Some ten miles west of Birmingham, just south of Interstate 59, lies Tannehill State Park. Picturesque and serene, this is a favorite gathering place for cookouts, trade days, and family reunions. But more than a century ago, this was home of Tannehill Ironworks, the first generation of Alabama’s foundry industry that was to make Birmingham the Pittsburgh of the South.

The origins of the Tannehill Ironworks are traced to Pennsylvania ironmaster Daniel Hillman. In 1830, Hillman constructed a forge on the banks of the Roupes Creek just outside the Jefferson County line, where he had found the richest deposits of brown ore in his experience. Unfortunately, Hillman died in 1832 and the forge lay dormant until 1836, when it was sold to Ninian Tannehill. Tannehill, one of the first pioneers in the valley, enlarged the Hillman forge and sporadically worked it for the next twenty years. While Tannehill was one of at least four owners of this property, it was his name that retained identification with the ironworks.

In 1857, Tannehill sold the Ironworks to John Alexander. He, in turn, engaged his father-in-law, Moses Stroup, to oversee a major expansion of the plant. Tannehill No. 1, as it came to be called, was built using stone carved from a quarry site on a nearby hillside. The quarry site is still visible today much the way Stroup left it.

The Civil War brought another change in ownership. William L. Sanders of Marion purchased the operation in 1862 and set about expanding the iron works, eventually adding two more furnaces to the plant. Of the 15 iron producing plants operating in Alabama during the Civil War, Tannehill was the only site where three cold blast furnaces operated side by side. At peak operation, more than 700 workers produced 20 tons of pig iron a day, most of which was shipped to the Selma Naval Arsenal to be recast into cannon and naval plate. Tannehill also produced large quantities of war munitions, including cannon balls, gun barrels, and ordnance, as well as pots, pans, and skillets for use by the Confederate Army.

By 1865, Alabama’s iron works industry was a major contributor to the Confederate war effort, which prompted the Union forces to take swift action to destroy it. In the spring of that year, Maj. Gen. James H. Wilson led a force of 14,000 men through Alabama. In the process, Tannehill Furnace was destroyed on March 31, 1865. Of the destruction, the historian Milo B. Howard wrote, “Destroying the usefulness of the great stone furnaces, they left them standing as solemn witnesses to the general destruction. Tannehill was never again to function as a producing furnace.” While there were some efforts to rebuild the ironworks, the ruins remained only as a memorial to the early ironmasters. Slowly, the site succumbed to nature and reverted to virgin wilderness.

By the mid-1950s, efforts began to restore the site. Encouraged by several noted civic and political leaders from the Tuscaloosa and Birmingham areas, the Alabama Legislature enacted law in 1969 proclaiming it the Tannehill Ironworks Historical State Park. Subsequently, during America’s bicentennial in 1976, a refiring of Tannehill No. 1 was undertaken. The successful refiring has been the only such project of its kind ever attempted in the United States.

Today, this popular tourist attraction attracts more than one-half million visitors annually and stands as a monument to Alabama’s reputation as the capital of Southern steel and iron manufacturing.