

The Schuylkill River Heritage Center The Rebirth of the Phoenix Steel Foundry

Barbara Cohen



The story of the Schuylkill River Heritage Center, a local landmark in nearby Phoenixville, begins with the closing of the Phoenix Steel Company in 1987. The property was sold, and most of the buildings were demolished. By the mid-1990s only the Foundry Building and the former Bridge Company Building were still standing. Battered by weather and time, the Foundry was filled with 100 years worth of trash and debris.

The Phoenixville Area Economic Development Corporation (PAEDCO) undertook the challenge to rescue this iconic survivor. Elected to serve as a board member of PAEDCO, Barbara Cohen led the successful fundraising campaign to restore and adaptively reuse the historic Foundry Building. Over 5.2 million dollars were raised by PAEDCO to achieve this goal. The Chester County Commissioners gave PAEDCO the grant funding to purchase the 14,000 sq. ft. building so that it could be restored and adaptively reused to become a northern Chester County gateway for visitors, and a new venue would be installed in the building that would create jobs that support Phoenixville's urban revitalization.

On March 21, 2010, Barbara Cohen delivered a presentation on the Schuylkill River Heritage Center at the monthly meeting of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society. The following photo essay utilizes Barbara's slides and notes to re-tell that presentation. All images courtesy of the Schuylkill River Heritage Center.



The story of the Schuylkill River Heritage Center actually begins in 1991 when I discovered and fell in love with a building that was part of the former Phoenix Iron and Steel Company, which covered over 130 acres along both sides of the French Creek, from Routes 113 & 23 in the west, following the curve of the creek to where it joins the Schuylkill River near Mont Clare in Montgomery County.



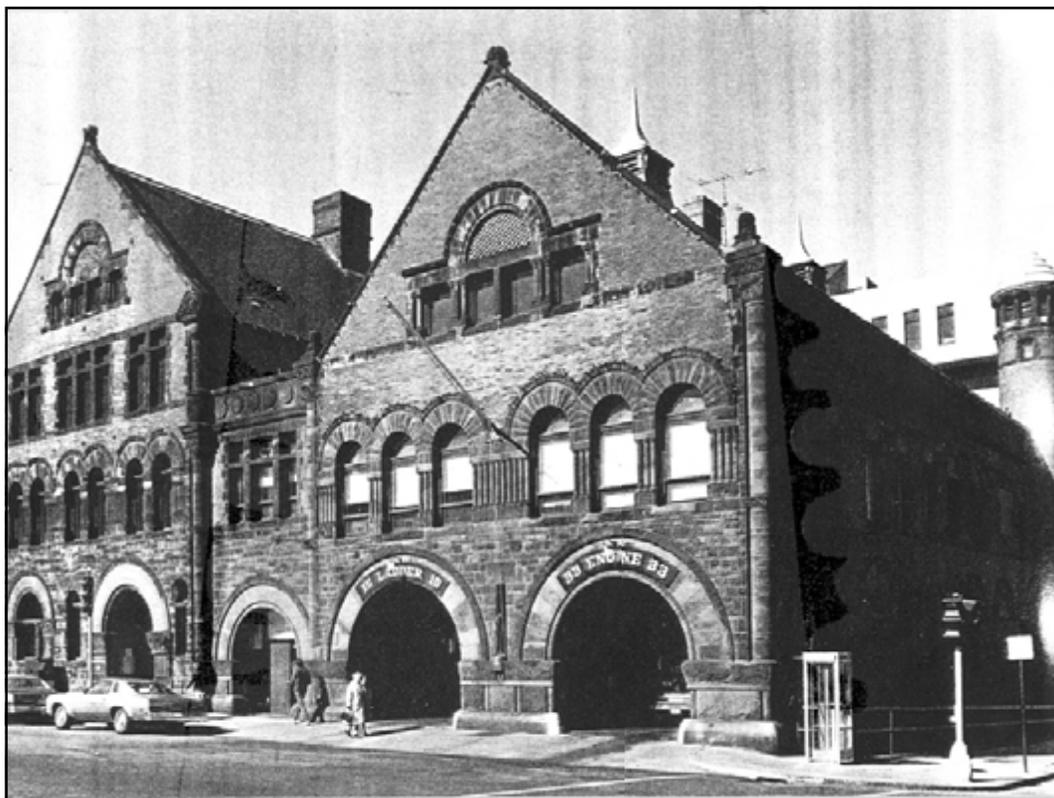
This building somehow survived even though most of the other buildings had been torn down. It was and is called the Foundry Building. The 14,000 sq. ft. building was constructed in 1882 in what is called the Richardson Romanesque style. The native sandstone used for the building is found here in Phoenixville.



This is what the entrance to what is now the Heritage Center looked like in 1997.

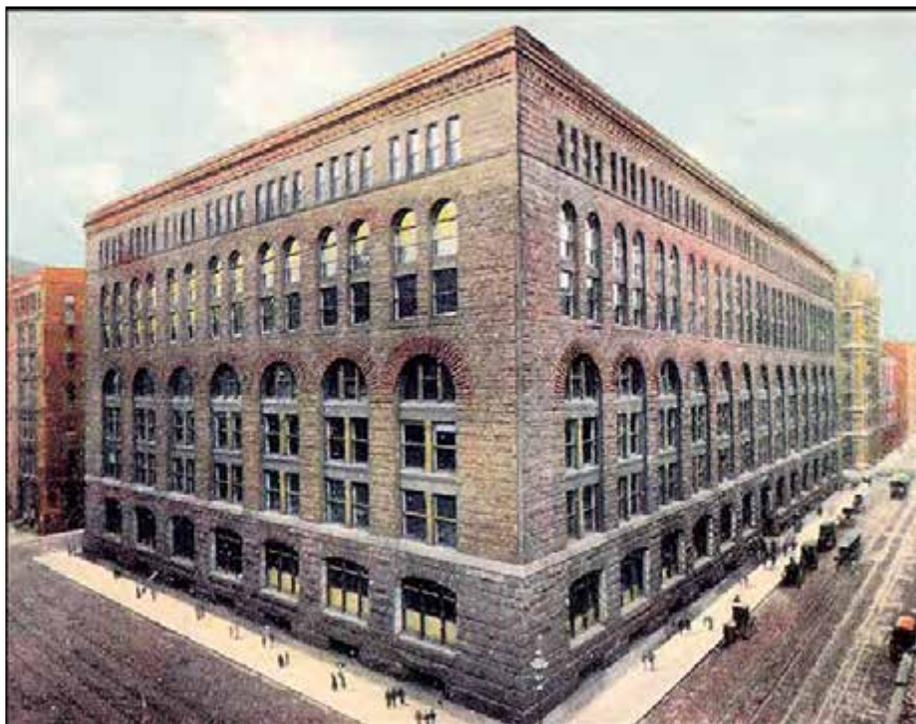


It took six years to be able to purchase the building after the last remnant of the steel company, the Phoenix Pipe and Tube Corp., went bankrupt in 1994, and there were all kinds of legal entanglements to get through.



I put together a poster showing signature buildings designed by three world class architects. The first was a building designed by Henry Hobson Richardson, who is truly the father of modern architecture. He did not use any applied decoration. He used the materials themselves to define the style of the building. This is a fire house that he designed in Boston in the 1870s, and you can see how he used the large Romanesque openings defined by a stone trim surrounding the openings. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1880s and it is possible that he had a hand in designing the Foundry which was constructed in that same time frame.

Richardson then went to Chicago and worked with Louis Sullivan. Here is a large warehouse building that shows how Sullivan used Richardson's Romanesque style openings with no applied decoration. Sullivan also used windows to allow in more light and to help define the design of the building. Frank Lloyd Wright was a young draftsman in Sullivan's office at that time.

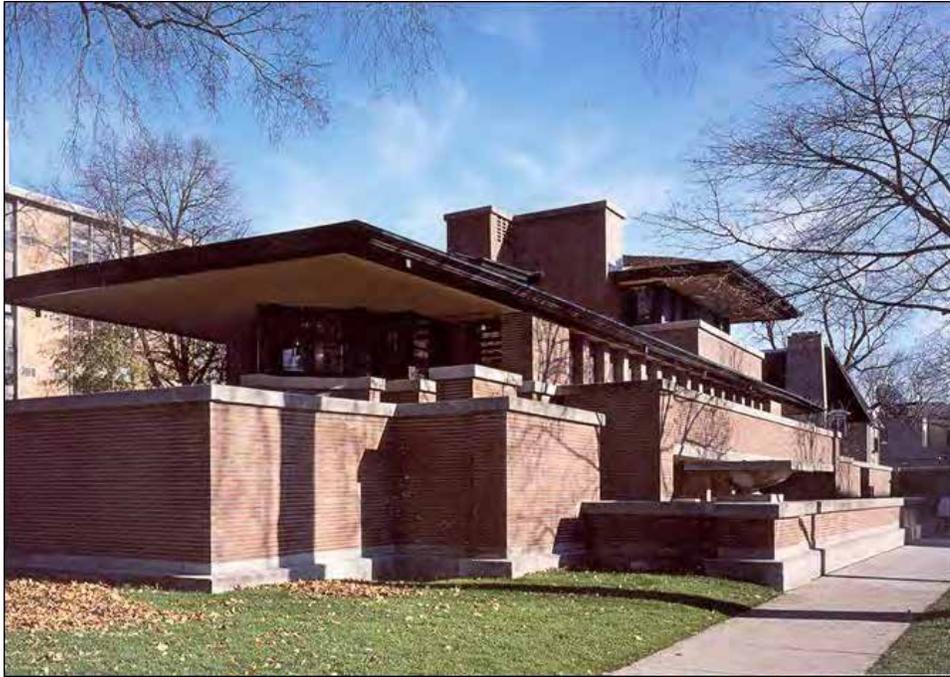




This early Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home in Oak Park, near Chicago, is called the Heurtley House. Built in 1902, it shows how Wright was influenced by both Richardson and Sullivan. You can see how he used the brick to help define the home's design. He also used rows of windows and added stained glass designs to make them even more interesting.



Here is a detail of Heurtley House that shows how Wright used Richardson's Romanesque style to articulate and define the entrance to the house.



Wright's great achievement was the triangle sloped roof that gave his buildings their special character. This of one of Wright's most famous buildings, the Robie House, also in Oak Park, dating from 1908. You can see how he developed the double tiered overhanging roof that became part of his signature style.

With a picture of the Foundry accompanying this architectural presentation, I explained how the Foundry Building incorporated extraordinary elements used by each of these world famous architects. The Chester County Commissioners responded, and provided \$300,000 in funding to PAEDCO to purchase the building in February 1998.





The first step was to raise the funds to restore the shell of the building. By 2001 PAEDCO had raised enough money to have a new roof, new doors and windows installed and the walls were repointed as well. By 2002 the parking areas and Symbols of Steel Sculpture Garden had been constructed. We used a large pinion gear rescued from the Phoenix Steel Company property and twelve Phoenix Columns which once held up the floors of the Stegmaier Brewery in Wilkes-Barre, PA as the major elements for the sculpture garden.

SYMBOLS OF STEEL



Samuel Reeves designed the Phoenix Column here at the Phoenix Iron Company. It was patented in 1862. As an important architectural and engineering innovation, the Phoenix Columns provided structural support for bridges all over the United States and as far away as Russia and Japan. It was also used to support many buildings, as well as the elevator shaft of the Washington Monument and the first elevated train line in New York City.

The Phoenix Columns here in the "Symbols of Steel" Sculpture Garden once supported the floors of the Stegmaier Brewery, a Wilkes-Barre, PA landmark. The Romanesque style brewery building was constructed in the late 19th century and continued in operation until 1974.

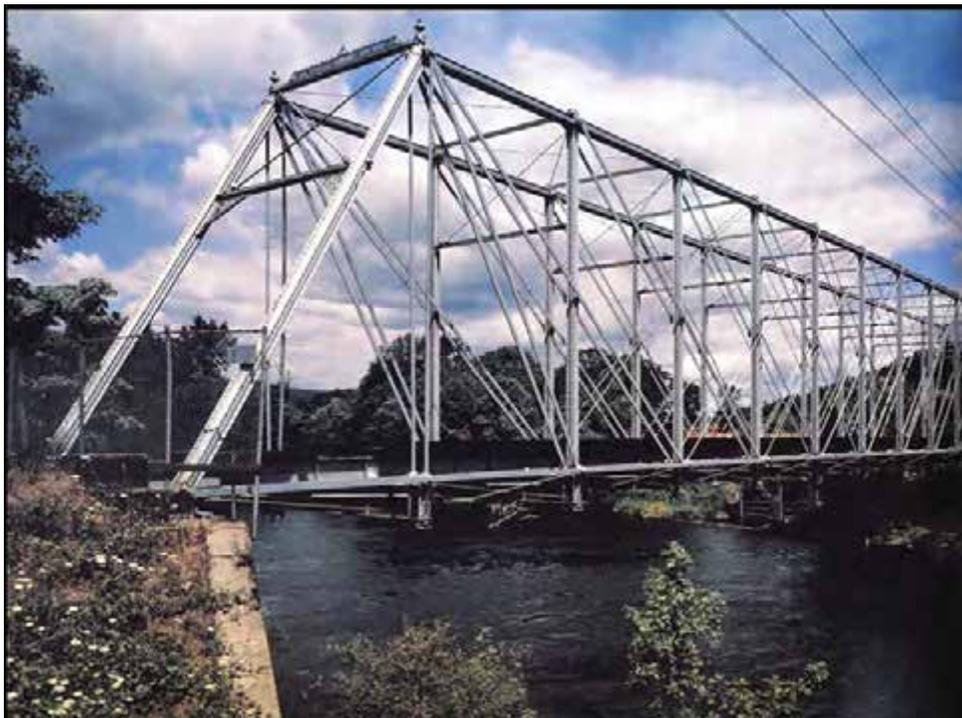
The sculpture garden was conceived and designed by Barbara C. Yee and Charles Berger. Structural design was provided by Jay Vacco, landscape design by Joe F. Smith, column installation by John Phillips, and column restoration by Barry J. Chodurian. The columns were transported to Phoenixville courtesy of Joseph Mosier.



The sign adjacent to the sculpture garden shows how the Phoenix Columns were used to support the building. It reads "Samuel Reeves designed the Phoenix Column here at the Phoenix Company. It was patented in 1862. As an important architectural and engineering innovation, the Phoenix

Column provided structural support for bridges all over the United States ... It was also used to support many buildings ...”

Inside the Foundry Building, in what is now the Schuylkill River Heritage Center, there is a display wall with photographs and archival postcards that bring the Phoenix Column story inside the Heritage Center. Below is a display photo of the Dingman’s Ferry Phoenix Column Bridge. It crosses the Delaware River in northeastern PA. The Kinzua viaduct in northern PA was a major accomplishment for the Phoenix Iron Company.



There were three major attributes that helped PAEDCO raise funds to restore the Foundry Building. First, in 1996 the Foundry was named one of the nine most endangered buildings in the state of Pennsylvania.

Second, the Foundry is also a contributing structure to Phoenixville's Historic District, which, by the way, has over 1,200 nationally certified buildings—more than any other place in Chester County.

Third, it was designated by Governor Ridge in 1995 to be one of four major interpretive visitors' centers for the Schuylkill River Heritage Corridor. This designation enabled PAEDCO to continue to raise the funds necessary to make interior infrastructure improvements to the building, to restore and conserve the wooden crane and to build the Schuylkill River Heritage Center in the eastern portion of the building. In all, over five million dollars was raised to restore the building, to restore the Phoenix Column Bridge, and to create the Heritage Center and the Symbols of Steel Sculpture Garden.

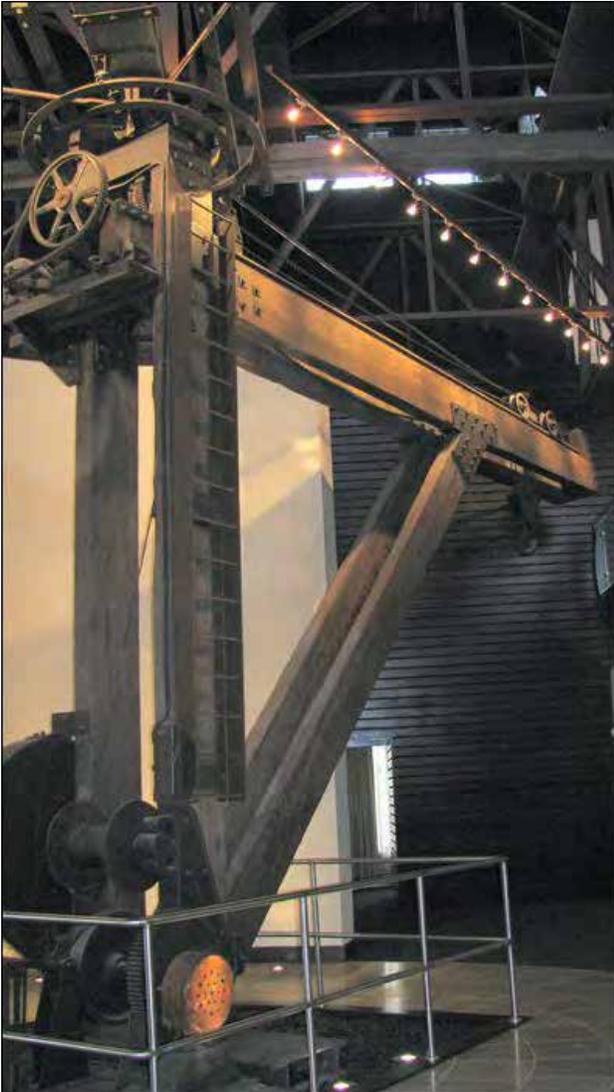
Thirteen years ago this is what the inside of the building looked like. It was a mess. There was debris strewn all over and there had also been a fire on this side of the building.





This is what it looks like now as you walk into the building. The floor illustrates the Schuylkill River, its tributaries and the major municipalities along the river, starting with Philadelphia at the entrance and leading the visitor all the way through the space. The river leads visitors to the mural showing former industrial places along the Schuylkill River. Below is a view of the mural itself. An interactive monitor allows visitors to learn more about each of the images along the river.

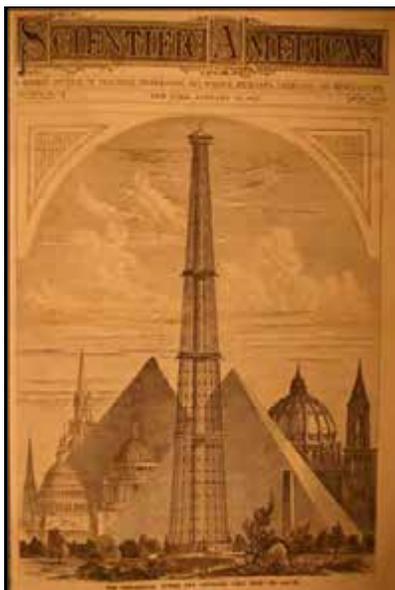




There is a glass wall next to the river mural that allows you to see the restored wooden crane on the other side. We have been told by the National Park Service that this is the only wooden crane still in place in the entire USA!

There had been a room to the left of the entrance and this wall was weakened by the fire. The interior of the room still had the fire-blackened walls and stud openings where there had once been a second floor. We started by removing this wall and, using a Phoenix Column for support, we created what would become the reception area.

This is what the same area looks like now. The entrance and reception area are on the left, with a three-dimensional display wall that now showcases some very special artifacts. One of those is a January 1874 edition of Scientific American Magazine. This is a page from that journal that shows Samuel Reeves' Phoenix Column Tower that was supposed to have been built in Fairmount Park as part of the Centennial Celebration that was held there in 1876. Unfortunately, it was never built, but there was a model of the tower that was on display. A visitor from Paris named Gustave Eiffel saw the model and used it as his inspiration for the Eiffel Tower that was built a decade later in Paris.



What was once a fire-blackened room has now become the reception area. That same fire-blackened wall now displays archival plans of the Phoenix Iron & Steel Company that were donated to the Heritage Center, dating from 1932 and 1957. The original ceiling has been left alone. This vaulted ceiling was actually created by using train tracks produced by the Phoenix Iron Company – they were made of iron, not steel - since Phoenix did not start producing steel until 1889.

You can see the original opening here on the other side of the reception area wall. This wall has now been reinforced and covered by heavy duty drywall so that this display of a huge wooden gear, large wooden patterns, and a train track pattern can be safely accommodated.

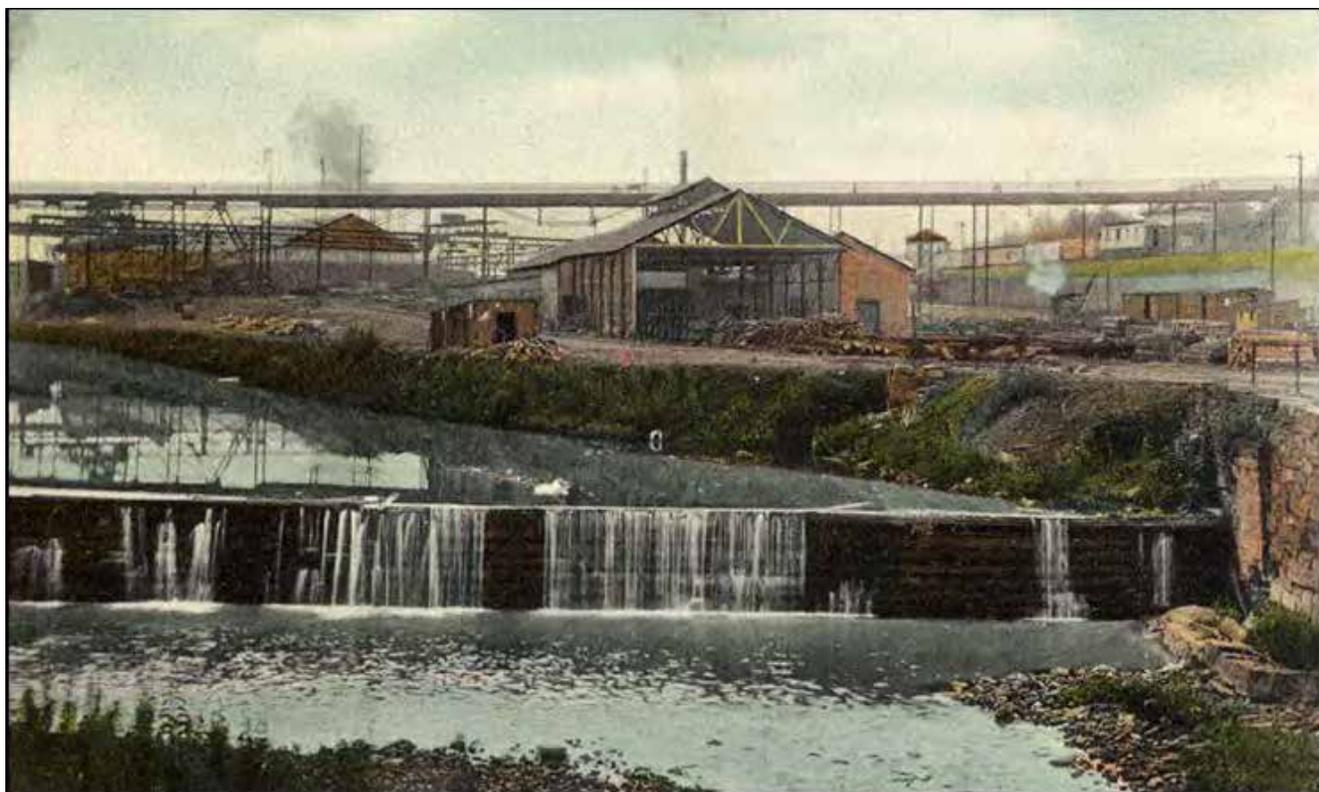
The room that highlights the Phoenix bridges and other major works produced by the former iron company also serves as the place where videos about Phoenixville & the Schuylkill River, the History of the Phoenix Iron Company, and Chester County are shown. It also serves as the Heritage Center's board room.



One particular image in this room has a very special meaning. In a small space, how can you tell the story of 2,000 men working 24 hours a day, seven days a week? We created this 7' by 9' mural which shows scenes of the former steel company itself. There are also many pictures of former steel workers which were loaned to us and have been incorporated into the mural.

There was once a sign above the steel company entrance that read "At Phoenix – it's the people that make the difference" so we thought it most appropriate to place this sentence above the mural. That is what made the Phoenix Iron Company so special. It didn't matter if you were Irish, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, or African American – everyone could get a job at the mill. This legacy is what has given Phoenixville its special character.





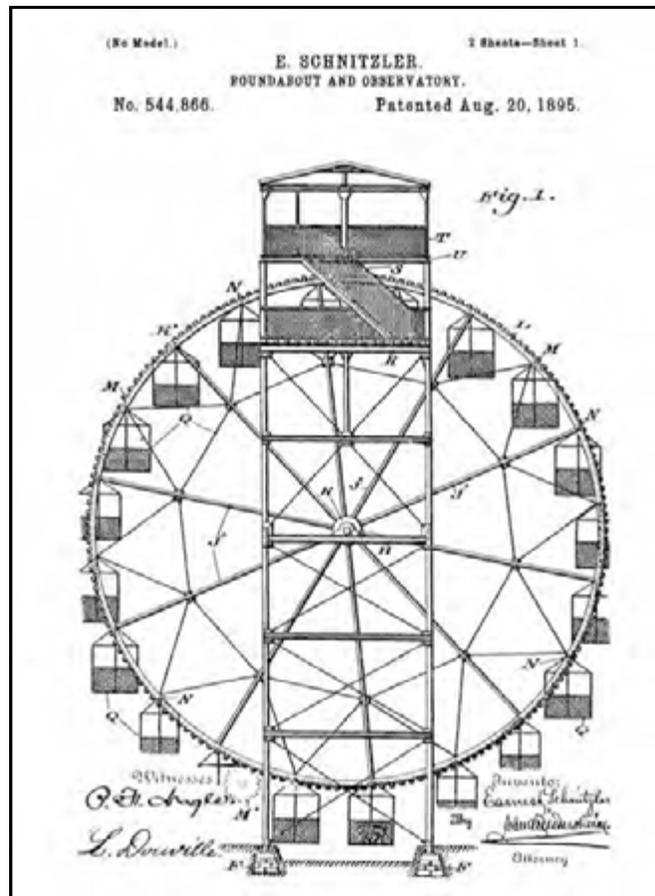
The Phoenix Iron Company buildings that once occupied such an important economic and geographic part of Phoenixville’s landscape are all gone. But the Foundry and one other building have survived, and have been adaptively reused very successfully.

Two years ago the Hankin Group purchased the Foundry Building from PAEDCO. They have transformed this former industrial space into an extraordinary place for special events. The weddings, corporate and civic events, and meetings that take place in the building play a vital role in bringing people to Phoenixville. The Foundry’s restoration and adaptive reuse has created a cultural and economic renaissance for the Phoenixville area.



The Phoenix Wheel

In 1895, Ernest Schnitzler, owner of the Palace amusement center in Asbury Park, New Jersey obtained a patent for a "Roundabout and Observatory." This was two years after George Ferris constructed his 264' diameter wheel for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Schnitzler's roundabout would be constructed of iron, have a diameter of 67', and contain 20 carriages that could hold 160 passengers. He contracted with the Phoenix Iron and Bridge Company of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania to fabricate the roundabout.



Schnitzler's invention, which he would construct to rival a smaller 50-foot diameter wooden wheel erected several years earlier on the property adjacent to the Palace, would rise 74 feet from the floor of the Palace to the roof of the observation deck. Two rectangular towers would support the wheel's central axle, the upper landing, and the observation deck. When completed, it would provide the finest views in Asbury Park. The ride would be powered by a 2-cylinder steam engine. Each of the 20 carriages would be named for a United States city, including Asbury Park and Ocean Grove, New Jersey. Knowing that he could never compete with Schnitzler's iron wheel, the owner of the wooden wheel had it dismantled and shipped to Baltimore, Maryland. Schnitzler then purchased the 32-foot by 100-foot property to expand the Palace and erected the "Roundabout and Observatory."

In July of 1895 the first passengers were carried as the wheel revolved at seven revolutions per minute. At night the wheel was illuminated by 300 lights attached to its two rims. Another 80 lights illuminated the observatory. While it received great reviews in the press, local hotel owners complained about smoke and sparks from its

steam engine. For 93 years the Palace wheel retained much of the look and feel of Ernest Schnitzler's original design. The biggest changes came in the 1920s. It was during this time that the observatory was removed due to insurance concerns. Two of the 20 carriages were removed due to the tendency of the carriages to lock together when they rocked. It was also during the 1920s when the steam engine was removed, and the wheel was converted to electric power.



After World War II, as world powers began carving out a Jewish state in the Middle East, Palace co-owner Zemil Resnick joined a secret American underground dedicated to procuring military supplies for the Haganah, the Jewish defense force in Palestine. Resnick's dedication to the cause of Israeli independence ran deep, dating to the days during World War I when he fought alongside Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, in the Jewish Legion of the British Army. Despite his business responsibilities at the Palace, Resnick visited Israel 25 times between 1946 and 1956, including a parachute jump onto Mt. Sinai in 1956, at age 60. The guns for Israel operation ran from the top floor of the Hotel Fourteen on East 60th Street in Manhattan, and collected more than 10,000 guns from friends, relations and veterans' organizations throughout New Jersey. When Resnick wanted to ensure his conversations were held in complete privacy, he held them in the one place where he knew they would not be overheard, in one of the wheel's carriages.

For nearly 95 years Schnitzler's wheel was an Asbury Park icon for generations of visitors to this Jersey shore community. By this time it had operated for more years than any "Ferris" wheel in American history. However, in 1989 when the Palace was finally closed, the wheel was put up for sale. The wheel was included in an auction of amusement-related items conducted by Sotheby's in New York City. When it failed to find a buyer at the auction, the owners sold the wheel to a buyer in Biloxi, Mississippi where it carried passengers at a 140-acre water park and campground from 1990 to the park's closure in 1997. Along with the operating mechanism of the Palace carousel, the wheel was purchased and returned to New Jersey by a developer who planned to purchase and restore the Palace. When this failed to materialize the wheel was once again put up for sale.



In the summer of 2008, the Schuylkill River Heritage Center in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania purchased the wheel and returned it to its "hometown." The Schnitzler wheel was one of four Ferris wheels that the Phoenix Iron and Bridge Company fabricated in the 1890s. As the only one of the four to survive, it is fitting that it has been returned to Phoenixville. Once it has been restored and reconstructed, it will become not only a 70-foot tall piece of industrial sculpture, but also a unique iconic symbol of late 19th century material and structural technology.

Jeffrey Amerine, Schuylkill River Heritage Center

About the author

Barbara Cohen has lived in Valley Forge since 1973. She began her career as a teacher, pursued a M.S. in Interior Design from Drexel, and continues to operate her own design firm. She has been a civic leader and major contributor to community organizations since the 1990s, when she accepted a position with the Phoenixville Area Chamber of Commerce. She was honored as Phoenixville's Outstanding Citizen of the Year in 1999. Barbara currently is a Supervisor in Schuylkill Township and serves on the board of the Schuylkill River Heritage Center, French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust, the Wharton Esherick Museum, and the Phoenixville Area Economic Development Corporation. Regarding the Foundry Building, she says that she "fell in love with it, and kind of 'adopted' it as a third child. ... It has been a challenging, amazing, and wonderful journey."