

Discovery of Mineral Coal in America

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immigrant ancestor, of her great-grandfather, Silas Aldrich, a soldier of the revolution. The place where he was buried being well known, Mrs. Potter wrote the secretary of war, suggesting the removal of the remains of Silas Aldrich to the military cemetery at West Point. Secretary Root at once ordered this to be done, and the removal and reinterment were carried out under his direction. The military history of Silas Aldrich runs in this wise: he joined Washington's army as a water boy at the age of nine years, but as soon as he was old enough he enlisted and served under Col. Humphrey Greaton, as a soldier, until the close of the war. He was at Valley Forge during the terrible winter of 1777-8 when the army endured such terrible hardships, of which he had his full share. The official records show that he participated in many battles.

DISCOVERY OF MINERAL COAL IN AMERICA.

The most important factor in the recent unparalleled advancement of our industrial activities is the existence, under easily accessible conditions, of exhaustless quantities of cheap fuel in the form of mineral coal. The discovery of this substance in America has been commonly ascribed in time to the latter part of the seventeenth century, and in place to Pennsylvania. We now know that there are still earlier records.

It is therefore a fact that deserves more than passing mention, that the first discovery of mineral coal in this country did not take place in regions first settled by the white man, in districts where it is now most extensively mined, and known to be widely distributed, but in the very heart of the American continent. Among the very earliest discoveries are those in the Mississippi valley, very close to the present boundaries of our own State. This was nearly fifty years before coal was recognized in the Pennsylvania region.

The earliest record of the existence of mineral fuel in the form of coal in this country appears to be that of the Jesuit missionaries in the Assiniboine country. As early as 1659, in referring to the Poulak (Assiniboines), mention is made of mineral coal as follows:

As wood is scarce and very small with them nature has taught them to burn coal (charbon de terre) in its place, and to cover their wigwams with skins.

Coming nearer home, that illustrious and determined French explorer and Jesuit missionary, Father Louis Hennepin, states in the Journal of his travels, and in an English edition gives the location on a map,* that on the Illinois river above Fort Creve Coeur, which was situated not far from the present town of Ottawa, coal exists. That he was not mistaken is clearly shown by subsequent accounts.

This discovery was eight years later also considered by La Salle, in his letters regarding the natural products found along the Illinois river. In the recent reprint of these letters by Margry† the following passage is of great interest:

Il y a aussy quantite d'ardoisieres et de charbon de terre; quatre lieues plus bas, a droite, on trouve la rivier des Pestigonki dans laquelle j'ay trouve un morceau de cuivre et une espece de metal que j'envoyay, il y a deuxans, a M. de Frontenac dont je n'ay point eu de response, et que je croy de la bronze, si elle se trouve en mine.

Coal was not mined in Pennsylvania until the beginning of the eighteenth century, the earliest record being 1704, twenty years after the privilege was granted to William Penn. The anthracite was known in the Wyoming district in Pennsylvania as early as 1766; and it was discovered in the Lehigh region in 1791. The Virginia coals near Richmond were mined for the first time in 1750; and at the close of the Revolutionary war were shipped from this district to Philadelphia, New York and Boston.

C. R. K.

*New Discovery of a Vast Country in America, etc., English ed., map, 1698, London.

†Mem. et doc. pour servir la l'histoire des origines Francaises des pays d'outre-mere; t. II, Lettres de Cavalier de la Salle et correspondance relative a ses entreprises (1676-1685), p. 175, Paris, 1879.

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