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Igbo and African Contributions to the American Steel Industry

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Providence Forge, New Kent County, Virginia. Built in 2nd quarter of 18th century.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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The Igbo-speaking imports into the Chesapeake played a significant factor in the rise of Afro-Virginian culture. One implication of the presence of so many Igbo-speakers was the proliferation of Igbo terms and concepts—*okra*, *buckra*, *obia*—or discrete Igbo cultural practices (e.g., the Jonkonu celebration, funerary customs, and spiritual beliefs) in Jamaica, Virginia, and other regions of the Anglophone Americas that imported significant numbers of Africans from the Bight of Biafra. Another implication was the possibility that Gabriel Prosser—leader of the failed Richmond, Virginia, slave revolt in 1800—was accorded a great deal of respect and veneration because of his blacksmithing skills and the spiritual powers associated with this trade among the peoples living in the Biafran interior. In fact, three separate blacksmiths were claimed to have been part of the leadership core of this attempt to capture and raze the capital of Virginia.

— Walter C. Rucker Jr. (2010). Igbo. In: Encyclopedia of African American History. ABC-CLIO. p. 53. Photo: Ukpuru

The contributions of Igbo people and other Africans to the American steel and iron industry remain one of the lesser-known but highly significant aspects of African heritage in the United States. Many enslaved Africans, including Igbo blacksmiths, were brought to America for their expertise in metalworking. These skilled craftsmen played a vital role in the development of iron industries in colonial America, particularly in the Chesapeake region.

The Igbo and Blacksmithing Tradition

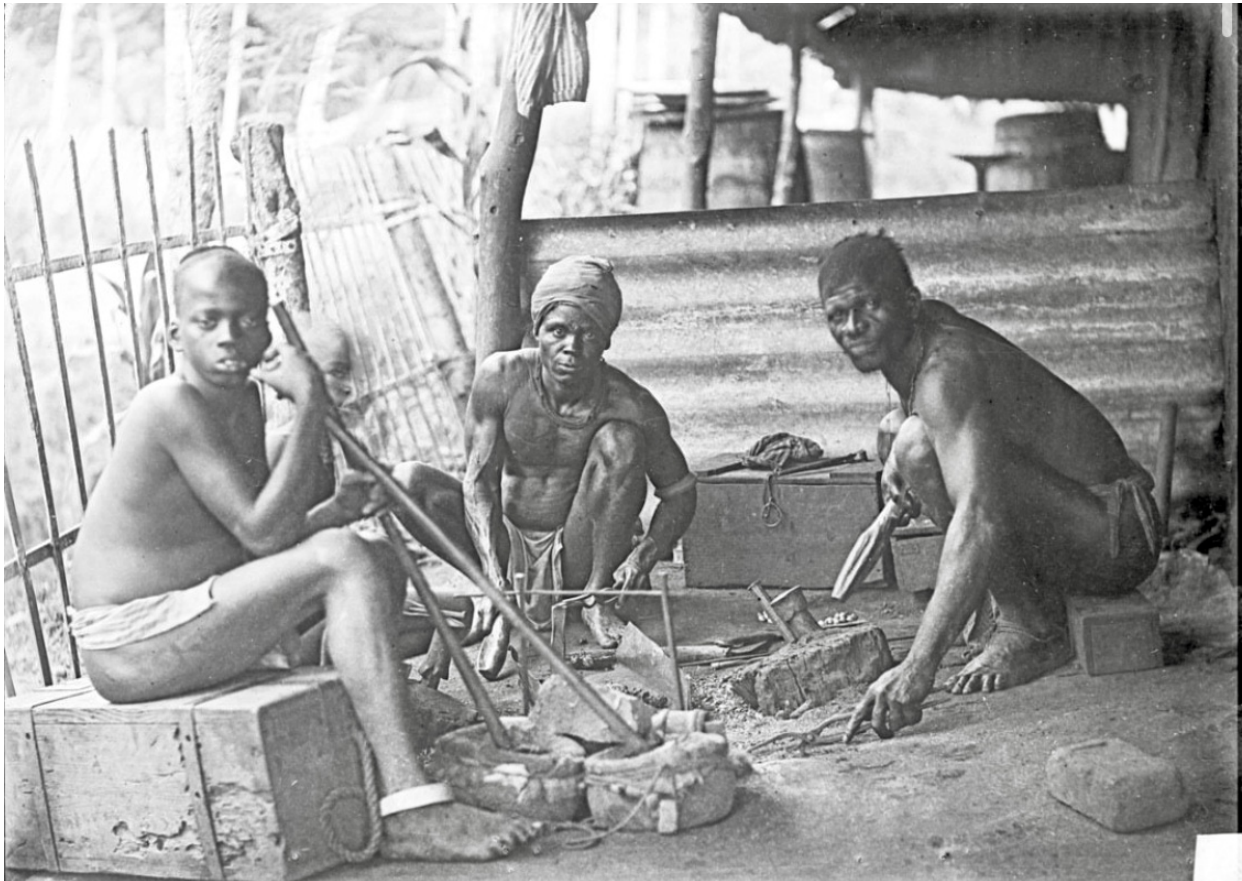
The Igbo people, particularly from the northern region, have a long history of blacksmithing. The Awka blacksmiths were among the most skilled, and their work was highly valued in Igbo society.

Blacksmithing in Igboland was more than just a craft; it held spiritual significance and was passed down through generations. Some historians suggest that Awka blacksmiths were responsible for the famous Igbo Ukwu bronzes, which were more advanced than most metalwork found in the world during the 9th century.



Pot made with leaded bronze rediscovered in what is purported to be an uncovered shrine at Isaiah Anozie's compound in today's Igbo Ukwu, Anambra State. The pot has since been dated to around the 9th century and was made by unknown artists and for unknown reasons. Photo by Dirk Bakker. National Museum, Lagos.

Iron smelting in Igboland dates back to at least 2000 BC, making it one of the oldest metallurgical traditions in Africa. This deep knowledge of metalwork made the Igbo people highly desirable to slave traders who supplied labor for the American iron industry.



Blacksmiths “from the Onitsha area” according to G. I. Jones, photographed by William Henry Crosse, part of the Royal Niger. Company, 1886-1895. MAA Cambridge.

02

Enslaved Africans and the American Iron Industry

Many Africans, including the Igbo, were chosen by slave traders based on their skills. Just as rice planters from the Senegambia region were taken to Georgia for their agricultural expertise, blacksmiths and metalworkers were taken to America to work in iron forges and plantations. The first successful ironworks in the South were built in

the Chesapeake region by Alexander Spotswood in 1718, and by 1775, the American colonies had become the third-largest producer of iron in the world.



This double bell (dawuro, nnawuta) was made around 1920 by Asante artist Kwaku Bempah and an unidentified blacksmith in Ghana. Crafted from iron and wood, it is a traditional Akan musical instrument used in ceremonies and performances. The piece is part of the Fowler Museum at UCLA's collection (X87.1312) and was a gift from Elizabeth Lloyd Davis. Photo: National Museum of African Art.

Africans brought their knowledge of iron smelting and craftsmanship to these ironworks. The labor of enslaved Africans was crucial in building and maintaining iron forges, furnaces, and tools. Enslaved blacksmiths like Abraham and Bill were even given positions of authority at places such as the Snowden Iron Furnace in Maryland.



Early 20th-century Adze, crafted by a Central Pende artist in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Made of iron, wood, copper, and pigment. By Felix Collection.

Catoctin Furnace and the Legacy of African Ironworkers

At Catoctin Furnace in Maryland, archaeologists discovered the remains of 31 enslaved ironworkers. Studies by the Smithsonian Institution confirmed that these individuals were first- or second-generation West Africans. This evidence supports the theory that slave traders intentionally sought out Africans with metallurgical skills.

Ironworking was one of the most privileged professions among enslaved people. Skilled workers were sometimes paid for overtime work, which allowed them to improve their standard of living. Some were even able to purchase their freedom. This suggests that ironworkers, despite being enslaved, maintained a level of self-worth and social status through their craftsmanship.



03

Women in the Iron Industry

Women also played roles in the iron industry. At sites like Catoctin Furnace, women made up half of the enslaved workers. Some worked directly at the furnace, while others were involved in related tasks like ore mining and charcoal production. The roles of women in the American iron industry mirrored those in African societies, where they assisted with the preparation of materials necessary for metalworking.

04

Spiritual and Cultural Continuity

The influence of African spiritual beliefs in blacksmithing also persisted in America. Among the Mande people, blacksmiths were believed to control natural forces, and similar beliefs existed among the Igbo and other West African groups. Archaeologists discovered a small wrought-iron figure buried under a blacksmith's shop near slave quarters in Virginia. This figure is believed to resemble protective artifacts made by African blacksmiths, showing a continuity of African spiritual traditions in the Americas.

05

The Lasting Impact of African Ironworkers

Despite being enslaved, African blacksmiths managed to preserve elements of their identity and skill. Their contributions helped shape the American iron industry, and their knowledge of metalworking was

passed down through generations. Many of the tools and techniques they introduced were later adopted by American blacksmiths.



Eastern Bamana forged iron figure And Iron figure from blacksmith shop, slave quarters, 18th century Virginia. Photo: NPS

The Igbos, alongside other African groups, played an indispensable role in the American steel and iron industry. Their expertise not only helped build the economic foundation of the American colonies but also preserved African cultural traditions in new lands. Recognizing their contributions is essential in understanding the full history of America's industrial growth.

- Rucker, W. C. Jr. (2010). Igbo. In: Encyclopedia of African American History. ABC-CLIO, p. 53.
- National Park Service (n.d.). African American Heritage & Ethnography: Ironworkers in Chesapeake.
- National Museum of African Art (n.d.). Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Idenze Ezeme**

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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