

PER THE MORRIS POST: Hibernia Furnace to New York City in 1774

By Tim O'Connor

The William Alexander archive in the New York Historical Society houses many letters from the pre-revolutionary and wartime eras. During an exploration of that archive I encountered two letters from Hibernia Furnace in Morris County, New Jersey which bore interesting superscriptions. They are the topic of this report.



Illustration from *The Pulse of the People, NJ 1763-1789*¹

Fig. 1: Pre-revolutionary pig iron from Hibernia Furnace, Morris County, NJ.

Morris County sits in the New Jersey Highlands, a physiographic province of the eastern slopes of the Appalachian Mountains, extending from Reading Pennsylvania to the Housatonic River in Connecticut. Iron ores in the form of lenses, seams and veins abound in the metamorphic rocks. Ore quality is excellent with scarce magnetite, the highest quality of iron ore, being easily found. Knowledge of the ore can be traced back to the Penn Proprietorship, and they probably heard about the “black rock” from the Lenape Indians. Mining and smelting started about 1710, and iron soon became a profitable export commodity as well as filling a local need. Actually, the

production of iron became so valuable that the Crown sought to control it with the Iron Act of 1750. Arguably the predecessor of the many Coercive Acts, it encouraged production of lower quality bar and cast iron, demanding that these be shipped to Britain where their smiths would forge it into steel to be sold back to the Colonies. While there were many iron producers in the Highlands, we focus on the Hibernia Furnace which came into the possession of William Alexander in 1771.



Your Most Humble Servant
W. Alexander

NYPL Digital collection²

Fig. 2: William Alexander (Lord Stirling), acquired the Hibernia Furnace in 1771. It was used during the Revolution to provide materials for Washington’s Army.

William Alexander was born in New York City in 1727 into a prosperous merchant family. He was well educated in the sciences. He married the sister of New York Governor William Livingston and became active in the New York social scene. His military career began with the French and Indian wars, acting as a provisional agent for the British army, and Aide-de-Camp for Governor General William Shirley. He met Colonel George Washington in this capacity. In 1756, being the last male of the Scottish Stirling Clan, he pursued a claim to the vacant title, Lord Stirling. He joined the Continental army in 1775, and had a role in the 1776

Battle of Long Island, acting in the rearguard, which delayed British forces so as to allow Washington to retreat safely. He was captured, exchanged and promoted to Major General in February 1777.

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Both letters are from Joseph Hoff, Superintendent of the Hibernia Furnace Forge. The letters detail the tasks and provisions necessary for a successful iron smelting operation in the 18th century. In particular, we note the work necessary to prepare the nearby roads so as to insure the arrival of vast quantities of cut wood which would be turned into charcoal to fuel a blast furnace. Good roads would also be necessary to transport the heavy finished product, iron in some form, to Elizabethtown.

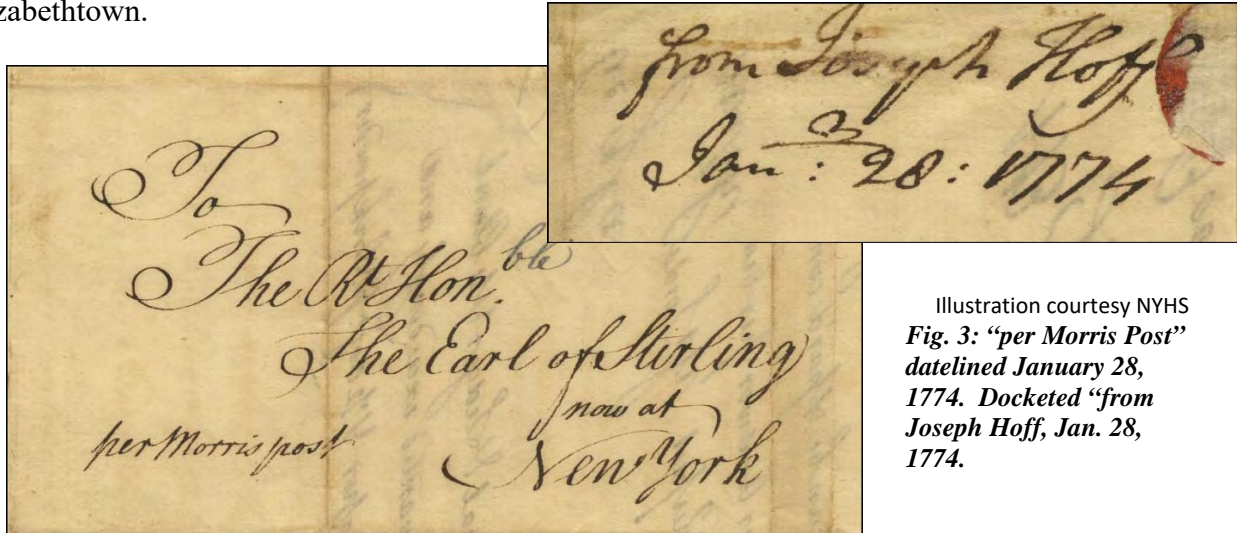


Illustration courtesy NYHS
Fig. 3: “per Morris Post”
 datelined January 28,
 1774. Docketed “from
 Joseph Hoff, Jan. 28,
 1774.

Figure 3, a letter from Hoff to “The Rt Hon^{ble} The Earl of Stirling now at New York” is datelined January 28, 1774. It went “per Morris Post.” In the letter, Hoff lists the “absolute necessity... of having sufficient quantities of rum, molasses, tea, sugar, blistered steel, blankets, tobacco, pork, flour and (gun) powder,” these items to be hoarded prior to the initiation of a “blast” for the smelting of iron. (Once a “blast” is initiated the temperature of the charcoal furnace must not be allowed to drop or the impurities won’t separate from the iron. Forgemen would work around the clock for days, in shifts.) Hoff goes on to say that Lord Stirling must pay the balance of a supplier’s bill before “he would aid us again.” Hoff notes his brother, Charles, had engaged a “bellowsmaker” and he has “inquired about (water)wheel repairs (both necessary components of an iron forge). “The road to Mount Hope is cleared,” and he has acquired planks for the dam and awaits slate stone for the road.

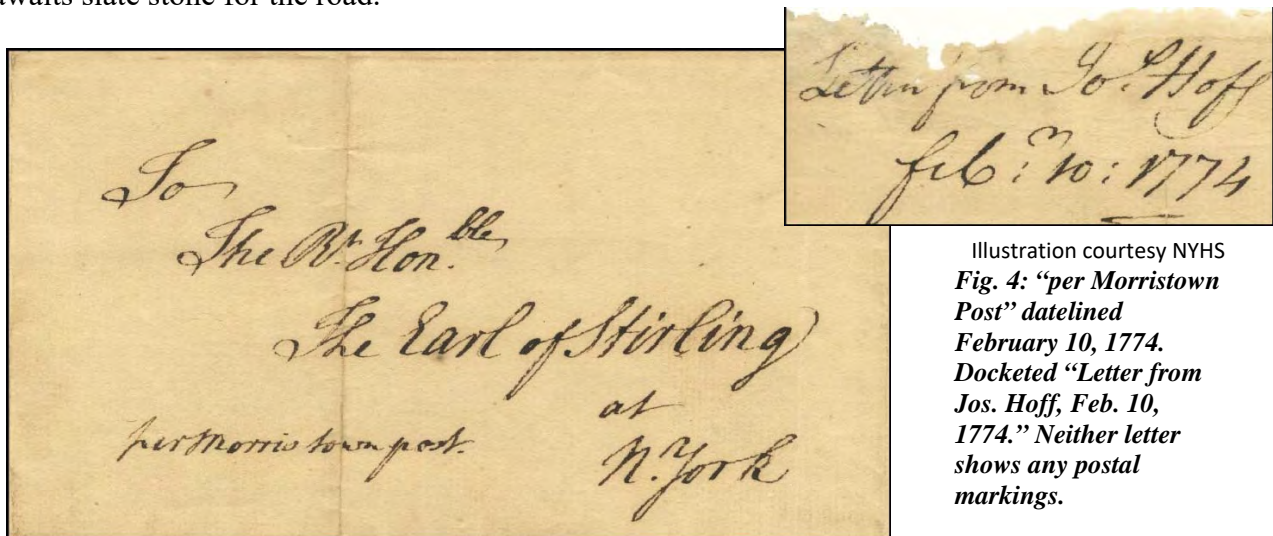


Illustration courtesy NYHS
Fig. 4: “per Morrissetown Post”
 datelined
 February 10, 1774.
 Docketed “Letter from
 Jos. Hoff, Feb. 10,
 1774.” Neither letter
 shows any postal
 markings.

The *Figure 4* letter, datelined February 10, 1774, is superscribed “Per Morristown Post.” In it, Hoff reports that the ore has been secured and also sufficient hay (for the horses) until “the grass comes.”

The word “Post” may not refer to a postal system as Morristown would not have a formal post office until after the Revolutionary War broke out.³ Rather, I think it more likely that “Post” refers to a person riding between Morristown and Elizabethtown, site of a Post Office under the Crown during Alexander Spotswood’s administration.⁴ In my searches, the next reference to a “Morristown Post” is from an August 31, 1776 Hoff letter to Colonel Stephen Moylan of the Continental Army. He reports that the Forge could provide “36 or 38 three pound cannon” and that he has the ore that he needs, but needs “not less that 50 pounds proclamation money.” He asks for “a prompt answer by the return of the Morristown Post.”⁵ No mention of a Morristown post has been identified in newspapers extant at this time.

The following 1780 map describes the location of the Hibernia Furnace, and Morristown, as well as New York City.

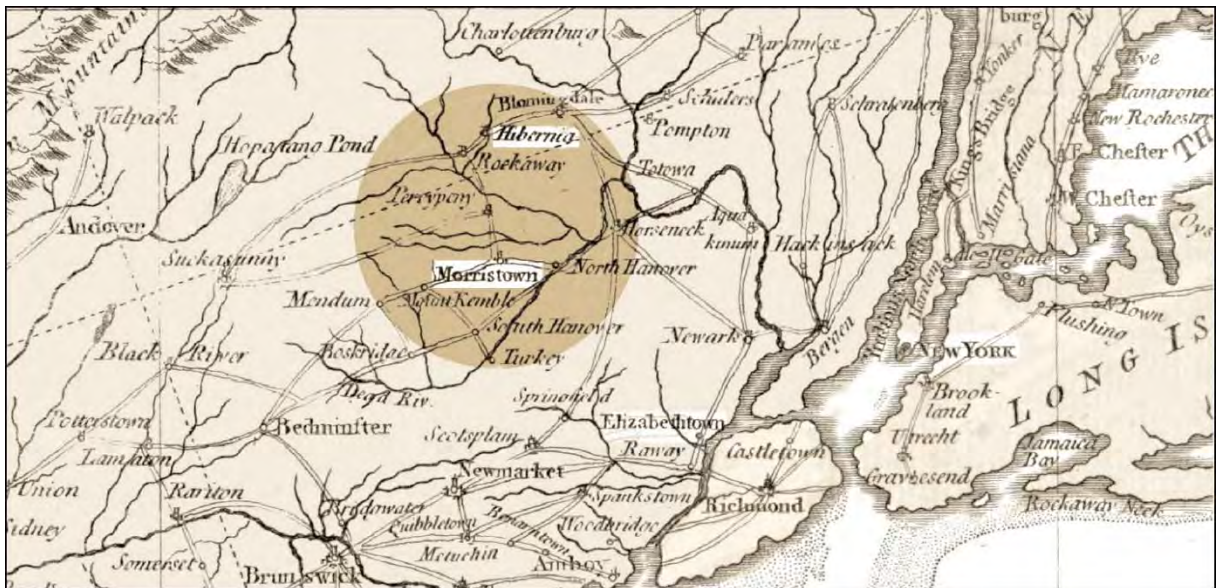
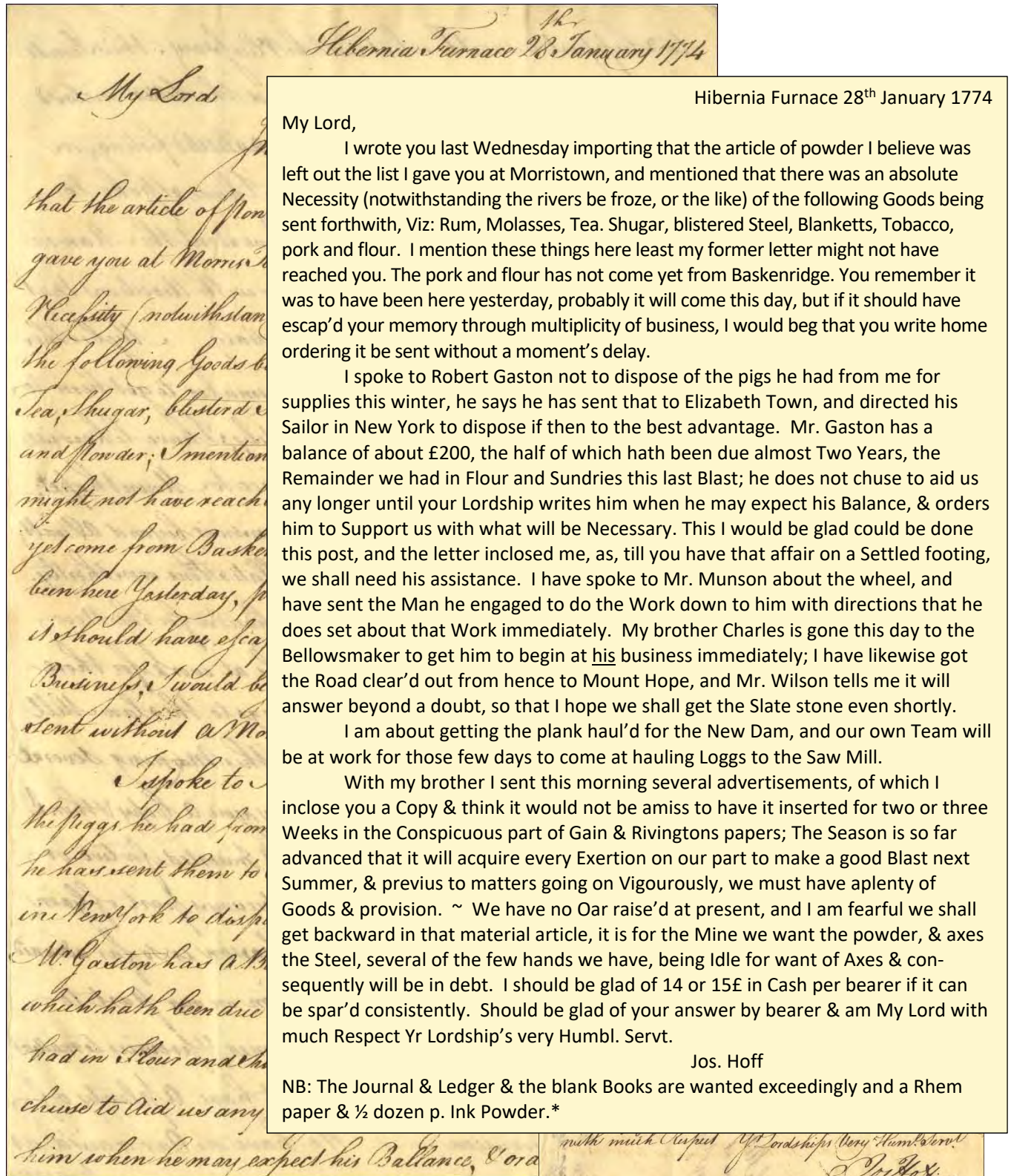


Fig. 5: Section of a 1780 map from Universal Magazine,⁶ showing this section of New Jersey with roads, six years after the 1774 letter to Lord Stirling.

Similarly, the route of the Morris Post is subject to conjecture. Hoff notes that delivery to the Hibernia Furnace depends of “rivers being frozen.” So too, a post rider might have changed routes based on freezes and high water altering river crossings.

In summary, we report two similar superscriptions referring to a messenger service from Morris County to New York. Both letters lack traditional postal markings, and appear to have gone free to Stirling. We hope that future researchers will be able to fill in the blanks about the Morristown Post.

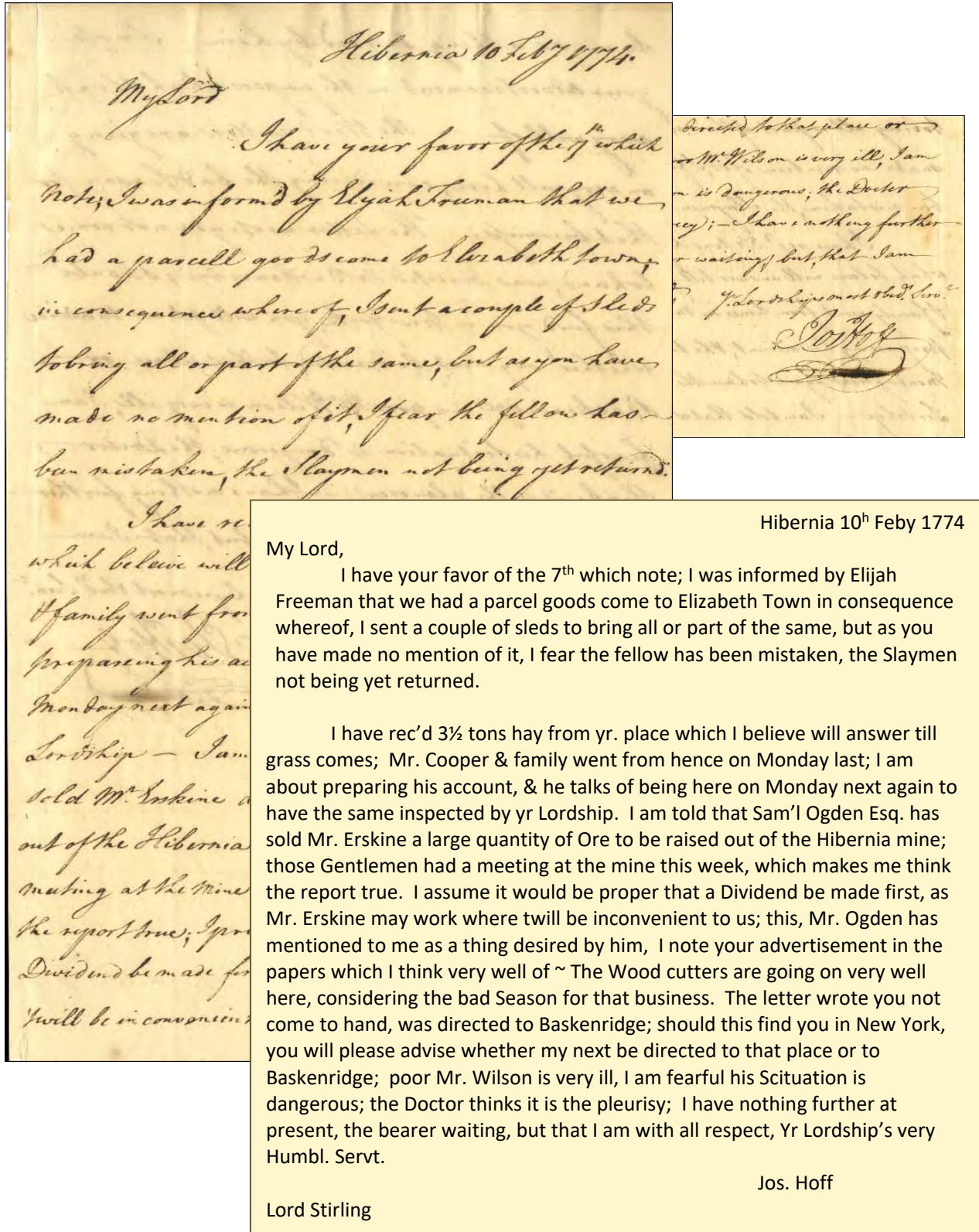
Acknowledgements: I enjoyed talking to fellow New Jersey colonial postal history enthusiasts, Robert Rose, Ed Siskin, Stephen M. Roth and Donald Chafetz, about these letters.



Letter scan courtesy of the New York Historical Society
Fig. 6: January 28, 1774 from Hibernia Furnace to Lord Stirling in New York City.

*We have left spelling and punctuation as it occurred in these letters.

with much respect Yr Lordships very Humbl. Servt
 Jos. Hoff
 NB: The Journal & Ledger & the blank Books are wanted exceedingly and a Rhem paper & 1/2 dozen p. Ink Powder.

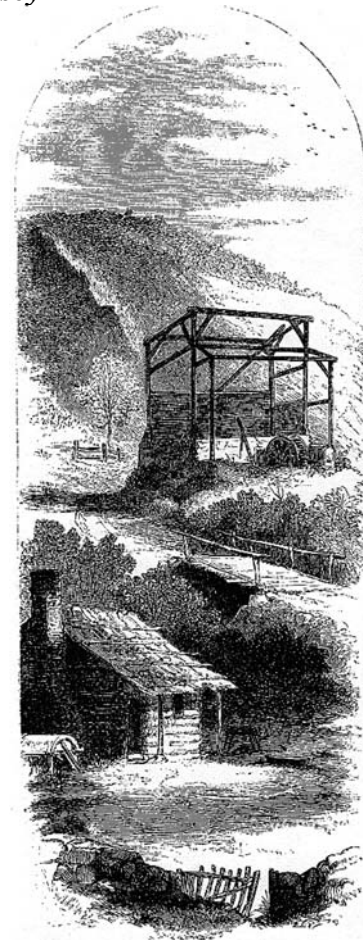


Letter scan courtesy of the New York Historical Society
Fig. 7: Second letter from Joseph Hoff, dated February 10, 1774, again to Lord Stirling in New York.

The Early Iron Industry in New Jersey



ENTRANCE TO HIBERNIA MINE.



LORD STIRLING'S FORGE.

Figs. 8-10: Illustrations of the Hibernia Mine, Lord Stirling's forge, and a view of the interior of the mine from an article in Harper's New Monthly Magazine.⁷



INTERIOR OF THE MINE.

Interior of the Mine

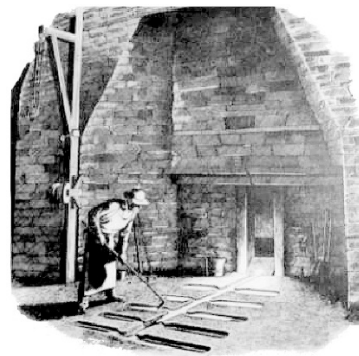


Fig. 11: Casting the pigs – molten iron flowed from the furnace's tap hole into channels compressed in sand in the floor. The main stream was referred to the "sow," and the laterals as "pigs" as they resembled piglets. The crude iron was then sold to be further processed and refined.⁸

ENDNOTES:

¹ *The Pulse of the People: New Jersey 1763-1789*, a catalog of an exhibit held at the New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, Jan 17-April 4, 1976.

² William (Lord Stirling) Alexander, Your most humble servant. This image is available from the [New York Public Library's](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org) Digital Library under the digital ID 2163e1a0-c60a-012f-a03e-58d385a7bc34: digitalgallery.nypl.org → digitalcollections.nypl.org (4/25/2019)

³ Donald A. Chafetz, "The Morristown Post Office," *NJPH*, Vol 31, No. 4, Whole No. 152 Nov 2003.

⁴ Alexander ter Braake, *The Posted Letter in Colonial and Revolutionary America 1628-1790*, pp C13-15.

⁵ Edmund D. Halsey, *History of Morris County New Jersey*, 1882 "Military Work at Hibernia" pp 51.

⁶ Universal Magazine, 1780, showing "The Seat of War" in the Colonies, at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d9/A_New_and_accurate_map_of_New_Jersey_-_from_the_best_authorities_%28NYPL_b14934030-465945%29.jpg in the New York Public Library digital collections.

⁷ Goller, Robert R., Ed., *Artist-Life in the Highlands and Among the Nail-Makers, An 1859 Visit to Northern New Jersey's Iron Industry and the Morris Canal*, published by The Canal Society of New Jersey, 1994. This booklet reprints articles from Harper's *New Monthly Magazine*, April & June 1860, with additional notes by Robert R. Goller. The stage coach view below also from this same booklet.

⁸ Description of the Hopewell Furnace in Pennsylvania from www.peacham.com/travel



Fig. 12: Riding atop the Paterson, Bloomingdale, & Newfoundland Stage