EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE OF CENTRE COUNTY

Centre Furnace lands have changed considerably in use, appearance, and ownership over the last two hundred years. While many landscape features have been erased during the region’s subsequent growth, some features of the charcoal iron-producing landscape remain. In addition to the Centre Furnace Mansion, stack, and remnants of other ironmaking-related buildings, abandoned ore banks, charcoal flats, functioning farms, reclaimed woodlands, and roads still can be identified. Other features, now lost from view, can be located through the use of old maps, documents, and historical narratives.

Centre Furnace Mansion
Now the headquarters of the Centre County Historical Society, this beautiful mansion was the home of the ironmasters of Centre Furnace. It replaced or incorporated into it a log house that had been built for John Patton in 1792. The Hearth Room probably dates from that period. (Glass tax records)

In 1791, Revolutionary War veterans Samuel Miles and John Patton established Centre Furnace at the base of Mount Nittany, in an area rich with iron ore. Miles and Patton located Centre Furnace on a prime spot. The raw ingredients needed for charcoal iron were iron ore, limestone, and trees for the making of charcoal. The Nittany Valley was rich in all three. The fourth ingredient needed for a successful iron furnace operation was water for power. At Centre Furnace, it was provided by a fast-moving Spring Creek tributary – Thompson Run. The abundant source of this run, originally called Willy Brook, was known to these early entrepreneurs as the Great Falling Spring. The furnace operated until 1809, when it went out of blast for about fifteen years.

This large brick home, probably built c. 1826 in the Georgian design when the furnace was put back into blast, became the home of a new set of ironmasters, including Samuel Miles’ son, Joseph Miles. In 1841, Moses and Mary Irvin Thompson became the new owners of the Centre Furnace Mansion. Thompson joined his brother-in-law, James Irvin, as co-owner of the furnace operation.

The Thompsons added a back ell to the Mansion in 1846, and in the 1860s they “modernized” their home to reflect the Victorian architectural styles of the day by adding a large porch, third floor sharply gabled windows, and Italianate bracketing at the eaves.

Take note of the Mansion’s location on a knoll where it once overlooked the Centre Furnace Village and the entire ironworks. The Mansion is open for tours Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons from 1 – 4 pm. Call the Mansion at 234-4779 for more information.

The Trees at Centre Furnace
Be sure to look at the stately trees on the grounds at Centre Furnace. Of special note are the sycamores. The one on the hill behind the Mansion has been given a date of about 1740, already a 50-year-old tree when Centre Furnace began operation.

Centre Furnace Barn
Few remnants remain of the stone barn that once stood on and below the southern edge of the Mansion parking lot.
Centre Furnace Stack
Explore the area around the stack. Interpretive signs located there will tell you something about the process of making iron.

Thompson Spring
The Spring is located across College Avenue and west of the Duck Pond, just below the Municipal Sewage Treatment Plant. An 1861 map shows the location of housing for ironworkers just south of the spring. Thompson Spring was originally called Great Falling Spring, suggesting the quantity of water that came from – and still comes from this very large spring that forms the headwaters of Thompson Run. A natural heritage inventory site with a rare and endangered animal species that thrives in pure spring water, the area around Thompson Spring is not open to the public.

Thompson Run
Thompson Run, called Willy Brook in the 18th century, was a source of water power for the operation of the iron furnace at the Centre Furnace Iron Plantation, as well as a source of water for grist and saw mills that were part of the newly forming Centre Furnace Village. Once a source of native trout, Thompson Run flows alongside the Duck Pond and then runs nearly parallel to Route 26 until it enters Millbrook Marsh where it and Slab Cabin Run converge to join Spring Creek.

Duck Pond
The Duck Pond area has been known and used by the community as park-like open space for more than 70 years. Penn State classes of 1927-1931 created a pond near the spring and headwaters of Thompson Run. It was originally used as a winter recreation area. A memorial arboretum was designed for the area by landscape architect John R. Bracken in 1927, but the plan was never carried out. Now it is a popular area for its bird activity.

Centre Furnace Business Office
Just east of the Duck Pond and across East College Avenue from the Mansion, this building was an integral part of Centre Furnace Village. Nearby was the site of a tollgate collection point for the Agricultural College and Junction Turnpike.

James Thompson Mansion
Now a private residence, this large house was the home of the youngest son of ironmaster Moses Thompson. It replaced an earlier house, built by James Thompson on the “Poorman Farm” in the 1890s. It was rebuilt, in 1916, on the foundation that had been destroyed by fire in 1913. Behind the property is Walnut Run.

Poorman Farm
James Thompson’s mansion was a principal building on this extensive Centre Furnace farm, one of the many tenant farms owns by the furnace operation. A tenant house, barn, and other farm buildings also were located on this property. There are still some archaeological traces of these buildings.
Walnut Springs Park
Once part of the Poorman farm, this Centre Region park offers landscape clues to Centre Furnace ironmaking. They include remnants of an old road that crossed “Centre Hill” to connect Slab Cabin Run with the Centre Furnace grist mill on Thompson Run. A few large trees remain near the old road, along with pieces of slag.

Centre Hill
This hill that separated Slab Cabin from Thompson Run took its name from Centre Furnace. It has given its name to the Centre Hills Country Club.

Thompson Woods
This newly acquired Centre Region park also represents part of the Poorman farm owned by the Centre Furnace iron operation. A small number of huge trees separate two residential areas at the top of the hill – trees that were not cut for charcoal making. These trees were spared, according to one story, because of uncertainties over the actual property line between the Centre Furnace holdings and land owned by another early settler, John Mitchell.

Forest Cutting and Charcoal Making
The hardwood forests immediately around Centre Furnace, as well as substantial landholdings much farther away, represented the essential resource for the making of charcoal, the fuel that would heat the furnace enough to “smelt” the iron (to melt away the impurities from the iron ore.)

While most timber owned by the Centre Furnace Iron Operation was consumed as industrial fuel, some was used for building construction, farm and household needs, or domestic heating.

Centre Furnace Mill
Situated along Thompson Run, the Centre Furnace grist mill produced flour and other necessities for the residents of the village. Although the building is gone, portions of the millrace are still visible.

Mill Operator’s House
Located at the corner of East College Avenue on Puddintown Road, it was close to the mill and to Thompson Run, the fast moving stream that powered the mill.

Puddintown
A somewhat unlikely story is that the community was given the name, Puddintown, because of a local family who particularly liked a boiled and seasoned white pudding.

Centre Furnace School
Only photographs remain of this school, once located behind the mill operator’s house. It served the children of the workers who lived at Centre Furnace. Generally the women of the village were not
literate, but the children were able to read and write.

**Millbrook Marsh**
Covering 70 acres, this wetland is located in the heart of urban State College. Despite being surrounded by a highly diverse mixture of land uses including commercial, residential, farm, and university operations, it supports several rare and endangered plant species. Millbrook Marsh provides the important function of filtering out sediments of the streams that flow through it. The marsh is widely recognized as the rarest type of natural community found in Centre County, worthy of state, national, and even global significance due to its status as a “calcareous” (limestone) fen. Prior to development and draining of the marsh for farm operations and later commercial and residential uses, it may have been nearly twice its current size.

**Millbrook**
The name Millbrook serves as a reminder of the Centre Furnace Mill once located nearby. It was powered by Thompson Run. Remains of the millrace can still be seen on the south side of College Avenue, near its intersection with Puddintown Road.

**Millbrook Marsh Nature Center**
This farmstead, another of the tenant farms owned by the iron company to meet the agricultural needs of Centre Furnace, was one of many sold by the Thompson family to the Pennsylvania State College in the early 1900s. Penn State now leases it and adjoining marshland to Centre Region Parks and Recreation as a community nature center. Boardwalks and sun shelters provide an opportunity to explore this important resource. Call 231-3071 to find out more about the programs at Millbrook Marsh Nature Center.

**Bathgate Farm and Spring**
Located just around the bend from Millbrook Marsh Nature Center is another Centre Furnace tenant farm. The spring house is the low white building immediately behind Orchard Road.

**Old Main, Penn State Campus**
In the 1850s, the Pennsylvania Agricultural Society was in search of a location for a new school for farmers. Centre County was one of six counties within Pennsylvania vying to serve as that location. In 1855, a gift of 200 acres of Centre Furnace land by Ironmaster James Irvin and his brother-in-law Moses Thompson resulted in this area being the location of what would become The Pennsylvania State University. An agreement for the new school was signed at the Centre Furnace Mansion in 1855, with the Thompsons hosting a party of 200 dignitaries.

**State College**
The Borough of State College grew from a small assemblage of homes located across the road from Old Main into a town large enough to warrant incorporation in 1896. Businesses opened along College Avenue to serve the needs of a growing student body and college personnel. Rooming and boarding
houses initially provided housing for both students and faculty, but within a decade several subdivisions were developed to meet the needs of a growing community.

By the 1920s, large and elaborate fraternities were added, as were a wide variety of early 20th-century single family homes, some designed by area architects, some chosen from pattern books, and many selected from a variety of styles offered in mail-order catalogs. State College, despite its comparative youth, has grown to be the largest community in Centre County.

**Neighboring Townships**
Centre Furnace lands not only extended to State College and Penn State, but to six nearby townships as well: College, Ferguson, Halfmoon, Harris, Patton and Benner. Working farms related to the Centre Furnace operation still can be found in those townships, along with iron ore banks and charcoal flats. Names related to Centre Furnace can be located on regional maps: Patton Township named for John Patton; Irvin Avenue in State College; Thompson and Irvin Halls on campus are a few.

**Lemont**
French for “the mountain,” the National Register village of Lemont was laid out in 1870 at the base of Mount Nittany by Centre Furnace ironmaster Moses Thompson and his son, John. It was ideally situated to become a successful commercially oriented village because of its location at the junction of Nittany and Penns Valleys, and along the main highway between Bellefonte and Boalsburg. In 1880 railroad service and a hotel were added to the community’s collection of several stores, a wagon and carriage shop, and the Thompson bank. Shipping and storage facilities, including a grain elevator and coal shed, were built along the track; a train depot for passengers served Penn State students.

**Dales Mills**
The tiny village of Dales Mills has disappeared; only the Cornelius Dale house and the Dale Cemetery remain as reminders of this early community on the old road between Lemont and Oak Hall. A grist mill and saw mill once were part of this community along Cedar Run.

**Oak Hall**
One of the county’s oldest communities, Oak Hall is also on the road that led from Bellefonte along the base of Mt. Nittany into Penns Valley. Fertile limestone soil and milling operations along Cedar Run served the agricultural needs of the area. The 1825 Georgian stone house and barn built for General James Irvin, the county’s most active ironmaster, is at the western edge of the village. Next to it, the remains of an early grist mill serves as the foundation story for a modern residence. A large portion of the village was razed in 1971 to make way for the Mt. Nittany Expressway; what remains is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Linden Hall**
Another National Register village located in historic Cedar Run Valley, Linden Hall was the shipping point for timber cut in the Bear Meadows area. In its heyday, Linden Hall had four stores, a grain elevator, lumber and coal yard, grist mill, distillery, shoe manufacturer, and a station for the Lewisburg & Tyrone Railroad. The large home above the mill pond was owned by the parents of James Irvin and Mary Irvin
Thompson. The school was one of many provided to local communities by Moses Thompson. Cedar Run Springs, headwaters of another Spring Creek tributary, is just east of the village.

**Red Mill, Potter Township**
Centre Furnace landholdings extended well into Potter Township. An example is the farm and mill operation at Red Mill that was owned by Moses Thompson.

**Brush Valley Road and Route 192**
This very early road was laid out by ironmaster Samuel Miles, designed to bring agricultural products from Miles Township in Penns Valley to Miles’ Centre Furnace iron operation.

**Tussey Mountain and Shingletown**
About 1400 acres of land on Tussey Mountain, above Shingletown, was one of the sources of wood for Centre Furnace and the location of charcoal flats. These flats, accessible from Roaring Run trail, are still discernable and in good condition. They are about 25-30 feet in diameter and almost perfectly circular. A thin layer of charcoal can be found a few inches below the surface. Second or third growth forests of oak, maple, pine, and mountain laurel surround them. The recreational trails through the area were probably originally cart roads used in transporting the charcoal during the period of Centre Furnace’s operation.

**State Game Lands**
Centre Furnace farms were once located on what is now State Game Lands #176, near the intersection of Fox Hollow and Fox Hill Roads.

**Boogersburg School**
This one-room school house located on Fox Hill Road and across from the game lands, is another of the schools located on furnace lands and built by Moses Thompson to provide an educational location for children of Centre Furnace tenant farmers.

**Scotia – State Game Lands**
As early as the 1790s iron ore for use at Centre Furnace was extracted from the ore pits in Patton Township. In 1865, Moses Thompson sold the River Hill tracts to Andrew Carnegie for $48,000 and royalties, and in 1881, Carnegie established the Scotia Iron Mining Works.