

CENTRAL IRON FOUNDRY
(Tuscaloosa Steel Company)
Birmingham Industrial District
1700 Holt Rd.
Holt
Tuscaloosa County
Alabama

HAER No. AL-82

HAER
ALA
63-HOLT,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, DC 20013-7127

ADDENDUM TO
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
BLACK & WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS

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Location: Holt Road, Holt, Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. Take McFarland Boulevard to River Road east to Holt.

Owner: U.S. Government

Date of Construction: 1903

Builder/ Architect/ Engineer: Multiple

Project Information: Information within this written report was donated to the Historic American Engineering Record by the Birmingham Historical Society.

Description: Today, Tuscaloosa Steel and Empire Coke, a division of McWane Inc., operate a steel mini mill and coking operation at the Holt site on the western and eastern, respectively, portions of the Central Iron site. The foundry site appears abandoned and unused at present with two cupolas and substantial numbers of early 20th century plants and facilities still standing. The furnaces have been demolished.

Significance: While information about the Central Coal and Iron Foundry site is limited, this site appears historically significant for three reasons. Central Iron was once the largest soil pipe plant in the United States. It was also the first fully integrated pipemaking operation in the United States with a coke plant, blast furnaces, and foundry located on the same site. The still operating coke plant (See Empire Coke Plant HAER No. AL-21) is potentially National Register eligible. Since the foundry was shut down before the federally mandated changes of the 1970s and 1980s, a comprehensive inventory of the foundry portion of the site could reveal that significant early features of the plant are still intact.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In 1901, Central Iron and Foundry Company, the major producer of cast iron soil pipe in the United States, established the Central Iron and Coal Company as a subsidiary of the parent company located in New York. The Central Iron and Coal Company purchased a 1,200 acre tract of land along the Warrior River six miles north of Tuscaloosa. Due to the completion of the locks and dams along the Warrior River, this industrial site provided excellent water transport. The site was also accessed by the Warrior Southern Railroad. Construction of the first blast furnace began in 1901, along with a battery of 164 beehive coke ovens. The blast furnace with an 85-foot high stack and an 18-foot wide bosh, went into blast in August of 1903, producing the first pig iron casts three days later. Capacity of the furnaces was listed as 150 tons per day. In 1907, a soil pipe plant was also built. In 1912, a much larger pipe plant was built to replace the original plant. This plant manufactured universal pressure pipe in sizes 2-inch through 36-inch. It was made in six foot lengths and named for the design of its joint. A nodulizing plant was also built in 1909-1910 for the "preparation of pyrite cinder from Spain" and a contract was signed with the Virginia-Carolina Chemical Company for this production. The community of Holt grew up around the furnace and pipe works. J. Warner Shook, son of Colonel A. M. Shook and a graduate of Sewanee and Boston Institute of Technology, who began his career as a machinist at the Ensley works in the 1890s, served as vice-president and general manager of the Holt plant.

Coal for the Holt operations came from Kellerman. In 1903, the Mobile and Ohio Railroad built a 13-mile long railroad (later extended to 16 miles) to develop this area to support the Holt operations. The Central Coal and Iron Company also purchased mining properties near Woodstock accessible by the Alabama Great Southern Rail Line.

In 1903, a new coking process patented by Semet-Solvay Company was implemented at Holt and 40 Semet Solvay ovens constructed. The original beehives continued in operation until 1912 when 40 additional Semet Solvay ovens were constructed. The Semet Solvay coking process had been introduced to the United States in the early 1880s from Europe where its use began in the 1870s.

About 40% of the iron produced by the Holt furnace was used in the manufacture of pipe, the rest was sold under the brand name of "Warrior," a high manganese iron, and "Tuscaloosa," a straight foundry iron. In 1929, the Holt Furnace was closed and early in 1940 the Central Iron and Coal Company went into receivership. DeBardeleben Coal Corp. acquired the by-products plant in 1940. Henry Ticknor DeBardeleben (1874-1948, son of Henry Fairchild and

Ellen Pratt, born in Prattville) served as President of DeBardeleben Coal Company from its formation in 1923 through the merger of DeBardeleben Coal Co., Empire Coal Co. and Corona Coal Co. in 1947. In 1948, the company owned 100,627 acres of coal lands in Walker, Cullman and Fayette counties, engaged in mining on the Black Creek, Mary Lee and Corona seams with an annual capacity in excess of 1 million tons, operated retail coal yards in Birmingham, the byproducts plant at Holt and bunkering divisions at Mobile and New Orleans. McWane/Empire Coke acquired the coking portion of the plant in 1962. The foundry site is currently owned by the U.S. Government which acquired it due to the bankruptcy of its former owner.

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