



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

The genealogical inquiry is the leading type of question the Society receives. That comes as little surprise since family history is by one report the second-most popular hobby in the United States. (Gardening is #1.)

At its core, completing your family tree involves finding the dates and places of birth, marriage, and death for each generation of your ancestors (as well as their children). For this specific purpose though, the Historical Society's archives are usually of little value. While we have some city directories, usually census records, church and state vital records, and cemetery transcriptions are of more direct use. Moreover, organizations such as the Mercer County Genealogical Society (which meets at the Shenango Valley Library on Tuesdays) are available to help.

Of course the heavily-advertised paid subscription to Ancestry.com is invaluable to someone seriously interested in learning about his family tree. However, if you just want to dabble, know that a large collection of free online databases is available at Familysearch.org. Likewise, Pa. death certificates (from 1906-1963)—though hosted by Ancestry.com—are available free to Pa. residents at www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Ancestry-Pa.aspx

Beyond recording vital statistics for your family members, the larger goal of genealogical research is to be able to better understand the life and times of your family members. Here, perhaps our archives may offer some context. We are not likely to have great-grandma's diary, nor specific information about one of the individual laborers who did most of the living and working in this town. What we may be able to offer, though, is some insight into the conditions of toil in the mills, or the institutions, shops, and pastimes that defined the contours of everyday life here.

Upcoming Events

CHAUTAUQUA BUS TRIP FEATURING A CONCERT BY

The Four Tops and
THE TEMPTATIONS

Saturday June 25th

Call 724-962-2392 for info. *Reservations due by May 15th*



ANNUAL ICE CREAM SOCIAL AT MAHANAY PARK

Sunday July 10th



GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIP

Seneca Niagara, July 20th

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



*Sharpsville Historical Society sponsorship of
Valley Lyric Opera's production of*

Il Trovatore

Verdi's thrilling music amidst a story of passion and retribution

Pierce Opera House

August 11th and 13th

call 724-962-5757 for tickets



Please also support Area Community Theatre of Sharpsville's quality productions, showcasing local talent.

Neil Simon's wry comedy of love and marriage

Plaza Suite

Pierce Opera House May 20th – 22nd

call 724-815-4388 or go to actsharpville.org

A Look Back

The Nation's Iron Capital?

Growing up in Sharpsville, it was an article of faith, with Pete Joyce perhaps its chief evangelist, that Sharpsville at one point was the largest producer of pig iron in the country. While Pete was a local historian *par excellence*, we do not find this assertion repeated in Mary L. McCracken's monograph "The History of the Blast Furnaces in Sharpsville, Pennsylvania from 1846 to 1954" nor in the 1877, 1888, or 1909 Mercer County histories (which did not shy from boosterism). Was Sharpsville's pre-eminence merely town lore, or is there documentation for this lofty claim?

(Pig iron, it should be noted, is merely the product of smelting iron ore, the unrefined molten iron direct from the blast furnace, before it is wrought, cast or alloyed. Consequently, pig iron production does not include the output of foundries, rolling mills, or other allied industries. As it is very brittle, except in a few applications, it is not used directly. The name derives from the traditional method of pouring the molten iron out of the furnace into a central channel that then branched off into molds formed in a bed of sand. The arrangement of these small ingot molds along the central channel resembled piglets being suckled by a sow. Hence, the ingots so formed were pigs and pig iron the product thus poured.)

What then is the genesis behind the claim of Sharpsville's lead in iron-making? One clue is given in an 1894 letter to the editor of *The Iron Trade Review*:

In looking over "Pittsburgh's Great Industries" by J. Morton Hall, member of committee on transportation and railroads of the Chamber of Commerce, I note the [rail] tonnage originating in Pittsburg and Allegheny [City—now the North Side but was once a separate municipality prior to its annexation by Pittsburgh in 1907] is placed at 19,125,000 tons. This includes in and out bound. Knowing the tonnage of Sharpsville to be exceptionally large for its size, I was led to make a rough comparison of the tonnage per capita of the two places. The daily output of the active furnaces of Sharpsville will aggregate about 1,100 tons or 400,000 tons per annum. I believe it is customary to consider that the ore, coal, coke and limestone necessary to make a ton of iron, is about three tons.

This would give us a total in and outbound tonnage originating in Sharpsville of 1,600,000. Placing the population of Sharpsville at 3,000 the tonnage per individual would equal about 533 per annum. Placing the population of Pittsburg and Allegheny at 400,000 their tonnage per individual would be less than fifty per annum.

The total railroad tonnage of the United States for 1890 was 656,961,123. If the tonnage of Pittsburg was proportionately as great as Sharpsville, one half of the tonnage of the United States would originate in Pittsburg instead of 19,000,000. If Sharpsville was as large as Pittsburg its tonnage would be over twice the entire tonnage of the State of Pennsylvania, which is placed at about 152,000,000 tons. In consideration of this showing it seems to me Sharpsville is entitled to claim the unique position of contributing the largest railroad tonnage per individual of any town, village or city in the United States and probably in the world.

A similar assertion was repeated in a 1954 pamphlet published by the Pennsylvania Railroad in connection with an inspection trip, with commentary on points of interest along that sprawling network. Sharpsville's entry notes: "Steel mills in this area, started by General James Pierce, resulted in Sharpsville becoming at one time, the largest tonnage point in the world for a town of its size—considering inbound and outbound traffic."

While rail shipments are a good proxy for iron production in a town like ours, both these excerpts rank Sharpsville on a *comparative* basis. Is there any evidence that we ever stood at the summit of iron production on an *absolute* count of tons?

Looking back to the 1874 edition of *Wiley's American Iron Trade Manual*, copious statistics are given for blast furnace production in this country. Production figures are broken down by state and county with listings for the individual furnaces. The aggregated statistics, when dated, are as of December 31, 1872. For individual furnaces, however, production appears to be from anytime in the first half of 1873, and is usually listed only as a rounded-off capacity. ("Capacity" merely annualizes average production. While it ignores times a furnace is out-of-blast due to maintenance, strikes, lack of demand, or shortages of coal or ore, it remains a good comparative measure.) These figures, however, would soon be obsolete since, starting in the fall of that year, an economic depression set in—the Panic of 1873—with iron production everywhere plummeting.

With these caveats in mind, we see close competitors to the collective capacity of 88,000 tons per year of Sharpsville's nine furnaces. Youngstown's nine furnaces totaled 85,000, with a tonnage equaled by Pittsburgh's six stacks.

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Joe Barovich has shared with us a large collection of digitized photographs taken by his father.

Among them were several views of downtown Sharpsville in late 1957.

The storefronts of by-gone shops along Main Street, looking west toward the intersection with Walnut (back when there was still a traffic light!) can be seen, especially if you zoom in on the photo,

Items for Sale

Natural Stone Drink Coasters
featuring lithographed scenes of old Sharpsville
17 different choices



\$8 each, any 4 for \$30

available at Mehler Insurance or through our website at www.sharpsvillehistorical.org



still available

Scenes of Old Sharpsville

a DVD slideshow featuring 100 photos of Sharpsville
in years past—\$10

Collections update

The following have been recently added to our collections:

Jill Lanich donated five postcards with scenes of Sharpsville from the 1940s.

Patty DeJulia donated a series of newspaper issues reporting on the 1985 tornado.

Bruce Lozier shared a large collection of digitized photographs from the 1970s showing each stage of ingot mold production at the Sheanngo, as well as documents from Shenango, Inc. and Sharpsville Quality Products.

With Gratitude

Our recent Quilt Show was very well attended and something we want to make into an annual event.

Much thanks to the quilters who brought 63 quilts for display at our headquarters and congratulations to Dianne Setterberg who won best-in-show. We would like to especially thank Jeannie Goodhart who organized the event and donated a quilt for our raffle and the best-in-show prize.

Contact Us

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see our website for officers' phone numbers

Headquarters: 131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpsville, Pa.
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Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm at our headquarters

The Nation's Iron Capital?, cont'd.

Allentown had nine furnaces with a capacity of 76,000. *Wiley's*, however, lists two cities exceeding Sharpsville's capacity: St. Louis with eight furnaces producing 90,000 tons and New Castle's seven furnaces also at 90,000 tons.

A closer examination of the furnaces, though, requires revisions to *Wiley's* figures which in some instances included the anticipated production of furnaces that were still under construction. Indeed, accounting for the frenetic pace of blast furnace construction during the early 1870s was a difficult task. One contemporary account noted that "it [monetary inflation] set everybody wild on the subject of iron. People could not build blast furnaces and iron mills fast enough in 1872-73. They built them so fast—with such a perfect furor, as it were—that it was said at the time that one cause of pig-metal going to \$55 per ton, was the extraordinary demand for it to build iron works of various kinds." We thus note, first, that *Wiley's* total for Sharpsville includes both Spearman furnaces. While they were both built around the same time, with No. 1 being blown in on January 15, 1873, the No. 2 (at 11,000 tons) did not actually start producing until August 27, 1875. The figure for St. Louis, likewise, included the third Vulcan Furnace, (18,000 tons) which was not completed until the latter part of 1873, and New Castle's 20,000 ton Rosena Furnace which did not go into blast until June 3, 1873. From Youngstown's total, 12,000 tons should be deducted when the Grace Furnace No. 1 was torn down in 1873 (and not rebuilt until 1882). These adjustments still have Sharpsville leading (as of February 12, 1873 when the Ormsby was blown in): 77,000 for Sharpsville, 76,000 for Allentown, 73,000 for Youngstown, 72,000 for St. Louis, and 70,000 for New Castle.

Pittsburgh's total of 85,000, though, stands; it came about with the blowing in of the 20,000 ton Soho on November 22, 1872—beating the addition of the Ormsby to Sharpsville's production by 82 days. This number, moreover, requires an addition. *Wiley's* still listed the Clinton Furnace's location as "South Pittsburgh." That place, along with other South Side locales of Birmingham, East Birmingham, and Ormsby, were actually independent boroughs—until they were annexed by the City of Pittsburgh April 2, 1872. Thus, with Pittsburgh's total standing at 97,000 in early 1873, we must reluctantly yield the laurel to the Iron City. (Only if one counted the capacity of the unfired Spearman No. 2 for Sharpsville and placed an asterisk next to the inclusion of the Clinton in Pittsburgh's total—à la Roger Maris' record—could we claim the crown.)

It is worth remarking that the Shenango Valley as a total—including Sharon, Wheatland, West Middlesex, as well as New Castle—was one of the largest districts, outpaced only by the anthracite furnaces of the Lehigh Valley's Allentown and Bethlehem. If one crosses the state line to include the Mahoning Valley—as would be done in later years in tallying steel and iron production—we would, at this early stage, rank first as a region.

Yet, Sharpsville's close rivalry with Pittsburgh would not last long. The next available directory, the 1876 *Directory of Iron and Steel Works of the United States and Canada*, shows an increase in production here—to 90,000 tons. While this kept us ahead of New Castle's capacity of 89,876 tons, ever larger furnaces were being built elsewhere. Allentown increased to 95,600, St. Louis to 107,000, and Pittsburgh, which would begin to establish itself as the undisputed iron and steel capital, at 127,280 tons.

As Pete Joyce would later put forward, the reasons Sharpsville did not keep pace with Pittsburgh were our lack of navigable rivers and our reluctance to embrace steel over iron. (And had General Pierce not met with an untimely death in 1874, his entrepreneurial vision may have prompted a transition to steelmaking here.)

Yet, even if a claim of being merely the nation's *second*-highest iron producer may disappoint, the *concentration* of iron production here is nonetheless remarkable. Within a span of less than a mile (from the Mt. Hickory Furnaces at the far end of Canal Street, to the Ormsby at around 8th and Main), stood nine blast furnaces (and for brief periods from 1880-1885 and 1902-1905, a tenth). Though we would never rank ahead of Pittsburgh, postcards of Sharpsville as late as 1907 were still captioned "Great Iron Center."

