of initiative, the kind of leadership, the kind of skilled workmen that Massachusetts, in its great history has produced not only for the state itself, but for the whole of the United States.

Christian A. Herter, Governor of Massachusetts, "Restoration Dedicated at Impressive Ceremony," reprinted in the *First Iron Works Gazette*, Fall 1954.

14.7 Visitors watching demonstration of slitting mill waterwheel. (Photograph 1194 by Richard Merrill, 1954.)



to government control does not seem to have evolved as a result of the inherent distrust of government. Rather, it appears to have been a result of anger directed toward the American Iron and Steel Institute, whose withdrawal of financial support seemed a shirking of responsibility; many FIWA members felt betrayed and abandoned by the industry. E. Neal Hartley keenly summarizes this view in a March 1, 1962, letter to George Rose, vice president and secretary of the Institute:

That this has been the Institute's preferred course of action has seemed clear from that summer day when Sanger and I were called to New York to receive the sad news that the steel industry was withdrawing its support of a project which it had chosen to undertake and into which it had poured vast sums of money. I think I see why this has been so. The steel industry could slough off a responsibility and pass it along to "government." Its publicists might even manage to make such an action sound like a public service gesture Nevertheless, where I came from one turned to government only when one was in dire extremity. One went on relief only after exhausting all possible alternatives I am not anti-government. I have the highest regard for the job the National Park Service does. I am, however, bound to favor private enterprise in all instances save only those in which it clearly breaks down.⁴⁸

The FIWA made a valiant attempt to make things work without government intervention. As discussed above, meeting minutes note several steps that were taken to try to reduce costs and increase income.⁴⁹ The various attempts to keep the ironworks in private hands, however, ultimately failed. The FIWA began to actively court the National Park Service, fulfilling a prophesy foretold by Sumner Appleton as early as 1941.⁵⁰ It was announced at a March 24, 1962, meeting that the FIWA had contacted the NPS, which had scheduled a study of the site for appropriateness at the end of 1962 or early in 1963.⁵¹ The board voted on May 6, 1963, that its endorsement of the NPS taking over the ironworks would be held in abeyance until after the study was completed.⁵² Evidently, the board did not want to tip its hand. The NPS completed the study in the fall of 1963 and FIWA President J. Sanger Attwill reported during the December 9, 1963, meeting that the NPS had found the site eligible.⁵³

Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior, sent a letter to Attwill announcing the designation of Saugus Iron Works as a National Historic Site on May 20, 1965.

I am pleased to inform you that the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments at its 52nd meeting, April 12-15, 1965, recommended that the Saugus Iron Works be established as a national historic site. I concur in the recommendations of the Board and have so informed Senator Saltonstall, Senator Kennedy and Representative Macdonald.

Wednesday, 11.40 to 2.45, April 10, 1968

We [Edwin W. Small, Project Coordinator, NPS, and Roland Robbins] talked for more than 3 hours, not only about the Saugus Ironworks, but about other restorations, etc., in general. I told him I was happy to see the Ironworks end up in the National Park System.

Roland Robbins, notes, The Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.



14.8 FIWA President J. Sanger Attwill receives award, June 11, 1955. (Photograph by Richard Merrill, 1955.)

Your letter of March 16 to Director George B. Hartzog, Jr. of the National Park Service, offering to donate the properties constituting the restored Saugus Iron Works to the Federal Government for inclusion in the proposed national historic site has been brought to my attention. I wish to add my thanks to those expressed by the National Park Service for this generous offer. We shall look forward to working with you in the future on this proposal.⁵⁴

The transfer of Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site to the National Park Service began to be debated in Congress following the recommendation of the Advisory Board. During the debate, the bill, known as S. 2309 in the Senate and H.R. 1308 in the House, first went to the House of Representatives where it was passed. When it reached the Senate, Edward Kennedy testified in support of the bill and gave out copies of the pamphlet prepared to document the history of the restoration. President Lyndon Johnson signed the bill into law on April 5, 1968 (Public Law 90-282). The bill appropriated \$400,000 to carry out the purposes of the act. The minutes of the April 29, 1968, FIWA meeting record the passage of the law.⁵⁵ It was now official: the Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site was part of the National Park Service.

The period between 1965 and the official transfer of the site in 1969 was one of relief for members of the FIWA Board and an opportunity for reflection on and negotiation with the National Park Service for the continued operation of the site. The FIWA actually remained a chartered organization until 1978, when it was officially disbanded, finalizing various arrangements with the NPS, selling several properties that didn't convey to the Federal government, and disposing of miscellaneous materials and the remaining funds in the treasury.⁵⁶ On October 14, 1978, three days after the 35th anniversary of the founding of the FIWA, the board of directors voted to surrender the charter and disband the organization.⁵⁷

Roland Robbins Reemerges at Saugus Iron Works

After he left the project in 1953, Robbins made only sporadic visits to the site, but kept up with events through friends, acquaintances, and media reports. Robbins had devoted several years of his life and career to the development of the site and had become invested in the outcome of the project. He knew that the ironworks was part of his legacy.

Soon after Saugus became a unit of the National Park Service, Robbins contacted NPS representatives. For some unknown reason, NPS officials ignored Robbins and spurned his offers of educational assistance during the final years of the 1960s. In his notes, Robbins records that he contacted Edwin Small, Project Coordinator for the NPS on Wednesday, April 10, 1968, and offered to help with the site.⁵⁸ Almost a year later, Robbins contacted Benjamin Zerby, Superintendent at Minute Man National Histori-

The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations hereinafter specified by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of the said parks, monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

National Park Service Organic Act of 1916 (16 U.S.C., Section 1, 39 Stat. 535).

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14.9 Robbins' invitation to the Saugus Iron Works dedication. (Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society's Collections at The Thoreau Institute, at Walden Woods. Courtesy The Thoreau Society® Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.)

cal Park and the person now in charge of Saugus Iron Works, and offered to conduct a slide show for him and members of the staff illustrating discoveries made during the five years of excavation.⁵⁹ On August 10, 1969, Robbins notes that he met with NPS Ranger J. Paul Okey at the ironworks. Robbins again volunteered his services and offered to educate staff on the archeological discoveries and told Okey that he made the same offer to Zerby some time ago. The staff of the ironworks was uninformed, in Robbins' assessment. The staff lacked a copy of his daily notes, which Robbins offered to loan them.⁶⁰ Reading Robbins' daily log, one can feel his frustration with the lack of response by the NPS. Finally, on November 5, 1969, Robbins phoned Okey, but instead talked to Glen Gray, the first superintendent of Saugus Iron Works NHS. Robbins, Grey, and Zerby agreed to meet in December. When the meeting finally took place in January 1970 at Robbins' house, the attendees also included Cynthia Pollack, the business manager for the park. Robbins complained in his daily log that "there was so much stuff they didn't know about."⁶¹ He and Grey continued to have meetings and discussions during February and March 1970. Robbins seems to have become friends with Gray, and was genuinely disappointed when he accepted a superintendency at Saratoga National Historical Park.

The written interaction between Robbins and the NPS then stopped until 1975, at least according to the records contained at the Saugus Iron Works and Thoreau Society collections. Early in March 1975, James Deetz, professor of archeology at Brown University and Assistant Director of Plimoth Plantation, notified Robbins that two of his graduate students were going to conduct a survey of past archeological work at Saugus Iron Works. Deetz asked Robbins to consult on the project.⁶² Robbins readily accepted and set up a date with Deetz to meet with Marley Brown III and Mary Beaudry. Robbins was not satisfied with the \$50/day fee that Deetz offered for the meeting, but notes that more substantial consulting fees would be available later. When the meeting took place on May 17, 1975, Geoffrey Moran also attended. This interaction is very interesting considering what had transpired between Deetz, Robbins, and the NPS during the first half of the decade.

As noted earlier Robbins was not an academically trained archeologist. He developed his expertise in historic and industrial archeology from his project experience. However, during the 1950s and 1960s historical archeology was beginning to carve out a niche among academically trained archeologists. While acceptance of historical archeology was slow to take hold among academics, it seems to have made progress every year toward its ultimate acceptance as a viable subfield of anthropological archeology. In 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act was passed, which began to set standards for archeological excavation. Those who were not academically trained were increasingly seen as rogue practitioners of an academic discipline. "Robbins' approaches to archaeological research and excavation did not improve with respect to the increasingly rigorous standards of the professional community; in fact, they may have deteriorated with his increasing alienation by the academic community, and his growing desire to separate himself and his work from that of the academy."⁶³

Monday, 9.40 a.m. to 2.50 p.m., January 26, 1970:

Benjamin Zerby, Supt. of the Minute Man National Park, Cynthia Pollack and Glen Gray were at my house. I served coffee and cookies when they got here, then some clam chowder at noon. I showed pictures of the S.I.R., covering details that I normally wouldn't in a lecture. They were very much interested and impressed There was so much stuff they didn't know about. It was left that I would go thru my papers and see what I have in the nature of artifact information, etc., and let them know and we would plan to get together again soon.

Roland Robbins, notes, The Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.

14.10 Glen Gray, first superintendent of Saugus Iron Works NHS. Gray is pictured here from a later assignment at Saratoga NHP. (Courtesy Saratoga National Historical Park.)



One incident brought about by the increasing professionalization of the discipline is key for understanding later interaction between Robbins, the academic archeologists, and the NPS. Following a lecture in Connecticut, Robbins was approached by William J. Morris, Director of the Connecticut Historical Commission, about doing some work for the state. However, because the work was a federally-funded project, Morris had to submit Robbins' name and résumé to the Keeper of the National Register for approval. The Keeper referred the matter to the NPS, which rejected Robbins' qualifications as an archeologist.⁶⁴

Robbins wrote to Massachusetts Senator Edward W. Brooke for help. Senator Brooke asked the NPS for a "complete report" on the situation, but was clearly disturbed by the lack of a direct answer from the NPS to Robbins' questions. Following an additional inquiry, NPS relented and agreed that they could not prohibit any organization from employing Robbins. "Although Robbins participated in several cultural resource management projects during the period and was able to capitalize on the interest in historic sites generated by the nation's bicentennial, he found himself increasingly marginalized by professional academic archeologists who considered his lack of education and excavation standards unacceptable and his populist views alarming."⁶⁵ Despite this dismissive attitude, Robbins continued to interact with the NPS, Deetz, and other academics throughout the 1970s.

The work done at Saugus Iron Works by Deetz's students, Marley R. Brown III and Mary Beaudry, focused on assessing Robbins' work with an eye toward future excavations at the site. It included a summary of Robbins' daily notes and maps indicating where excavations had taken place and where archeological potential remained. For the most part, Brown and Beaudry refrained from writing a critical evaluation of Robbins' work at the site and instead summarized the information left behind by Robbins. This laid the groundwork for the later work of Geoffrey Moran, who in 1976 conducted an excavation program on the area to the north of the Iron Works House.

Correspondence contained in the Thoreau Society collection identifies the differences in approach to the site between Robbins and academic archeologists and NPS officials. On one hand, Deetz wanted to bring in many of his students to conduct scientific excavations, much as he himself had done at Plimouth Plantation.⁶⁶ Robbins, on the other hand, wanted to restore more of the site's original setting, reconstructing the Jenks area and removing more of the retaining wall along Central Street to recreate the canal that ran from the cranberry bog. In an August 1975 letter to Marley Brown, Robbins wondered if the archeological work would happen at all.⁶⁷

In 1976, several people made contact with Robbins about the Saugus Iron Works project. Richard Cote, an intern at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, borrowed slides from Robbins and tried to get the NPS to copy all of his slides.⁶⁸ Geoffrey Moran visited Robbins a couple of times and

Monday, 9 A.M. to 4.45 P.M., May 19, 1975:

I spent the day at the site going over stuff for their master plan. [Robbins, Brown, Beaudry, and Moran] The Jenks' area will receive priority, etc. THEY SAID THAT THE NEW NATIONAL PARK POLICY IS THAT ALL AREAS MUST BE TAKEN DOWN SO THAT ALL ARTIFACTS FOUND AT EVERY ½" LEVEL MUST BE RECORDED!!!!!! I SAID THIS WAS IMPOSSIBLE AND STUPID WHERE ONE GOES DOWN GREAT DISTANCES IN DEPTH IN HISTORIC SOILS . . . I SAID THAT ONE WOULD NEVER REACH 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY LEVELS AT THIS RATE . . . THEY WOULD SPEND THEIR BUDGETS AND BE COMPLETELY CONFUSED WITH NO ACCOMPLISHMENT!!! THEY AGREED.

Roland Robbins, notes, The Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.

14.11 Letter from James Deetz to Roland Robbins about Saugus project. (Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at The Thoreau Institute, at Walden Woods. Courtesy The Thoreau Society® Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.)

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Robbins showed him slides highlighting the project. Robbins offered to plot features that he had identified in the field to assist Moran with the excavations, but it appears that Moran never took Robbins up on the offer. Moran conducted excavations in May 1976. While he wrote a summary of the work, a more in-depth report was completed by Alex Townsend of John Milner Associates.

Robbins' interaction with the NPS continued to deteriorate during 1977. Cynthia Pollack, park superintendent Jim Gott, and park historian Steve Carlson met in August 1977 for one of Robbins' slide shows. Correspondence in the Thoreau Society's collection indicates that Robbins began to become quite irritated with the NPS after this point. In one letter, he wrote, "More than ever, it becomes quite evident, that unless there is something that suddenly gets the attention of the bureaucratic system, there is little one can do about conducting legitimate business with it."⁶⁹ He later comments, "Come to think of it, it was 5 weeks ago I entertained the National Park people here for 2 days. I have yet to hear a word, written or oral, of thanks, nor of their interest in the Gleason-Robbins photographs . . . if, indeed, such exists!"⁷⁰

The Gleason-Robbins photographs that Robbins referred to are an interesting example of Robbins' business acumen. Herbert Gleason, an early professional photographer, visited and photographed numerous National Parks beginning in 1899.⁷¹ Over six thousand of the negatives from his collection were purchased by Robbins from a Boston studio in 1947. Robbins attempted to make money from his investment by selling publication rights to many of these images. Evidently, he attempted to sell many of these negatives to the NPS.

On September 20, 1977, Robbins wrote a letter to Cynthia Pollack stating his displeasure with the way the Park Service handled his involvement at Saugus. He indicated that any further interest in the Gleason Collection or his involvement would have to be made in written form.⁷² Evidently, Jim Gott phoned and apologized for the way the NPS responded to his offer of the collection. Gott asked if Robbins wanted to write the Jenks report instead of Carlson, but Robbins indicated he preferred to be a consultant and would help Carlson when he needed it; evidently Gott had asked Carlson to write a report on the Jenks area.⁷³ On Monday September 26, 1977, Pollack called Robbins.

I told her that I was getting ready to phone her and apologize for writing the letter I had, I didn't have anything against her in mind, it was the National Park Systems inefficient way of doing everything that I was complaining about. She said she didn't feel upset about the letter, was glad I wrote it! Thought they had handled the Gleason and Robbins' collections poorly.⁷⁴

Monday, 1.30 to 4.45, March 29, 1976:

I discussed the master grid system I use, especially for pretesting sites. I explained [to Moran] how work sheets can record much pertinent info., including artifacts, soil grades and natural subsurface soils, stone, peat, etc. And they can cover many miles of terrain. He seemed interested in learning more about this.

Roland Robbins, notes, The Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.

14.12 Robbins greets Mr. Guy, son of the former blacksmith, at a May 1980 museum addition dedication ceremony. (Courtesy Mel Pollack Photo Services.)



In November 1977 another event occurred that infuriated Robbins. Evidently Gott had asked Robbins to do some archeological testing for the Jenks Road area. Robbins' November 7, 1977, log entry captures the situation:

Jim Gott telephoned me. Asked if I could postpone the tests for the roadway to the Jenks' site until later, "besides it is due to rain Tuesday." I said that normally rain doesn't stop me from my work. He said he had been at a NPS meeting in N.J. last week (I believe), and he met "their archaeologists." His guy said he had heard of me and wanted to meet me. Jim also said he didn't know until then that the NPS now have certain rules regulating work of this nature, etc., etc. And Jim said the guy wants to be there when I do the testing. By now I was warming up considerably, but didn't boil over! I said that it probably would be just as well if I forgot about doing the tests; after all, the interest in this area came about when he and other N.P.S. people were here and I was reviewing all my work at the Jenks' site and I mentioned I thought I know where the Jenks road may be, and volunteered to do this testing. He agreed that I could do this. I said that it probably would be best to forget about the testings. He didn't want that to happen. He said that he would have the guy phone me and we could make mutual arrangements.

After our conversation, my slow burn erupted into volcanic proportions!!!! I DON'T INTEND TO HAVE ANYONE STANDING OVER MY SHOULDER WHILE I WORK READING RULES AND REGULATIONS TO ME !!!!⁷⁵

There was no easy resolution to this situation, as Robbins' November 12, 1977, entry shows:

...She [Pollack] didn't know about the "new archaeologist," but he would be a regional archaeologist just out of school.

I told her that this was humiliating, to say the least, especially the new archaeologist's request to be there when I did the testing. I said Nobody has ever looked over my shoulder when I worked, and I am not about to let it start now. She said she couldn't understand that . . . there is no way that anyone can stand over her shoulder when she is working! I said that Steve Carlson was going to be here next Monday and go through more of my personal files on the Saugus Project, which I have been cooperating with. But I shall phone him and say that under the circumstances, I want to cancel this and future cooperation of this nature.

She said she didn't blame me in the least.⁷⁶

Tuesday, 9.30 A.M., September 20, 1977:

Then he [Steve Carlson] said that Mrs. Pollack asked him to tell me that N.P.S. may be in touch with me next spring relative to the Gleason photographs of the National Parks.

FROM WHAT I CAN MAKE OF THIS, MRS. POLLACK HAD STEVE DO HER DIRTY WORK . . . TELL ME ABOUT A POSSIBLE CONTACT FROM THE N.P.S. NEXT SPRING . . . SHE IS THE ONE THAT HAD HANDLED ALL OF THIS, NOW PASSES THE BUCK TO STEVE WHEN THINGS BOG DOWN!!!!

Roland Robbins, notes, The Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.



14.13 Photograph of Steve Carlson (second from right) and Cynthia Pollack (far right) at a 1980 museum addition dedication ceremony. (Courtesy Mel Pollack Photo Services.)

While this event seems critical and final, a reconciliation of sorts took place in August 1978.

Steve Carlson phoned. Wanted to know if he could continue looking at my notes and correspondence that I cut him off from last November. Also wanted to interview me about the construction work at S.I.W. and do some tape recording. I said yes to both. Said he had Conover Fitch there last week for a similar interview . . . Jim Gott then talked to me. Said he wanted to talk with me sometime about my color photographs of my S.I.W. project work—also there others that wanted to see them, I believe. He apologized about the cancellation of the tests for the road to Jenks' site last November. Said he should have just had it done and not said anything to the others, etc.⁷⁷

Surviving correspondence between Robbins and others grows sporadic at this point. In a February 12, 1979, letter from Robbins to NPS Regional Archeologist Francis P. McManamon, Robbins encloses his résumé, presumably for work on an NPS site.⁷⁸ Interestingly, Robbins wrote the letter on regular paper rather than the personal stationery that documented his excavation accomplishments along the left margin and signed it “Roland Wells Robbins, Consultant, American Heritage Landmarks.” By this point, Robbins realized that he could no longer fight the establishment.

Whether Robbins ever believed it or not, he left quite a legacy, as a pioneer in several fields. Linebaugh comments, “Robbins believed strongly that he had not been given proper credit by academic professionals for his many pioneering efforts in contract archaeology, public archaeology, and at industrial and domestic sites throughout the Northeast.”⁷⁹ Linebaugh goes on to note:

[Marley] Brown conjectured that Robbins's consulting work created ill will among professionals; “we were doing this work for free as Deetz's students and Robbins was working right down the road and getting paid for it.” It is not just ironic, but significant, that although Deetz worked from the security of the university, many of his graduate students—those who scorned Robbins's hucksterism, that is, his self-promotion of archaeology as a business—were later employed in contract archaeology or cultural resource management. They were compelled to practice contract archaeology because of underlying economic and political circumstances. As these university-trained archaeologists slowly began to embrace cultural resource management as a legitimate pursuit, they faced many of the same conditions that Robbins had encountered during his 30-year career, including institutional constraints, monetary pressures, and lack of standing within the discipline.⁸⁰

Tuesday, July 29, 1980, 1.55 to 4.00 P.M.:

I took the reel of 16mm film that Henry Gibson gave me after he completed making the Saugus Iron Works Sound Film to the museum. Cynthia Pollack, Louise Gillis, Jim Gott and other personnel were there to see it played through. Cynthia was going to show it again this afternoon to other personnel. She asked if they could borrow it so she could see if they can have a copy of it made for their files. I loaned it to her.

Roland Robbins, notes, The Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.

14.14 An example of Robbins' early stationery. Note the list of projects along the left margin. (Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at The Thoreau Institute, at Walden Woods. Courtesy The Thoreau Society® Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.)

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It is often difficult to see the progress one has made when still embroiled in a struggle. Robbins struggled with the academic field of historical archeology throughout his lifetime. Sometimes, however, recognition and acceptance come later. Now that historical archeology has matured into an accepted academic discipline, we begin to see the enormous impact of early practitioners like Robbins on the development of the field.

Conclusion

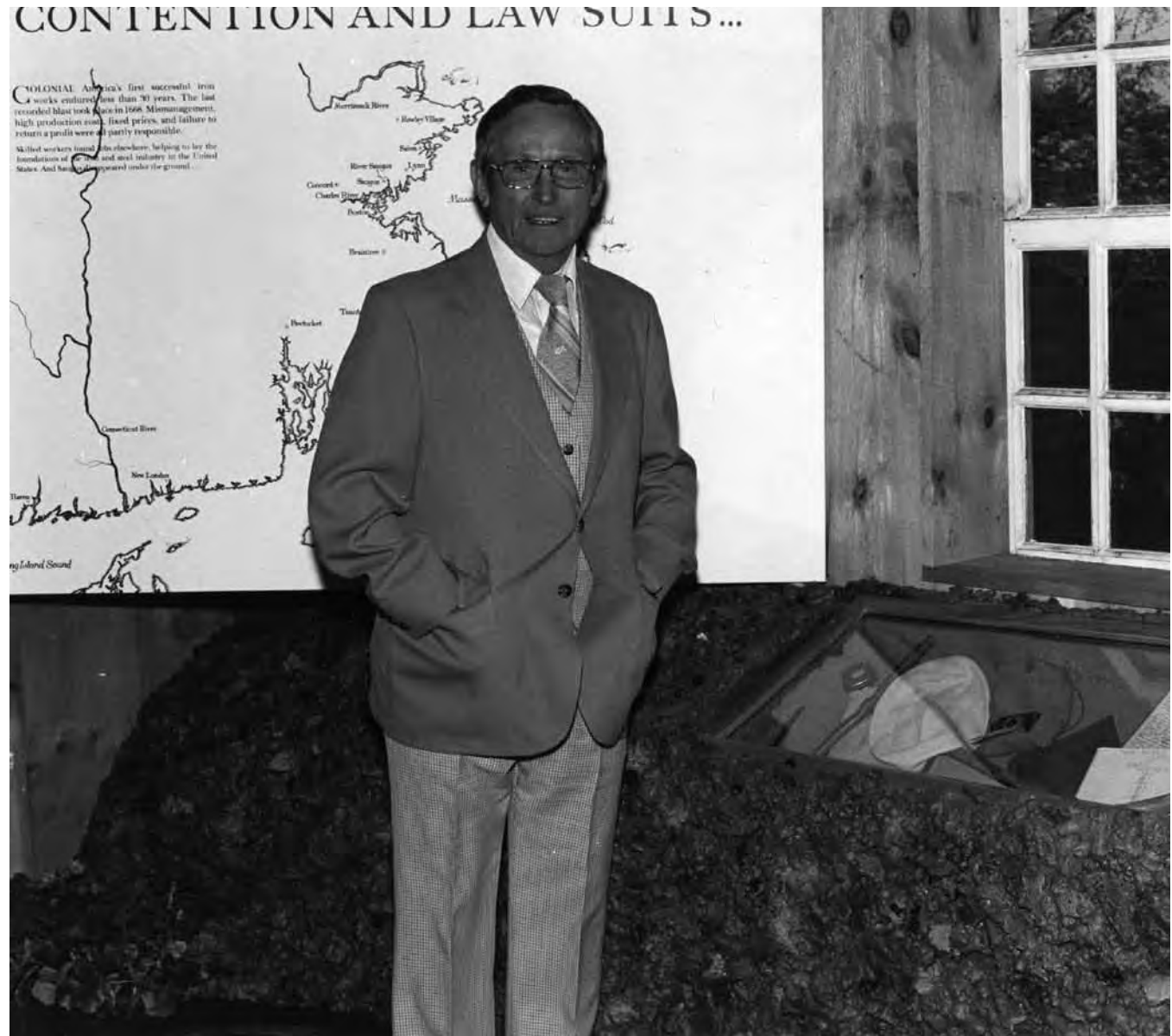
The period from the opening of the Saugus Iron Works in 1954 to the present consists of two very distinctive periods in the history of the site. From 1954 until 1969, Saugus was managed by the First Iron Works Association, the organization that spearheaded the excavation and reconstruction project. While the FIWA was responsible for the day-to-day operation of the site, the American Iron and Steel Institute, which funded the excavation and reconstruction, provided critical financial support for its maintenance and operation. In fact, the Institute's withdrawal of this funding precipitated the transfer of the property to the National Park Service. Archeological work ceased with the opening of the site in 1954, and was not resumed until the Park Service's tenure. During the FIWA's control, very little was done with the archeological collection beyond displaying materials in the museum. Most of this display was created by Robbins and his staff prior to his departure. As noted above in several chapters, Robbins displayed concern for artifact processing and treatment throughout the project. After his departure, he also expressed great concern about the lack of progress in processing and analyzing the collection. In effect, the majority of the materials recovered during the five-year excavation were ignored in the haste to open and operate a functioning museum site.

With the transfer of the site to the National Park Service in 1969, archeological projects focused on fully processing and inventorying the languishing artifact collection. The artifacts were moved from their less than ideal storage areas, rehoused and properly curated. Because Robbins left without completing a final report, the other major undertaking was an assessment of his work to provide a framework for better understanding the artifact collection and to aid future investigations. While several archeological projects have been completed under NPS management, all but two were compliance driven and generally limited in scope. Nothing even approached the scope of Robbins' work.

Roland Robbins' excavations at Saugus left an indelible impression, not only on the reconstructed ironworks at Saugus, but upon historical archeology in general. While most of the archeological investigations done prior to the passage of the National Historical Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966 were conducted by academically-trained archeologists working for universities, Robbins changed that and brought business to archeology. Without university backing, he had to rely on his entrepreneurial skills

During my four decades of professional study of American history I have been regarded as an archaeologist, which in a sense is true. In the summer of 1955 Collier's Magazine ran a feature story on me and my work which was entitled "The Pick and Shovel Historian." This has always been my favorite identification. After all, I am a historian who digs when the success of the subject necessitates my doing so. I suppose one could say that I [was] qualified to tackle the Saugus Iron Works challenge because I showed up at the right places in my life at the right times in my life.

Roland Robbins, incomplete biography, p. xiv. The Roland Wells Robbins Collection in the Thoreau Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.



14.15 Robbins posing in front of display of excavation tools at Saugus during May 1980 museum addition dedication. (Courtesy Mel Pollack Photo Services.)

to bring in business. Robbins especially relied on the publicity from his discoveries and the excitement generated from his public lectures to bring in business. He was very successful throughout his life with his entrepreneurial system and was able to work on archeological projects for over forty years. A similar business model was adopted by numerous cultural resource management firms following the passage of the NHPA in 1966, which required archeological investigations before major federally funded undertakings.

What started out to be an antique treasure hunt turned out to be one of the most intensive excavation campaigns on one of the most significant archeological sites in the northeast. The discovery of the archeological remains of the buildings, canals, raceways, and supporting structures at Saugus guided much of the reconstruction. Robbins' success at locating archeological features and the financial support of the American Iron and Steel Institute, which sought to immortalize the birth of its industry, combined in a powerful fashion. All of the stars seemed to align on the Saugus project. Although Robbins was never academically trained, this pick and shovel historian was able to excavate the site, locate the major industrial features, and leave an incredibly well-documented archive of information on his excavations. Robbins and the FIWA truly left a rich legacy at Saugus.

