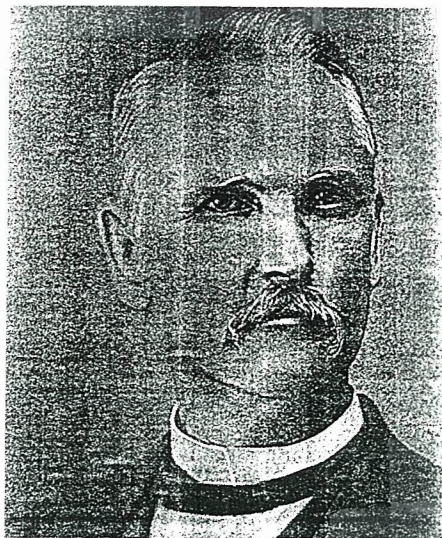


Grainger County

John Brabson Shields' Reminiscences

by Paula Gammell



Judge John Brabson Shields 1840-1930
From a picture in the Jasper, Alabama, Public Library

John Brabson Shields was born in 1840 in Grainger County into the prominent and extensive Shields family. His father was Milton Shields and his mother was Priscilla Brabson Shields; family connections included the Longs, Woods, and Taylors.

In 1921 and 1922 Judge Shields – who had not lived in East Tennessee in over 50 years – wrote several reminiscences in the form of letters that were published in his local paper. After a lengthy search we were fortunate enough to finally track down the entire set.

Here is a small excerpt concerning paper mills and iron furnaces:

I was born at one of my father's paper mills, known as the Shields, Johnson, & Rice Paper Mill, at Marshall's Ferry, then Grainger [now Hamblen], County, Tenn., three and one-half miles from Morristown, near the Holston River on Spring Creek.

My father, Dr. Milton Shields, and associates were the pioneer paper and iron manufacturers, having under [their] control three paper mills and three charcoal furnaces in the State of Tennessee.

The material then used for making paper was exclusively cotton and linen rags. All stores throughout the country for many miles around made a business of buying rags and sending to the mill, or holding until my father's teams called for them. 3 cents per pound was the price paid. There was no trouble to keep a good supply of rags on hand to keep the mills running day and night.

I remember when paper was moulded by hand, one sheet at a time... woolen or felt cloths between the sheets, and when a sufficient amount moulded taken to huge wooden screw presses where the screw was run down by man power with great wooden levers five inches in diameter and about 12 feet long... after which the paper was taken to a drying loft and hung over specially made poles to dry in the air.

In 1849 I went with my father to one of his furnaces, the Bright Hope Furnace, in Greene County, Tenn. [Here] they moulded all kinds of pots, ovens, lids, and machinery. The furnace was a large stone stack, and the blast for heating was made by two huge tubs.... A 20-foot overshot water wheel [drove] a crank to raise and lower plungers... to produce the air force to heat and melt the ore in the furnace. I remember seeing dog irons, smoothing irons, ovens, lids, skillets, cog wheels, segments, etc., all laying around in the moulding shed.

Hammered bar iron was produced at one of the furnaces called Sweden Furnace, located not far from the now town of Johnson City, upper East Tennessee. The metal, or bars, were hammered into whatever shape was desired by what was called a tilt hammer, operated by water power in connection with the power to drive the bellows to produce the blast to heat the bars for that purpose. All bar iron was thus made in 1830 to 1850, as rolling mills for that purpose were unknown at that time in the state.

I have a part of my father's old account book, a ledger kept at his Sweden Furnace, in the year 1839.... Labor at this furnace was \$10, \$13, and \$16 per month, after this prices of labor increased up to \$25 and \$35 per month.

At these furnaces and paper mills a day's labor was reckoned at 12 hours. The furnaces and mills ran day and night, starting up at midnight on Sunday night and shutting down at 12 o'clock Saturday night.

These [paper and iron] products... had to be hauled to market by wagons... or to be loaded upon flat boats on the Holston River to be delivered along the Holston and Tennessee Rivers at Knoxville, Chattanooga, Guntersville, or Buzzard's Roost, Tusculumbia, and Eastport....

Judge Shields' lengthy reminiscences also include how he 'read medicine' under Dr. Rufus Taylor then spent several years in the Confederate army. Although in his 80s when he wrote this, Judge Shields seems to have had an excellent memory and wrote a fascinating account of his life; one only wishes he had written more!

To read the entire set of articles go to "East Tennessee Roots" Vol. 7 No. 1.