

## Coojoot – A Graphite Mine Located in South Kingstown

PAUL FRANCIS GLEESON

On the west bank of the Narrow River between Middle Bridge and Bridgeton is located Side Hill Farm.<sup>1</sup> Here, in the town of South Kingstown, is the traditional site of the black lead or graphite mine called Coojoot.<sup>2</sup>

It has been alleged that the Indians made use of the graphite outcroppings in days before the coming of the white men—possibly as a source for a blacking material. The first mention of this black lead, or as it was sometimes referred to “black earth,” is to be found in the writings of Roger Williams. In the “Key into the Language of America” he records the Indian word “Métewis” meaning “black earth.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time he makes a note of an Indian town named “Metewêmesick”<sup>4</sup> as being situated in western Massachusetts. Trumbell, in editing a later edition of the “Key” interprets “black earth” as referring to plum-

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<sup>1</sup> In order to reach the mine site it is necessary, after leaving the road, to scramble over a gate and, crossing a field, to climb the hill for a short distance.

<sup>2</sup> There are at least three variants in the spelling of this word. a). On page 13 of his “Indian Names of Places in Rhode Island” Usher Parsons uses “Cajoot.” b). “Cojoot” is used by Sidney S. Rider in “The Lands of Rhode Island as the Great Sachems Knew Them” page 140. It might be of interest to note that Mr. Rider misquotes Dr. Parsons to whom he attributes the spelling “Cajout.” Dr. Parsons gives the name of the black lead mine as “Cajoot” [see above a).]. Rider page 141 c). On page 275 of Potter’s “Early History of Narragansett” we find “Coojoot.” The writer has used this third form as that is the one found in Potter’s transcript of the first Pettiquamscut Deed.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Roger “Key into the Language of America”, 1936 edition page 192.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

bago or graphite.<sup>5</sup> In the same note he shows that in colonies other than Rhode Island there was an interest in the possible commercial exploitation of this mineral,—

“In 1644, John Winthrop, Jun., had a grant of the hill at Tantousq, about 60 miles westward (from Boston), in which the black-leade is.”<sup>6</sup>

This aforementioned deposit would probably be located somewhere near the town of Sturbridge, formerly an important center for graphite.

The exact purpose for which the Indians used graphite is unknown. It is quite possible that it was used for coloring purposes. Williams' references to “black earth” are included in his chapter entitled “Of their paintings.” Here he writes,—

“They paint their Garments, &c.  
The men paint their Faces in Warre.  
Both Men and Women for pride, &c.”<sup>7</sup>

And further,—

“It hath been the foolish Custome of all barbarous Nations to paint and figure their Faces and Bodies (as it hath been to our shame and grieffe, wee may remember it of some of our Fore-Fathers in this Nation.)”<sup>8</sup>

Still quoting from Williams we find that the Indians had the word “Mówi-súcki,”<sup>9</sup> meaning black. It is entirely possible then from the above that black might have been discovered occupying an important place in a seventeenth century Indian make-up box. It is also possible that the ingredients for this tinting preparation might have come from some black lead mine—possibly from Coojoot. If these suppositions be true we should not, following Wil-

<sup>5</sup> Narragansett Club Publications, Vol. 1 page 207 n 367.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, op. cit. page 191.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. page 192.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. page 191.

liams, refer to the Indians as “barbarous” for the term “fashionable” would be more suitable. In support of this we offer the following quotation taken from a contemporary book, —

“He could not bear the sight of his own grey hairs, and therefore used a black-lead comb to discolor them.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the Indians may very well have had other sources for their graphite, the deposit at Coojoot seems to have been fairly well known in the middle sixteen hundreds. It is specifically referred to in the first Pettiquamscut Deed dated January 20, 1657 where we find that,—

“They also grant them all the black lead in this title and in a place called Coojoot.”<sup>11</sup>

Both Judge Potter and Sidney Rider locate the above mentioned deposit as being near the Pettiquamscut Rock and at the foot of Tower Hill.<sup>12</sup> These requirements fit the situation of Side Hill Farm upon which is found the traditional site of Coojoot.

The mention of the word Coojoot in the Pettiquamscut Deed is the only extant use of that word in the seventeenth century. The most probable explanation for this may possibly be inferred from the following quotation taken out of a letter sent by John Winthrop to his son Fitz-John in England. Under the date of September 12, 1658 he writes from Boston,—

“—there is some blacklead digged, but not so much as they expected, it being very difficult to gett out of the rocks, which they are forced to break with fires, the rocks being very hard and not to be entered further than the fire maketh way, so as the charge hath beene so greate in dig-

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<sup>10</sup> Murray's Oxford English Dictionary, Vol. 1, pt. 2, page 894.

<sup>11</sup> Potter, E. R., “Early History of Narragansett”, page 275.

<sup>12</sup> Rider, op. cit. pages 141-142.

ging of it that I am like to have no profit by the same."<sup>13</sup>

Although this does not refer to Coojoot, we can well imagine the same situation existing here in Rhode Island. The crude methods of extraction and the low quality of the graphite may have operated in such a way as to prevent the profitable exploitation of the deposit. It is certain that if Coojoot had been operated profitably there would have been many more references to it than have been found.

To find the next reference to these graphite deposits it is necessary to come down to 1840. In this year Charles T. Jackson's "Report on the Geological and Agricultural Survey of the State of Rhode Island" contained the following,—

"Tower Hill, in Kingston. Plumbago is found here in several places and has been wrought to some extent for supplying moulding dust for iron founders. Thirty tons of this substance have been raised at one time by digging only four feet into the rocks in the orchard, upon the hill side."<sup>14</sup>

It may be inferred from the above that these deposits were worked to some extent for the benefit of local industry. Once again, however, it is probable that these operations were not on any large scale, possibly owing to the aforementioned profit angle.

Over half a century was to pass before another serious attempt was to be made at operating this mine. On September 9, 1887 Jesse V. B. Watson sold the Side Hill Farm, which he had inherited from his ancestors, to a Mrs. Emma Carver. During her ownership Mrs. Carver executed a mining franchise to a graphite company which hoped to work the deposits. It is believed that this com-

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<sup>13</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, Fifth Series, Vol. VIII, pages 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, C. T., "Report on the Geological and Agricultural Survey of the State of Rhode Island", 1840, page 89.

pany was responsible for extending and deepening the shafts as well as installing a narrow gauge railway to connect them. Although some mining was done and although an effort was made to float stock or bonds on the New York market, the venture was unsuccessful due to the heavy expense involved and the small chance for profit.

Side Hill Farm changed owners again when on October 9, 1908 it was purchased by Thomas G. Hazard, Jr. of Narragansett from Charles Carver and J. Henry Carver, Executors under the will of Emma Carver. A few years later during the World War when mineral prices were high some slight interest was shown in the possibility of reopening the mine. Once again, even in a period of boom prices, it was decided that the mine could not be operated profitably. Since the War the mine has been left undisturbed and bushes and weeds have gradually begun to hide it from public view.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Information contained in a letter to the writer from Mr. Thomas G. Hazard, Jr., dated November 15, 1938.