



Pennsylvania iron

Pennsylvania has been a center for the iron industry since the early eighteenth century, and some of the most beautiful American ironwork was, and still is, produced there. In the early days the region was rich in the materials needed to make iron: timber, limestone, and iron ore. In Jeannette Lasansky's seminal study *To Draw, Upset, and Weld: The Work of the Pennsylvania Rural Blacksmith, 1742–1935* (1980), she writes that in Philadelphia alone in 1788 there were 214 blacksmiths, and nearly 800 blacksmiths are recorded as working in Union County between 1780 and 1890. She relates that farm owners frequently had a blacksmith's shop on their land to make repairs and create nails, tools, and the all-important shoes for oxen, mules, and horses. Indeed, making shoes required blacksmiths to learn the anatomy, behavior, and diseases peculiar to these animals. These versatile rural blacksmiths were called on to fashion or repair edge tools, augers, scythes, plows, shovels,

railings, pots, pans, cutlery, kitchen utensils, and building and furniture hardware. In cities, foundries and forges were large commercial affairs often employing up to forty or fifty men. Ironworkers in both urban and rural settings made all kinds of lighting devices, from the simplest betty and kettle lamps to more complicated, multitiered chandeliers.

The great early collector Henry Francis du Pont was drawn to American cast and wrought iron from the beginning.

Understanding that iron products—architectural hardware, fireplace tools and utensils, and lighting devices—were an integral part of early American households, he purchased his first pieces of antique iron, what he called floor lights, at an auction in Connecticut in 1924. He was attracted to all forms of early metalwork, and in 1945 he even purchased about 150 handwrought nails from Charles F. Montgomery, then a

dealer in base metals. Today du Pont's legacy, the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, has a collection of cast-, wrought-, and sheet-iron objects that is astonishing for its breadth and depth. Many of the objects in the museum have a Pennsylvania origin.

Some of the iron artifacts were displayed in the handsome and extensive gardens at Winterthur, including a pair of European armillary spheres dating from the nineteenth century. They

stood outside the conservatory until they so deteriorated that they were retired to a barn. There they were spotted by George A. "Frolic" Weymouth, who offered to underwrite the creation of reproductions to use in the gardens. A search for craftsmen able to replicate the spheres led to a relatively new metalworking concern in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, called Heritage Metalworks. The collaboration proved to be a happy one because each party

maintains exacting standards. For example, the company frequently uses lost-wax casting, which is more faithful, but also more expensive, than sand casting. Last spring the museum entered into a licensing agreement with the firm.

Heritage Metalworks is owned by the brothers Matt and Jon White. Matt is a gifted craftsman who can fashion all types of metalwork objects, and Jon oversees the business side of the operation. The company employs a blacksmith, a pattern maker, and a metalsmith, who work in bronze, brass, iron, tin, copper, and stainless steel, as can be seen in the handsome lighting devices they currently reproduce from originals in the Winterthur Museum. The company has a Web site (www.heritage-metalworks.com) and may be contacted at 610-518-3999.

Selection of iron chandeliers made by Heritage Metalworks, Downingtown, Pennsylvania, from nineteenth-century American originals in the Winterthur Museum. The armillary sphere is a reproduction of a nineteenth-century European original in the museum.



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