Etched into the natural landscape of Chester, Berks, Montgomery, and Lancaster Counties in Pennsylvania are the remains of the iron industry that literally forged our nation. For more than 300 years this region has been home to a vast number of iron and steel production sites in a small geographical area. This region has greatly influenced the American steel industry from its beginning to the present day.

Pennsylvania’s iron and steel industry began in the 1700s — natural resources led to the establishment of small iron making sites. The 1800s saw technological changes, increased demand, and mass production of steel. By the 1900s, Pennsylvania was the “steel capitol of the world.” The region was home to colonial America’s largest iron empire, the nation’s first female industrialist, and companies that supplied steel for American transportation, infrastructure and defense.
For more than a century, Pennsylvania was the ironmaking center of America. The state led both the colonies and the nation in iron production, largely due to its natural resources: abundant iron ore deposits, vast forests that provided charcoal, numerous coal beds for additional fuel, limestone deposits, and rivers for water power. Sizeable and growing markets for iron also existed.

Pennsylvania's iron and steel history began in 1716 and for the next century, the state's iron industry experienced a time of rapid expansion and a rising demand for iron products. The industry grew until the American colonies became one of the world's largest iron producers.

By the 1800s, the iron industry was a major part of the Pennsylvania economy. The nineteenth century witnessed crucial technological changes, which transformed the industry, and would lead to the United States becoming one of the world's top steel producers. Coal and coke replaced charcoal as a source of fuel, which made iron making a more efficient process and increased both production and quality. The introduction of railroads improved transportation of natural resources and iron goods. These and other technological changes affected the size of iron works, types of ownership, labor-management relations, and led to the creation of new products.

In the 1870s, steel was massed-produced in Pennsylvania. Bessemer converters and open hearth furnaces transformed the steel industry into a profitable endeavor. The new steel industry created a modern industrial society and led many to consider Pennsylvania as the “steel capitol of the world,” a title the state would hold for almost a century.

Steel remained a very profitable industry in Pennsylvania until the 1960s. Growth of foreign steel and out-of-date sites in Pennsylvania led to a fifty percent reduction in the steel workforce in the 1980s. Rough times continued into the early 2000s. That has changed in the last few years, however, as the steel industry today employs thousands of people and adds billions of dollars to Pennsylvania's economy.

For more than two centuries, Pennsylvania led America’s and the world’s iron and steel industries. Today, Pennsylvanian steel companies continue to have a positive impact on the state, national, and world economies and steel industries.
Coatesville is central to the Pennsylvania iron and steel story. It was here in 1810, that Isaac Pennock established the Brandywine Iron Works & Nail Factory. In 1825, his daughter, Rebecca Lukens, began managing the iron business and later became America's first female industrialist. The business evolved into Lukens Steel Company and the steel site operates today under the ownership of ArcelorMittal.

The 538 acres of the park include mature deciduous forests, various charcoal hearths along old cart paths and trails. Remains of the iron industry can still be seen at Warwick's woodlands provided much of the raw timber used to make charcoal for the region's iron furnaces and forges. Remains of the iron industry can still be seen at various charcoal hearths along old cart paths and trails.

Hopewell Furnace showcases an early American industrial landscape from natural resource extraction to enlightened conservation. Operating from 1771-1883, Hopewell and other "iron plantations" laid the foundation for the transformation of the United States into an industrial giant. The park's 848 acres and historic structures illustrate the business, technology and lifestyle of our growing nation.

Pottsgrove Manor exemplifies the restrained elegance of early Georgian architecture popular with wealthy English gentry during the mid-18th century. Built in 1752 for John Potts, ironmaster and founder of Pottstown, the mansion was situated on a nearly 1,000 acre plantation, which by 1762 included the town of "Pottsgrove." A forge for refining pig iron was also located on the original property.

Hibernia features historic ruins along with the iron master's mansion, redesigned in the early 20th century to emulate a English country house. Samuel Downing built the first iron forge at Hibernia on the West Branch of the Brandywine to convert pig iron into bar iron. The property passed through several ownerships from 1808 until 1821, when Charles Brooke purchased the works and became its most prosperous ironmaster.

The 19th century iron plantation with over 900 acres, Hibernia was situated on a nearly 1,000 acre plantation, which was purchased by Samuel Downing in 1801.

Warwick's woodlands provided much of the raw timber used to make charcoal for the region's iron furnaces and forges. Remains of the iron industry can still be seen at various charcoal hearths along old cart paths and trails.

The 140-year-old building housing the Schuylkill River Heritage Center, which sits on the site of the former Phoenixville Iron and Steel Company, is a unique, interpretive way to experience the pictures and pieces of the past to give a better understanding of Phoenixville's Iron and Steel legacy and its place in the Schuylkill River's history.

Founded as Mary Ann Forge along the Brandywine Creek in Uwchlan Township, the site became Dowlin Forge when John Dowlin purchased the land in 1801. The forge prospered through the 19th century and a small industrial area grew up around it. Today visitors can follow the industrial history of the site on trails bordering Shamona Creek.
The National Iron & Steel Heritage Museum is a not-for-profit educational institution whose mission is to promote an understanding of the iron and steel history of Coatesville, Chester County, Southeastern Pennsylvania and the region to audiences of all ages and interests by collecting, preserving, exhibiting and interpreting iron and steel’s history and its relationship to the region and nation beyond.

The National Iron & Steel Heritage Museum is a project of the Graystone Society, a 501(c)3 public charity registered with the Pennsylvania Bureau of Charitable Organizations. Contributions are tax deductible to the extent permitted by law.