

Our Heritage

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Johnstown, Pennsylvania, is a name synonymous with the words iron and steel. Blessed with abundant deposits of iron ore, coal, wood, a water supply and a developed transportation system via canal, Johnstown was a natural location for a growing industry.

The growth and development of the American iron and steel industry was one of the wonders of industrialism. It was the bases for American global power, as cheap steel allowed for the rapid expansion of the railroad and automobile industries. Thus, the significance of the Cambria Iron Company, predecessor to Gautier Steel, has to be placed within the context of the evolution of the American iron and steel industry.

The Gautier Department, founded by Josiah H. Gautier, was moved to Johnstown from Jersey City, New Jersey in 1878 to be near sources of raw materials and to tie into western markets.

The plant was built on the south bank of the Little Conemaugh River and bordered by the Pennsylvania Canal, on what was called the "Island".

For three years Gautier was a distinct subsidiary of the Cambria Iron Company and was a limited partner. The firm's members included Daniel J. Morrell, George Webb, Daniel N. Jones, Josiah H. Gautier, Thomas B. Gautier, and Dudley G. Gautier. In July 1881 the partnership was dissolved and the Gautier works became a department of the Cambria Iron Company. By 1888 the department had a brick building 200 feet by 500 feet where wire was annealed, drawn, and finished. Another building contained the barb wire mill where the famous "Cambria Link" barb wire (along with all other wire products) was made. A merchant mill building produced *wire rod, shafting, springs, plowshares, rake and harrow teeth* and *agricultural steel*. A cold rolling shop also operated.

On May 30 through June 1, 1889, massive rains were more than the local South Fork Dam could handle and the infamous Johnstown Flood was the result. Almost 7,000 men and women were on the Cambria Iron Company's payrolls when the flood desolated the Conemaugh Valley.

In downtown Johnstown, the floodwaters severely damaged the Company Store (formerly the Penn Traffic Building) and its contents were mired in mud. Cambria Iron also lost 256 workers homes out of the 500 existing in Johnstown. Heavy machinery from the mills appeared in strange sites all over the city.

Steam pumps from the Woodvale woolen mill, each weighing fifty tons, were pushed by the water 350 feet from their bases. Eight-ton ingots from the blooming mill were rolled away and 100,000 bricks from the company brickyard lodged at the Franklin Bridge. The entire Gautier Department was destroyed in the flood and little remained except for foundations and portions of engines and roll trains. About 200 rolls of steel cable and barbed wire weighing 200,000 pounds added to the flood debris, which roared toward downtown Johnstown and lodged at the famous Stone Bridge. An estimated 225 employees were among the 2209 people who tragically lost their lives.

Survivors did not immediately know whether their principal employer would remain in business after the devastating flood. The Gautier works were held in abeyance till finally on June 4TH, the great whistle at the blast furnaces sounded for ten minutes indicating the resumption of work.

The Gautier Plant was rebuilt on the site of the former canal basin of the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal. Rebuilding the mills after the 1889 flood's destruction started immediately. A lot of filling was done, which raised the level of the works "high above any possible danger of floods." Two months were required to reinstall machines and to build temporary sheds. Workers untangled, cleaned and straightened wire, which was sold at a lower price. Carpenters built temporary shelters to house the equipment while other workers searched the river and streams for missing patterns. By August a shearing machine was in operation and a cold roll shop soon after. The temporary plant was back in operation by September 1889.

By 1906 thirteen bar mills had been installed. The main building covered 15 acres. The complex extended for about 3,600 feet along the Little Conemaugh River. It included the following shops and mills: 12inch-1, 9inch-1, 9inch-3, 8inch-2, 8inch-3, 14inch, 10-18inch, 10inch-1, 13inch, 20inch, 22inch, 36inch universal plate mill, rake shop, machine shop, disc shop, cold rolling, drawing shop, machine shop, pattern shop and blacksmith shop, all entirely serviced by two coal fired boiler houses.

In 1923 when Bethlehem Steel Corporation purchased Cambria Iron, a large portion of the plant was in rundown condition. Between 1924 and 1926 Bethlehem modernized and rebuilt it. Iron production costs were high at Johnstown compared to other plants. Concentration was put on products for local outlets or in which the costs of iron and raw steel were unimportant in the value of the finished product, such as Gautier's specialized products. The Gautier Division was considered a better place to work, as many skilled workers were employed there.

A major first improvement was the installation of a group of bar mills capable of producing large tonnages. In addition, several merchant bar mills were modernized, including the 12-inch Mill. The new mills were made up of the following: the 14-inch structural mill produced *flats, angles, rails* up to 45 pounds per yard, *bevels, tees, mine ties, Z bars* and *auto rim sections*, the 10-inch bar mill produced *flats, concave spring, rounds, squares, hexagons, special sections* and *reinforcing bars*, the 9-inch No. 2 mill made *window sash sections, flats, special auto sections, channels, small tees, angles* and other *special sections*.

By the 1950S the entire Johnstown facility employed over 18,000 workers, with 6,000 in the Gautier Plant. Their capacity to produce steel rose to 20 million tons of steel ingots and castings and production reached 100% of that capacity, a record equal to the height of the war years. By 1951the Gautier Division's mills rolled steel bars in thousands of shapes and sizes. They were used for making *automobile springs, wheel rims, brake shoes, hinges, window frames, rail anchors, and sled runners*. Other finished products included *light rails, reinforcing bars, steel ties, and fence posts*. Specialty shops made *items for reinforced concrete construction* and *long span joists* for building construction. Another shop produced *cut-and-formed blank shapes* from steel plates. Gautier produced essentially any type of steel bar or specialty needed throughout the world.

The 1960's were a period of modernization in the steel industry, not growth. However, Bethlehem Steel failed to attract modernization capital, especially for its Johnstown plant. For the first time in more than 100 years competition arrived

from foreign countries. During the 1970's the Environmental Protection Agency told the steel industry to reduce emissions, and gave a five-year time limit to meet standards. The plant at Johnstown was the oldest facility, and required costly cleanup. In 1973 Bethlehem announced that certain operations would be shut down and workers laid off.

Once again, in 1977, raging floodwaters shut down almost every operation and two months passed before the plant could start up again. Volunteers helped shovel mud and debris, but the cleanup and restoration cost \$39 million and some facilities could not be saved. The devastation offered the opportunity to close the Johnstown plant; steel markets had moved west, cheap rail transportation was no longer available, and there was no room for the plant to grow with a river and a town on all sides. But instead of closing, the decision was made to close some of the facilities and lay off workers. The work force shrank from pre-flood 11,400 to 7,600 and continued to decrease until Bethlehem announced it's plans to shut down the Johnstown Plant in 1992, which by then employed a mere 1,500 people.

Since 1852 the mills at Johnstown had survived the fluctuations of time, money, water, and technology. "Such durability was achieved principally because Johnstown was innovative."

The integrity of the Gautier Plant is high, as the buildings stand as built after the 1890's with few major alterations. The plant physically dominates sections of Johnstown, being visible at the end of several streets leading toward the river. Sections of the plant stand empty or are used for storage. Buildings closely identified with steel manufacturing and fabrication processes stand intact. Much of the historic machinery has been demolished through the years as products and the marketplace changed; however, three bar mills are still active inside the historic buildings, including the 14" Mill (ca. 1924), which contains roll stands dating from the 1950's manufactured by Continental Roll and Steel Foundry Co., and Blaw-Knox Company, the 9"-2 Mill (ca. 1924), containing a gas-fired furnace, 1950's Continental or Blaw-Knox stands, and the 12"-1 Mill (ca. 1893), which contains two-high and three-high, ca. 1920's Blaw-Knox roll stands, 15-ton Cleveland overhead crane, and a 1903 gas fired furnace.

Our steel mills in Johnstown made an important contribution to the history of American industrialism. Nationally significant from its founding in 1852, the company attracted and employed the brightest minds in the world of iron and steel engineering. The first steel rails rolled on commercial order in America were produced, and technological advancements in the steel process were made. Nominated as a National Historic Landmark, it was significant in the areas of industry, engineering, architecture, and European ethnic heritage.

The plant, now known as Gautier Steel Ltd., continues to survive in the highly competitive and economically unstable world of steel, just as remnants of the rail we once rolled survive in forgotten side tracks across the country.