

Curator's Choice

Scripture in Iron: Pennsylvania German Stove Plates from Antietam Furnace

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In the early 1980s, archaeological investigations uncovered the remains of Antietam Furnace, a well-preserved 18th century frontier blast furnace, in Washington County. Constructed in 1761, this furnace produced a variety of cast iron objects, as well as "pig iron", which would have been further refined to make wrought iron. The blast furnace was in operation up until the American Revolution, when the owners received large contracts to cast cannon from the State of Maryland and the Continental Congress. Since Antietam Furnace was too small for this purpose, it was abandoned and the larger Mt. Aetna Furnace was constructed nearby in the mid-1770s (Frye 1984: 159).



Figure 1: Conserved stove plate from the Antietam Furnace site.

Some of the most interesting objects cast at the furnace were elaborately decorated cast iron stove plates for a five-plate, or jamb, stove (Figures 1 and 2). These stoves were used almost exclusively by the German immigrants in Pennsylvania and the Great Appalachian Valley of Maryland and Virginia (Frye 1984: 90). Used for radiant heat in northern European homes since the mid-1500s, many of the first German immigrants brought this style stove with them when they emigrated from Germany (Conococheague Institute Blog 2013).

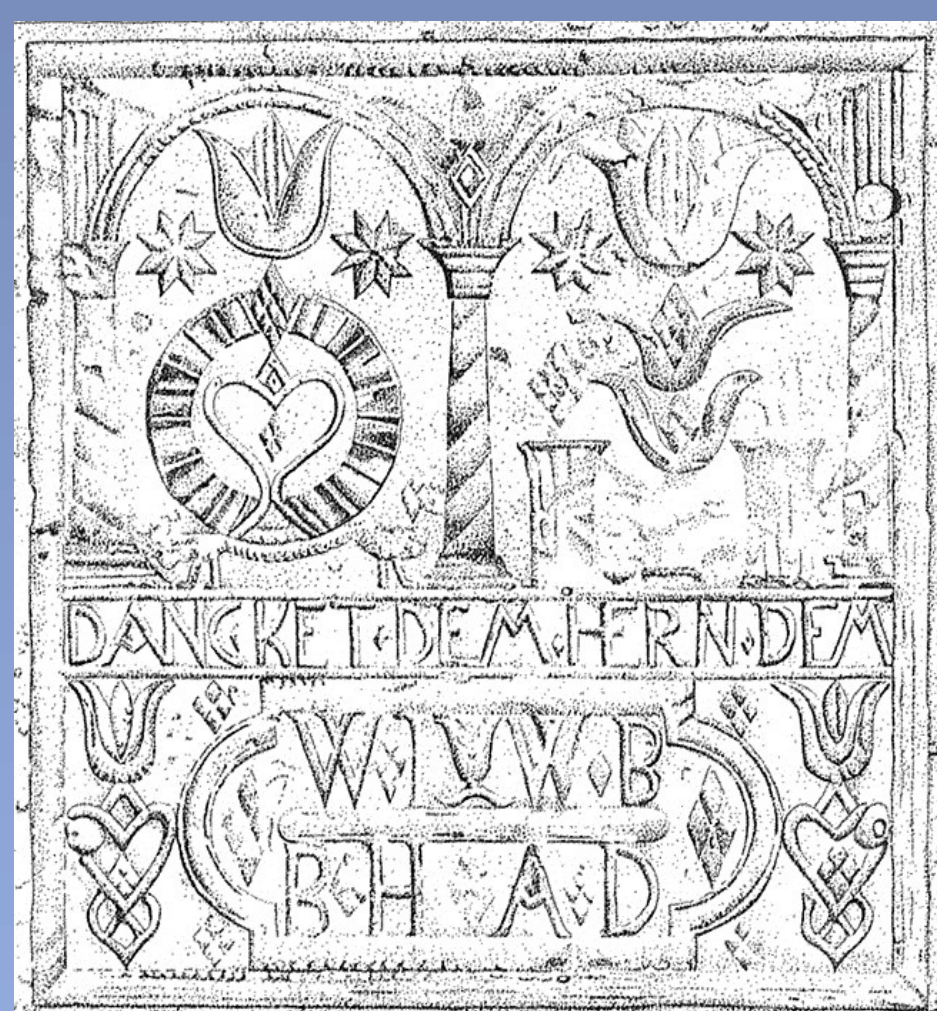


Figure 2: Drawing of a stove plate from the Antietam Furnace site by Johanna Mennucci (Frye 1984: 94).

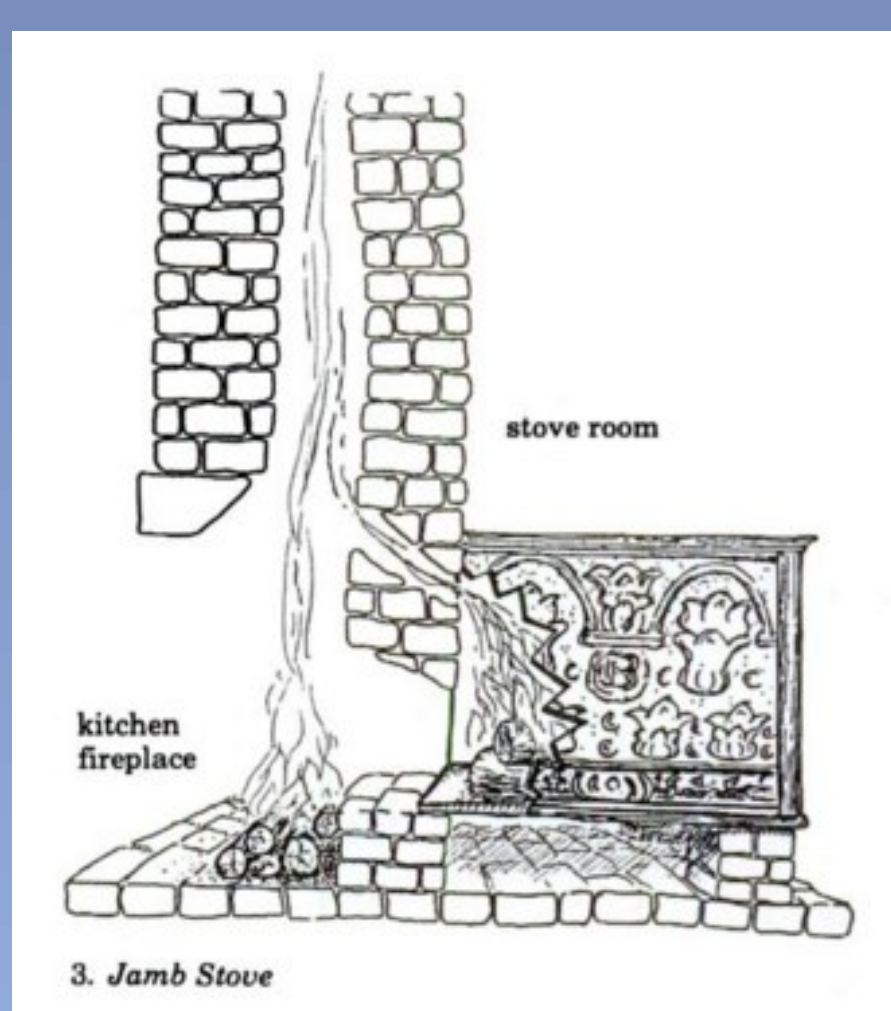


Figure 3: Diagram of jamb stove attached to hearth (Groft 1984:12). pin/448108231645161670/.

Tammis Groft describes how a jamb stove would be installed up against a home's central chimney:

The five plates formed an open box that was placed against an aperture in the wall that opened into the kitchen fireplace of the next room. Live coals were inserted into the stove through the opening in the fireplace. The adjacent room, thus, was heated economically without the discomfort of smoke (1984: 12) (Figure 3).

Prior to 1750, jamb stove plates displayed biblically-themed scenes along with quotes from scripture. By the time stove plates were being cast at Antietam Furnace in the 1760s, the pictorial scenes had been replaced by a stylized floral motif, but the scriptural quotations remained (Frye 1984: 92).

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The eight complete stove plates recovered from Antietam Furnace all had this floral motif, which included a combination of lozenges, hearts, and tulips. This design became ubiquitous on jamb stove plates after the mid-1750s. Having no known religious significance, it is unclear why the more interesting pictorial scenes were abandoned for it (Mercer 1961: 70-72). A German inscription in the center of the plate read "DANKET DEM HERN DEM", which translates "Give thanks unto the Lord". The verse was completed on the front plate: "ERIST FREUNDLICH", which translates "He is good." Only a few fragments of the front plate survived at the Antietam Furnace site (Frye 1984: 95). A complete example is illustrated in Mercer (1961: Plate 141) (Figure 4). The initials "WJ", "WB", and "BH" stand for the furnace owners William James, William Buchanan, and Barnabas Hughes (Figures 1 and 3). The initials "AD" are those of an unknown individual, but one who likely had an important role in the furnace's operation (Frye: 1984: 95).



Figure 4: Example of what the front plate of the jamb stoves recovered from Antietam Furnace may have looked like (Mercer 1914: Plate 141).

At the time these stove plates were being cast at Antietam Furnace, the jamb stove was a dying technology and was being replaced, even in some German homes, by the Dutch six-plated stove (Harris 2013: 3). These "Holland" stoves had a closed firebox which contained its own wood fire, eliminating the need to shovel live coals into it from the fireplace. This free-standing and portable stove, with its own flue at the rear of the top plate, didn't require the Pennsylvania German central chimney. This allowed it to be installed in rooms with chimneys on a home's outer walls or gable ends (Harris 2013).



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