ISAAC MEASON, THE FIRST IRONMASTER WEST OF THE ALLEGHENIES

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Other men in western Pennsylvania may have preceded Isaac Meason by a few months in the building of iron furnaces, but he was the first man west of the Alleghenies to make a huge fortune in the iron and coal business, the first in a long line of great ironmasters such as Frick and Carnegie.

From a pioneer in practically untouched woodlands, Isaac Meason grew with the country until he loomed the largest industrialist in the region. It was he who sponsored the first iron suspension bridge in the world; it was he who backed a Welshman bringing the rolled bar iron process from Britain; it was from Isaac Meason's busy wharf and boat yard at the mouth of Dunbar Creek that flatboats loaded with iron sugar kettles set out for Louisiana, and barge loads of salt kettles and Dutch ovens started down the river for families farther west. It was the men of Isaac Meason's forge who fashioned the six large iron screws for the presses used at the first paper mill west of the mountains.

The world might do without gold, even without a gold standard, but take from it its iron and the face of the earth is altered. Today the steel made from iron forms the framework of civilization; at an earlier day the quantity of iron used might not have been so great but its function was as basic. For when the first settlers came over the mountain they needed

1 Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on October 28, 1936. Miss Abraham, contributor of the biographical sketch of Isaac Meason in the Dictionary of American Biography and author of a booklet on pioneer life entitled Over the Mountains (see ante, 19:232—September, 1936), was then engaged in newspaper work at Uniontown, Pennsylvania. Ed.

iron to master the forest—iron in the ax heads, iron ploughs, iron in the gun barrels and in the cooking pots.

At first the iron had to be brought to the settlers by pack horses over the mountains, then the mountains themselves turned out to be rich in iron ore, and enterprising persons built furnaces for smelting it, and forges, where the iron ore was turned into usable articles. These furnaces and other local industries put the pack train out of business, just as, later, the Great Lakes ore banks and rail transportation silenced the furnaces themselves.

Isaac Meason’s neighbor, Colonel William Crawford, who later was burned at the stake by enraged Indians, left the first recorded mention of iron ore in western Pennsylvania when in 1780 he surveyed a farm on the Monongahela "to include a Bank of Iron Ore." Of three iron furnaces established west of the Alleghenies before 1791, Union Furnace, on Dunbar Creek, operated by Meason and Dillon, did the only profitable business with continued success. In the *Pittsburgh Gazette* of April 19, 1794, Meason, Dillon & Co. advertised that they had for sale "At their Furnace on Dunbar’s run, Fayette county, three miles from Stewart’s crossings, on Youghiogheny river, a supply of well assorted castings, which they will sell for cash at the reduced price of Thirty-Five Pounds per ton."

In 1783, with five hundred acres, seven horses, seven cattle, eight sheep, seven white people, and no negroes recorded as his property and household in the tax book, Isaac Meason was not by any means the largest landholder in Tyrone Township, Westmoreland County (now part of Fayette). Two years later his tax had grown to be five times larger than that of any other resident of the district, and it continued to mount as he lent money to the careless backwoods people and took over their farms when they lacked cash to meet the payments, or else bought land rights from people who turned farther west to take up new holdings.\(^4\) By 1788, at a time when land was the standard of wealth and prestige, he numbered his acres by the thousands.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) Ellis, *Fayette County*, 233.

\(^4\) *Pennsylvania Archives*, third series, 22:391, 577; Fayette County Archives, Deed Book 267, p. 45; Deed Book A, p. 262, 363.

\(^5\) *Pennsylvania Archives*, third series, 26:779.
Roads, ferries, and bridges are first essentials in the development of a new country. Isaac Meason aimed to increase the value of his holdings by petitioning the government in Harrisburg for a ferry at Connellsville, for a road "from Zachariah Connell's (Connellsville) to Isaac Meason's, on Jacob's Creek" in 1788, and for a road "from Meason's Iron-Works to the mouth of Big Redstone" in 1794. In 1804, as commissioner, he had power to receive subscriptions for capital stock in the Union and Cumberland Turnpike Road, a project abandoned the next year when Congress voted funds for a national road over the same route.  

When it came to bridges, Isaac Meason's business acumen, foresight, faith, and intelligence were probably responsible for the erection, near his place on Jacob's Creek, of the first iron suspension bridge in the world. He was all the more willing to sponsor it as the iron used in its construction would more than likely be cast in his forge near by. James Finley of Fayette County had patented the design, and on April 14, 1801, the commissioners of Fayette and Westmoreland counties met and completed the contract with Finley "to build a bridge supported with iron at or near Isaac Meason's, over Jacob's Creek, for the sum of six hundred dollars," one half to be paid by each county. The plans called for "a patent Iron chain suspension' structure of seventy feet span . . . to be completed ready for use on or before Dec. 15, 1801." This bridge was on the principal road between Connellsville and Mount Pleasant.  

In spite of those who urged him not "to impose on Mr. Meason, as it might ruin the old gentleman," Thomas C. Lewis, a Welshman, came to Fayette County in 1816 and persuaded the elderly Mr. Meason to finance a mill for puddling and rolling bar iron. Mr. Lewis, who had learned the process in Wales, had tried without avail for more than a year to convince eastern ironmasters that iron could be made into bars by rolling instead of by hammering as had been done in the past. It was the western ironmaster, Isaac Meason, who, at the end of a pioneer life, once more forwarded the industrial growth of the West by financing a project that forged one more link in the development of the great west-

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6 Ellis, Fayette County, 249, 252.
7 Ellis, Fayette County, 250; Joseph N. Kane, Famous First Facts, 104 (New York, 1934). Kane errs in reporting the cost to have been six thousand dollars.
ern Pennsylvania iron and coal industry, an industry in which he had been the first to achieve success.  

With Meason’s financial backing, Lewis built two puddling furnaces and one refining furnace at Plumsock, or Upper Middletown, near Dunbar. He made the patterns for new rolls which were cast at the Union Furnace, brought to the mill, and there turned by the master mechanic’s brother, George Lewis, recently arrived from Wales. Three other Lewis brothers from Wales were present on September 15, 1817, at the newly completed rolling mill to test the process and, for the first time in America, prove that rolled bar iron could be manufactured as successfully as trip-hammered bar iron.

Four months later Isaac Meason died, and his executors offered for sale “Plumsock Iron Works, the most valuable property on the western side of the mountains.” The Plumsock mill is said to be the second to have used coke in the manufacturing of iron. The advertisement stated that “An inexhaustible pit of coal, within one hundred yeards [sic] of the forge, supplies the only fuel used in making the iron. Three men with a horse and cart are sufficient to raise the coke and haul to the forge all the coal necessary for keeping the works in full operation.”

Far different is this picture of industry from the wilderness Isaac Meason had found when he entered the western country before 1771. Still in his twenties, the young man from Virginia came to a section where, legally, no white man could settle. Yet in spite of the Indian treaty that forbade them to use land not yet bought from the Indians, about 150 pioneer families lived south of Pittsburgh. The young Isaac Meason had looked over the hilly woodlands; he had picked out a good farm on Jacob’s Creek with a clearing and a log cabin already set up. Meason called his place Mount Pleasant and in 1772 when purchase of the land became legal he took steps to buy the 323-acre tract, located in what is now Fayette County. In those early days Lawrence Harrison and his family lived near by, and in 1772 Isaac Meason and Catherine Harrison were secretly married. Why did Meason force all the witnesses, the mag-

8 Ellis, Fayette County, 240.
istrate who performed the ceremony, and his bride herself to swear upon the Holy Evangelist that they would not tell of his marriage? It happened long ago, in April of the year 1772, when thick forests hid the land where coke ovens and slag piles now fume.\textsuperscript{11}

In these backwoods were no newspapers specializing in tales about the private lives of prominent people, so that, as Isaac Meason built up his great fortune from iron and coal, as he bought his thousands upon thousands of acres of land, built his iron furnaces and forges, laid out his Georgian mansion at Mount Braddock, took his seat in the state assembly and later in the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania,\textsuperscript{12} not one word about his early eccentricity appeared in the public prints. There may have been whispers among the early settlers, but Catherine Harrison shared all the honors of her husband’s eminence, thanks to her brother who had brought the matter to court, and there was no hint of an early scandal to interrupt the serenity of her old age as one of the few aristocratic ladies of the western land.

Four years before he met death among the Indians by torture, William Harrison saw to it that his sister received her due in the eyes of the law and of the world. Why Catherine had to use legal measures to secure her rights remains locked among the secrets of the past, as is the exact place where Isaac Meason, “a gentleman from Virginia,” originated and spent his earliest days.

There was an Isaac Meason in the company that Captain John Lacey commanded under Anthony Wayne in the American Revolutionary struggles of 1776–77.\textsuperscript{13} It may be that this Isaac Meason was Catherine Harrison’s husband, although no other records ever mention that Meason, the ironmaster, served in the Revolutionary army. The possibility that Isaac Meason was away at war in 1776–77 may account for the fact that Catherine became nervous about the legal standing of her four-year-old son Thomas and asked her brother to gather together the witnesses and prove in court her standing as a legal wife.

The record of the proceedings, unnoticed for years among old papers

\textsuperscript{11} The account of Meason’s marriage is based on records in Crumrine, \textit{Washington County}, 216, 217.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Pennsylvania Archives}, sixth series, 11: 405, 406.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Pennsylvania Archives}, fifth series, 2: 150.
in Washington, Pennsylvania, reveals that in December, 1777, John Stephenson, Thomas Gist, Joseph Beeler, and Edmund Rice received summons to appear before the court and testify what they knew concerning the marriage of Catherine Harrison with Isaac Meason. On April 28, 1778, the men appeared. Thomas Gist swore that in April, 1772, acting as a magistrate of Yohogania County, Virginia (now part of Fayette County), he had performed the ceremony according to the rites of the Church of England, and had sworn not to divulge the marriage unless legally called upon for such purpose. John Stephenson and Joseph Beeler swore that they were present at the marriage, that they had promised not to tell about it, and that Catherine had also promised Isaac not to tell. Joseph Beeler even went further and said "that there was a pre-engagement between the said Isaac and Catharine That upon divulging the said marriage contrary to the will of the sd Isaac the said parties should be absolved from any obligation to each other as man and wife." Isaac was thirty years old, Catherine twenty-nine, at the time of the wedding, so their secret cannot be put down as the hot-headed impulse of rash youth.

Isaac’s reasons for concealing his marriage had become unimportant by 1778. On January 3, 1779, nine months after his legal marriage had been proved in court, a second son, Isaac Meason, Jr., appeared. Apparently the parents lived happily together from then on for forty years. They had two more children, Elizabeth and Mary, each of whom received more than a thousand acres of land by the terms of their father’s will. Their mother received one-third of the entire income from the estate, plus one thousand dollars per year as her dower right; half the mansion house; and the gardens, furniture, cows, a horse, and two negro slaves, Harry and Marcia.

When Isaac Meason died, on Friday, January 23, 1818, his children fell heir to considerably more than twenty thousand acres of the best coal and iron land in western Pennsylvania. Thomas Meason, the eldest son, had died six years before, so to Isaac Meason, Jr., came sixteen thousand acres, including the town of New Haven, a bridge and ferry across the

14 Crumrine, Washington County, 217.
15 Fayette County Archives, Will Book 1, p. 579.
Youghiogheny River, saltworks, iron furnaces, forges, rolling mills, grist-mills, and, symbol of pride and property, the Mansion House at Mount Braddock, a plantation purchased from descendants of that old wilderness scout and guide of Washington, Christopher Gist.

It has never before been mentioned, except in the book of deeds where the record lies, that four hundred acres of Gist’s land where Mount Braddock stands were put up for sale in 1788 to satisfy a debt of nine pounds. Meason made the highest bid and took the whole 400 acres for thirty pounds, less than the price of a ton of iron; the next spring he bid in 620½ acres of the same farm for thirty-one pounds. The Gist heirs took legal action against him five years later, and Meason finally paid them 1,200 pounds for the entire property of more than a thousand acres.  

Mount Braddock takes its name from the unfortunate British officer who stopped there on his disastrous expedition against the French and Indians in 1755. He had planned to drive the French from Fort Duquesne, but only a few days later, fatally wounded in the battle at which his troops were defeated, he was carried back over the same route and was buried in the blue hills just east of Mount Braddock.

At that time, and even earlier, when Washington reconnoitered this territory, Mount Braddock was known as Gist’s Place. Gist had chosen this site between the last mountain ridge and the headwaters of the Ohio, as a likely spot for a trading post, a link in the chain of communication between eastern merchants and fur traders in the Ohio country, and had built his log house and storerooms there, in the uttermost wilderness.

In 1802, by the site of Gist’s trading post, Isaac Meason, as a person of prominence, a judge, a great landholder, and owner of many mills, built himself a limestone house worthy of his dignity and affluence. Mount Braddock is a Georgian mansion; its equal is not often found west of the mountains. It is built on a commanding slope of ground; behind it rise the quiet blue ridges of the Alleghenies, and in front of it the hills grow small and fade away toward the plains of the West.

Unlike the Albert Gallatin house at Friendship Hill, the house and garden of Mount Braddock are laid out in a symmetrical and balanced architectural plan. The central axis of the house is accented by three

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16 Fayette County Archives, Deed Book A, p. 262; Deed Book C, p. 297.
repetitions of the round arch—the fan light on the doorway, a similar fan light on the central window of the second story, and a third round arch window in the pediment. A chaste rinceau and leaf decoration in the pediment balance the hospitable sweep of the steps and columned doorway. A one-story kitchen wing on the north has an exact counterpart in the opposite office wing, and the whole facade forms part of a great circle continued by stone walls sweeping round a sloping terrace originally planted with stately walnut trees. Formerly the wall was crowned by a fence of iron pickets rhythmically arranged and at intervals accented by an urn-shaped finial. When the whole plan is put on paper it makes an almost mathematical design, even the wellhead near the house balancing a horse block by the gate.

Of the same architectural style as Mount Pleasant, and Cliveden near Philadelphia, Mount Braddock, mansion of the western ironmaster, was a proud place, built by a gentleman whose enterprise in a new country permitted him to erect a home similar to the ones he had admired, and perhaps lived in, during his youth. At Mount Braddock, Isaac Meason extended hospitality to the traveler along the Great Road to Pittsburgh: Bishop Asbury remarks in his journal on July 10, 1808, "On Monday I went to Colonel Mason’s, and was kindly received in his splendid, useful, good house."17

Isaac Meason’s grandfather’s clock was the tallest, his hall the broadest, his dining-room table the longest, in three counties. Today the garden and halls are bare, the swags and putti of the great mantel pieces done over in golden oak. Yet some of the original furnishings are still cherished by their owners as belonging to the first western Ironmaster. The late Jacob Lynn found the grandfather’s clock covered with green paint in the stable of a neighboring old negress. When the paint had been scraped off, the good proportions and delicate inlay of its fine walnut case showed. Besides the clock, Mr. Lynn also owned Isaac Meason’s three-piece dining table, made to seat twenty-four people, and a silver punch ladle which served many guests at that same table in Meason’s day. The ladle is now in the possession of Joseph R. Nutt of Cleveland.

17 Francis Asbury, Journal ... from August 7, 1771, to December 7, 1815, 3: 246 (New York, 1821).
In January, 1818, the following obituary appeared in the *Connellsville Herald*:

Died—On Friday, the 23rd inst., Col. Isaac Meason, of Mt. Braddock. Mr. Meason was an early settler in this county, frequently a representative in the assembly, and for some time a member of the supreme executive council of the state of Pennsylvania; after the adoption of the present constitution, he was appointed one of the associate judges of Fayette county. His life has been spent in unremitting industry and with uncommon success; he was the first who manufactured iron in this county with success, and the present improved state of that manufacture is greatly indebted to him; he is now brought to the close of his labors, but as a useful member of society, his place will not soon be supplied.

Isaac Meason was buried in the family burying plot at Mount Braddock, but later, when the mansion had passed into other hands, he and Catherine Harrison were taken to Oak Grove Cemetery, Uniontown, where they now lie side by side, with generations of less noteworthy descendants about them.18

18 For much of the information used in the preparation of this article, the author is indebted to McClellan Leonard of Uniontown, whose lifelong hobby has been a study of the history of the iron industry in western Pennsylvania—a study one of the fruits of which is a paper prepared for a meeting of the Westmoreland-Fayette Branch of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on "Charcoal Furnaces of Fayette County and Their Associations."

The author desires also to acknowledge a letter and a booklet received from Dr. Charles L. Lewis of Pittsburgh. Dr. Lewis is the only living grandson of the George Lewis who, with his brother Thomas, made the machinery for and produced the first rolled bar iron in America as related above. Martha E. Lewis of Pittsburgh, a granddaughter of Thomas, married Alfred Hicks, first president of the Allegheny Steel Company, and their daughter, May Alice, married the late Harry E. Sheldon, also a president of Allegheny Steel, who carried on the pioneering tradition of his wife's family by first introducing stainless steel to the market. Of the descendants of George Lewis, five great-grandsons and two great-great-grandsons are now actively engaged with Allegheny Steel, and it was a grandson of his, another George, who founded the Penn Iron and Steel Company at Creighton.