Industry in Delaware County

By Tim Duerden

While Delaware County was primarily known as an agricultural region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many hundreds of industrial concerns were also located within its boundaries. That early manufacturing was located in a rural area should be of no surprise, for those industries located in the county were largely based on the available natural resources and dependent on the motive power provided by water.

Highlighted below are some of the main industrial operations that were located within Delaware County.

RAFTING

Lumbering was one of the largest early industries of Delaware County. For the region's earliest white settlers the land needed to be cleared before farming could begin. It was soon discovered that the lumber had a great market in river cities such as Philadelphia and that rafting was the best way to get the lumber there.

Daniel Skinner, a Connecticut Yankee, is believed to be the first man to guide a raft down the Delaware in 1764. Until his death in 1801 he was known as the "Admiral of the Delaware," one of the great legends of the times.

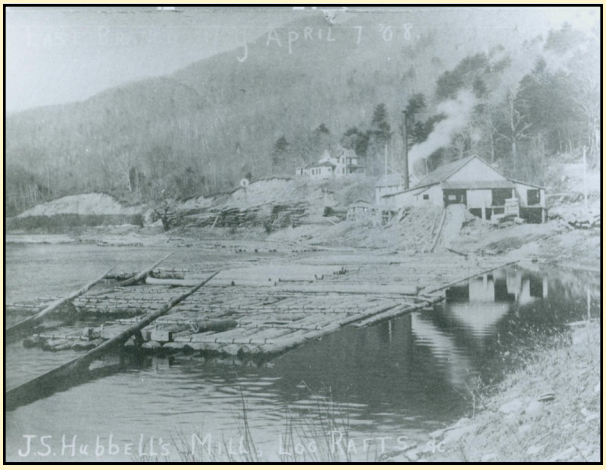
Logs were cut in the winter and dragged to the river. In the spring logs would be assembled into small "colt" rafts in the protected eddies of the river. Once they were below the junction of the two branches of the Delaware River the "colts" were often joined together, forming one larger raft. These rafts were on average about 120 feet long and 30 feet wide.

"Each spring cargoes of bluestone, wheat, potash, wool and whiskey were loaded onto the rafts for transport to the cities. The rafts were generally constructed of hemlock logs or pine and could be recycled at their destination for use as waterfront pilings or as construction materials."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

"The timber, which was looked upon as a hindrance to agricultural progress, was thus removed, becoming a source of profit and making way for the work of underbrushing, grubbing and cultivation, which could not have been prosecuted until its removal."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797 – 1880* by Munsells



"In 1837 David Horton and his family moved from Liberty Falls, NY, to a cabin along the Beaverkill. They settled on a farm at the mouth of Horton Brook and built a sawmill to saw up their own and neighbors' logs. Soon David realized that city markets paid better than the local ones, and he became a raftsman.

Wherever a large brook or another river joined the Delaware, (especially if there was a bridge pier there) the

steersman had to head for the other stream. Then when the incoming current hit the raft, the pilot had to guide his raft with skillful timing to avoid being swept too far in the opposite direction. Hershel didn't always miss a pier, but he seldom lost a raft. When the East Branch (called Beaverkill Point in those days) bridge was fist built across the Beaverkill, one of Hershel's rafts got stuck against the pier. Someone asked him how that happened. He explained that since he had tapped almost every pier between Horton and Philadelphia, he certainly didn't want to neglect that one."

From *Old Delaware County: A Memoir* by Gertrude Fitch Horton

GRISTMILLS AND SAWMILLS

One of the first necessities of the early pioneer communities before and after 1800 was a sawmill to provide dressed lumber for building. Water-powered sawmills proliferated across the entire county, numbering some fifty-four in 1820 and over 160 in 1860. A quarter of the industrial workforce was employed in such mills in 1870.

"Nineteenth century mills of all types remained for the most part powered by water taken from dams and other man-made obstructions built across creeks and rivers. A good example in Delaware County of an extant saw- and gristmill that draws most of its power from water held back by a dam and fed via an artificial sluice is at Hanford Mills Museum in East Meredith."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

Many sawmill operators soon added stones to their mills for grinding grains. Once an area could boast such a gristmill, local residents were spared the grueling and time-consuming trip to Schoharie, Cherry Valley, or westward into Broome County. East Brook at Howland Mills, Walton, was one of the earliest gristmills to be located in Delaware County:

"A great blessing to the settlers was the grist mill built by Michael Goodrich in 1792 about a mile up East Brook. Prior to this, they had to travel to Schoharie, later to Hobart, with sacks of grain to have it ground into flour. Those who could not or would not make this journey subsisted on rude potato flour ground by mortar and pestle. The large mill stones for this mill and those later had to be brought from Esopus to Stamford by oxcart. Two of the stones were strapped onto two canoes and transported down the Delaware to Walton. Cook St. John came from New Canaan early in the 1800s and became the miller here. The mill lasted for many years, it later being known as the Howland Mill. At some time a new dam had been constructed replacing the old log one, but this was taken out by the flood of 1935."

From *The Story of Walton 1785 – 1975* by Helen Lane

"As the number of small water-powered mills reached their height in the 1870s, however, they also approached the limits of their efficiency. (Rainfall as we know can be fickle--either too much or too little seemingly the rule in some years!) Indeed, most mill owners after that time were forced to abandon operations as competition from outside the region became too intense.

Some, however, such as the Hanford family in East Meredith, switched over to the use of steam power, or utilized some combination of water and steam, and were able to remain as a viable business concern until well into the twentieth century."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

By 1800 each of the ten towns then in existence in the county had a gristmill and by 1835, fifty-one gristmills dotted the county, producing grain valued at over $200,000.

ACID FACTORIES

Although acetate was produced in Delaware County as early as 1848, the wood chemical industry (known locally as "acid factories") did not become a major industry until the 1870s. Using a process imported from Scotland these acid factories produced wood alcohol, creosote, wood ashes, acetate of lime, charcoal, wood tar and formaldehyde. The process required large amounts of hardwood and fresh water, making Delaware County an ideal location.

"Acid factories of the Northeast used only hardwoods, preferably birch, beech and maple. Acid factories commonly used scraps and treetops left over from a sawmill operation, but some factories used whole trees. Wood was cut to four foot lengths by independent wood cutters who moved about through the region. Once the wood was cut, all pieces over six inches in diameter were split to assure complete carbonization. Wood was stacked in the forest where it had been cut. A good cutter working six days a week could cut, split and stack about forty cords of wood per month."

From *The Wood Chemical Industry in the Delaware Valley* by Frank Daniel Myers III

"This industry at its peak annually consumed 190,000 cord of wood and employed 3,000 men in Delaware County and the western fringe of Sullivan County. A complete community grew around each plan, constituted by a store, post office, school and thirty to forty dwellings for workers."

From *The Wood Chemical Industry in the Delaware Valley* by Frank Daniel Myers III

The towns that grew around these factories often took names that related to the industry including: Acidalia, Methol and Burnwood. Other acid factories were located at Arkville, Cadosia, Fernwood, Fishs Eddy, Hale Eddy, Harvard, Hazel, Horton, Readburn, Rock Rift, Shavertown, and Shinhopple.

Julius Corbett founded the acid factory town of Corbett in the town of Colchester during the first decade of the twentieth century and by 1912 the Corbett factory was one of the largest in the region, consuming some eighty cords of wood per day and employing men from as far away as Italy, Poland and Russia.

"By all accounts, the acid factories were drafty and dirty places to work. Noxious gases and volatile materials made the job dangerous and uncomfortable. The acid factory workers were generally misunderstood and looked down upon by their agricultural neighbors. None the less, the industry provided essential materials

to the nation. The acetic acid derived from the acetate of lime was an essential ingredient in explosives and commercial dyes. But the development of synthetic substitutes during WWI was a death knell for the industry."

From *Two Stones for Every Dirt* by Douglas DeNatale.

The Beerston Acetate Factory (pictured here in 1916) opened at what is now the upper end of Cannonsville Reservoir in 1888. By the early twentieth century the plant had a 40 cord per day capacity. In 1924 it was dismantled and parts used in construction of the giant Quinn plant north of Utica.

"The last acid factory in the county, and indeed the entire state of New York, was operated by the well-known Treyz family at Horton in the town of Colchester. This factory eventually ceased producing acetate in 1950, but remained active as a producer of charcoal until closed by the Route 17 expansion in 1967."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

"Today many of the communities that were established by the location of an acid factory have disappeared and the forest has once again closed in upon what remains of the factory buildings, dwellings and rail sidings. Every once in a while the traveler from the road may spy the remains of a smoke stack rising through the woods, but aside from these increasingly rare sightings, it is difficult now to imagine just how busy and industrial this southern section of Delaware County once was."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

TANNERIES

"The tanning industry grew rapidly in the Catskills after the War of 1812, reaching a peak in the mid-nineteenth century and declining thereafter until almost non-existent by 1900. During this boom animal hides were brought into the region from all over the northeast and from as far away even as the Caribbean and Argentina.

Rather than local animal hides (there weren't too many around in the early nineteenth century), it was the bark from the eastern hemlock tree that was the sought-after local product of the tanning industry. The industry was experiencing boom times during the first years of the industrial revolution in the United States, and the voracious appetite of burgeoning shoe and clothing factories caused an enormous consumption of the county's hemlock trees. The mass felling of hemlocks abated only with the development of chemical tanning in the twentieth century."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

"...Delaware County was fortunate in its location, for it possessed great stands of hemlock trees, whose bark was perfectly suited to the curing of leather. In the eastern section of the county and later in the Valley of the West Branch, large tanneries were built to process hides carted in from the Hudson Valley. Great tracts of hemlock were felled – the bark removed and the stripped trunks abandoned – to feed the voracious tanneries."

From *Two Stones for Every Dirt* by Douglas DeNatale.

Barkpeelers could work only from mid-May to early August when the bark peeled easily. At other times they found seasonal work, often in the rafting industry, for example.

"In the tanneries, the old water-power technology was used to turn four-foot wheels that ground the bark mixed with other agents to produce the tannic acid solutions in which the hides were cured. The hides were first soaked in water for softening, then the hair was loosened in a vat of lime solution. After hand scraping, the hides were left to cure in the tanning pits for six months to a year before they were ready for shipping."

From *Two Stones for Every Dirt* by Douglas DeNatale.

BLUESTONE

Bluestone is a layered form of sandstone comprised of sand, feldspar, mica, and various other minerals. This particular type of bluestone can only be found in the southern tier of New York and the northeastern tier of Pennsylvania. Bluestone, found in flat layers just beneath the surface, is durable, yet relatively easily worked.

"Bluestone quarrying… was hard and dangerous work, causing numerous instances of loss of life and serious injuries throughout the years. Another danger inherent in quarrying - and an unusual one at that - was the fact that many of the quarries were located in areas frequented by rattlesnakes. Often there would be a pigpen located in the quarries, the pigs being used to kill the snakes!"

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

Most of the larger commercial quarries were located in the southwest of Delaware County.

"The town of Hancock for example, was home to over twenty quarries around 1900, most of which benefited greatly from access to the nearby New York, Ontario & Western and the New York & Erie railroad lines."

From *The History of Delaware County, 1797-2007* by Tim Duerden

Bluestone has been used for many local buildings including the William B. Ogden Free Library and the 1899 State Armory in Walton. Further afield, the Capitol building in Albany and many of the sidewalks of New York City feature local bluestone.

The bluestone industry began to decline in the early twentieth century with the advent of Portland cement. Recently, however, bluestone has made a comeback.

The Johnston & Rhodes Bluestone Company, a 4th generation family owned business put out a press release in December 2002 announcing an expansion of their operations in East Branch, which would create 25 new jobs.

"The company, which started in 1900 and currently has 45 employees, will invest more than $1.7 million in a new machinery and equipment, in addition to a new stone processing facility. The investment will enable the company to modernize production capabilities as well as increase efficiency and output."

From Johnston & Rhodes Bluestone Company Press release 12/16/02

As in the past, most of the bluestone quarries of today are located in the southwestern end of the county. According to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) forty-nine bluestone quarries are on a list of "Active Bluestone Mines in New York State." Towns include Colchester, Masonville, Deposit, Hancock, Tompkins, Walton and Sidney. There are two in Hamden and one in Delhi. In 2003 more than 600 people in Delaware County were employed in the industry.

WOOLEN MILLS

"The War of 1812 and protective tariff legislation that effectively halted the importation of wool and other cloth from overseas gave rise to the rapid growth of the domestic woolen industry. As early as 1820 the Delaware Woolen Factory Company was established in Delhi. Here local households could deliver their raw wool and have it returned as finished cloth. A small weaving industry developed in and

around Delhi and a number of Jacquard weavers settled in the area, producing, among other items, the well-known Delhi Coverlets. Other woolen mills of note were located in Bovina, Davenport, Franklin, Hamden, Hobart, Sidney, Stamford and Walton.

In 1835 the mills of Delaware County together produced some 55,000 yards of domestic fulled cloth, 77,000 yards of flannel and other woolen cloth, and 86,000 yards of linen and cotton cloth. Furthermore, the 1835 state census listed twenty-nine fulling mills and twenty-eight carding machines in the county. In 1840, according to the federal census, there were four times as many sheep in Delaware County as people and by mid-century Delaware County was the leading wool producer in the state."

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TODAY'S INDUSTRY

Today the two largest single employers in Delaware County produce manufactured products rather than natural-resource based products. Both companies are located in Sidney.

The village of Sidney actively looked for new industry to help replace the ones that had left in the early 1920s –including the Kayser Silk Mill and the Hatfield Automobile Company. The community's merchants and professional people got together and raised $5,000 to serve as an expense fund for Winfield Sherwood, a former Hatfield official, who volunteered to serve without pay in a search for new industry for the village.

"In 1925 Scintilla Magneto Company, a Swiss firm with headquarters in New York City, bought the old Hatfield building and began manufacturing magnetos in Sidney (magnetos were used in connection with the ignition systems on internal combustion engines). In 1927 the company produced the magneto used on Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic. In 1929 the Bendix Aviation Corporation purchased Scintilla and over the years Scintilla-Bendix gained a world-class reputation for aircraft products. During World War II the company provided crucial components for the United States military and to overseas allies.

Due to this wartime boom, both the Scintilla plant and the village of Sidney experienced an era of unprecedented prosperity and rampant growth. By early 1942 more than 4,000 employees were reporting for work on a daily basis at Scintilla and busses were bringing them in from all parts of the region. At the peak of the war almost 9,000 workers were making the daily trek to the plant.

At the end of the war, however, the number of employees dropped dramatically and by November 1945 there were only 950 remaining workers. After this initial time of uncertainty, peacetime orders began to come into Scintilla again and the workforce numbers rebounded. The company still produced magnetos for aircraft and other commercial uses and by the end of 1946 was employing approximately 3,000 workers at its Sidney plant. In more recent times, after numerous mergers and corporate takeovers, the company has been known as Amphenol Aerospace Corporation."

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Scintilla became one of the first nationally known companies in Delaware County. Its growth was helped greatly by demand for their product during World War II.

On March 3, 1951 *The Saturday Evening Post* published an article entitled "The Village We Can't Do Without" in which they chronicled the history of the Scintilla Corporation.

Amphenol, employing over 1,400 people at its 675,000 square foot Sidney facility, produces components for the military, commercial aerospace and industrial markets.

"Adding to Sidney's post-war prosperity was the Keith Clark Company, the world's largest manufacturer of calendars. Keith Clark moved to Sidney from New York City in 1946, taking

over a building at the corner of Union and Division Streets formerly owned by Scintilla-Bendix. Having steadily expanded their calendar business and moving away from a reliance on business calendars the company was sold in 1963. After a number of expansions and ownership changes the company today is known as Mead Westvaco and is located adjacent to Sidney Airport. Today Mead Westvaco employs more than a thousand people and, in addition to calendars, manufactures all varieties of "time management products," which are shipped throughout the world."

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When Keith Clark started his business in Sidney in 1946 he had 30 employees and produced 200,000 calendars per year. Fifty years later in 1996 the company employed 1,100 people and produced 90,000,000 per year.

Scintilla, 1975