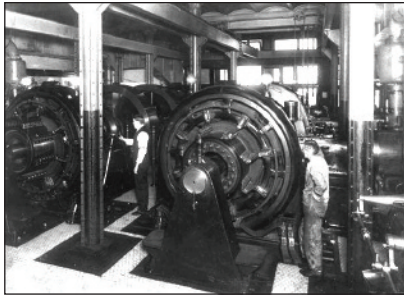


FOCUS ON PHOENIXVILLE

PHOENIXVILLE'S RENAISSANCE



Inside City Hall in Philadelphia



Inside the Washington Monument

By Barbara Cohen

William Penn gave his friend Charles Pickering a large land grant in northeastern Chester County, and Phoenixville was part of this area. Making use of the iron ore in the northern area of the county the settlement in Phoenixville produced hand-made cut nails for the early settlers to use for building their homes. This was done in 1792, while George Washington was President of the newly established USA. It was the first place in the USA where nails were made. As things progressed in the 19th century, and nails were machine made, the Nail Works became the Phoenix Iron Company. David Reeves and his family owned this company from the 1820's until 1948. They were most successful in building bridges and creating structural support for buildings using wrought iron Phoenix Columns, invented by David Reeves' son Samuel Reeves.

In the early 1980's a group of civic minded business leaders in Phoenixville knew that the steel company wasn't doing



This is how the corner looks today — The Phoenixville Mural and park

well. They were correct. The company closed entirely in 1987. This group of leaders founded the Phoenixville Area Economic Development Corporation (PAEDCO). They sponsored the creation of Phoenixville's nationally registered Historic District. There were 1,200 properties included, and the Foundry building was listed as a contributing structure in the district. This action became an important part of Phoenixville's revitalization.



This is the corner in 1993 – Vacant lot

In 1992, when I became the director of Phoenixville Chamber of Commerce, there were many empty stores on Bridge St. in the downtown. At the main intersection at Bridge and Main Streets, there was a weed strewn empty lot. I wrote a grant to the National Endowment for the Arts and we received the funding to have a large mural painted on the vacant lot's wall. There were public meetings so people had opportunities to share their thoughts about what they wanted to see portrayed on the wall. The artists listened and the imagery painted there had a wonderful community impact. The town's history became an artistic visual interpretation. There is a sign there that explains all the images so people can learn about the town's history by reading about the images on the mural.

The Phoenixville Mural helped to save the Colonial Theater and brought new businesses to open on Bridge Street. Meanwhile, the 130 acre former steel company property was vacant.

PAEDCO subdivided the Foundry Building four acres and received a grant to purchase the property. During the 1990's I was one of the 15 members of the committee who went to Reading every month for almost five years to plan the Schuylkill River Trail. In 1995, Governor

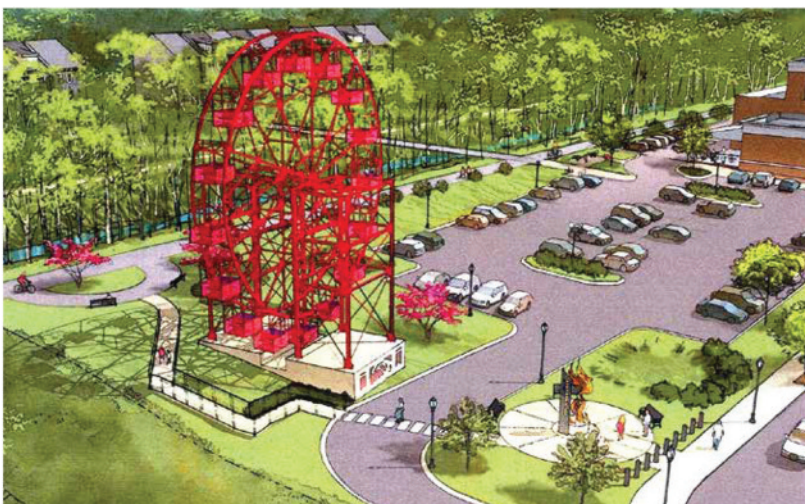
Tom Ridge named the Foundry as the place where the story of the Schuylkill River should be told. In 1996, Preservation PA named the Foundry as one of the nine most endangered buildings in PA.

(Continued on page 12)

SRHC plans to restore the oldest "Ferris" wheel in the world — made by the Phoenix Bridge Company in 1895.

Please Help the Schuylkill River Heritage Center Recreate the Historic Phoenix Wheel.

Once it has been restored, the wheel will be installed next to the French Creek Trail.



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Because of the Foundry's architectural attributes, its being a contributing structure to the Historic District, and its designation as the place to tell the river's story, PAEDCO raised over five million dollars to restore the building and create the Schuylkill River Heritage Center. Since the grant from Chester County required PAEDCO to create jobs, the Hankin Group purchased the property in 1998 and spent another five million dollars to create an extraordinary event facility in the major portion of Foundry.

The Schuylkill River Heritage Center (SRHC) is a charitable, non-profit organization. Our museum at the Foundry showcases the legacy of the Schuylkill River. The river is embedded in the floor and it leads visitors to the interactive exhibit that tells the story of many places along the river, from the coal region in the north to where the Schuylkill River joins the Delaware River in Philadelphia.

The SRHC also has interactive exhibits that inform everyone about places in Chester County and the Schuylkill River Trail. There are also exhibits of historic artifacts that were donated to the SRHC. In another room there are displays of the Phoenix Iron and Steel Company bridges and structures along with a mural that shows the company's workers and iron and steel production images.

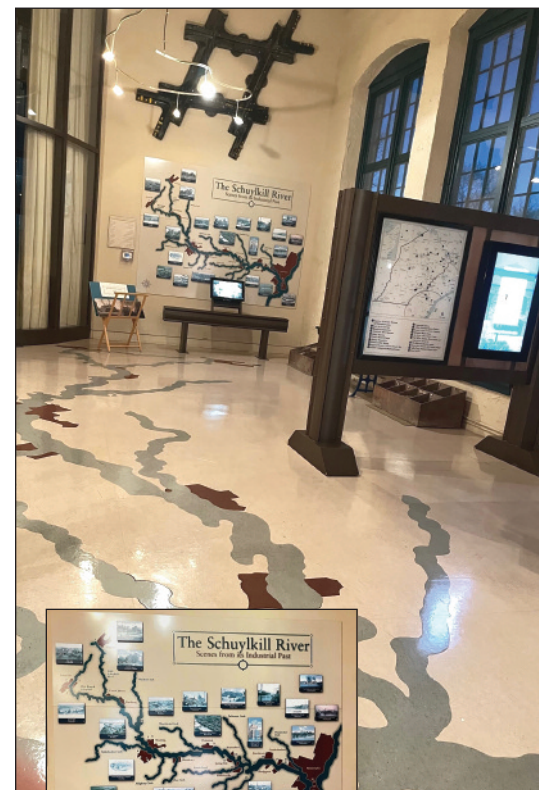
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This is how the Foundry looked in 1997



Today, it is the Schuylkill River Heritage Center



Interactive exhibits and exhibits of historic artifacts

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(Continued from page 12)

At the top of the mural is a phrase that replicates the sign that was once at the entrance to the iron and steel company property. It stated:

"At Phoenix, it's the people that make the difference."

This title tells the story of Phoenixville's inclusive history. It didn't matter where you came from, where you went to pray, or what color you were. Everyone could get a job at the iron and steel mill. In fact, David Reeves played a role in the Underground Railroad. Escaped slaves were not sent across the river or sent north. Many got jobs at the Phoenix Iron Company instead and settled in Phoenixville in the 1840's! One of the SRHC's interactive exhibits features the story of the Path to Freedom Trail through Chester County.

This legacy has contributed to Phoenixville's successful transformation. All of the remaining 126 acres of the iron and steel property have now become residential places featuring town houses and apartments. People of all ages have moved to Phoenixville in the last few years. Its population has grown from 15,00 to over 20,000 at this time. Everyone is able to walk to the downtown or take a walk on the Schuylkill River Trail which is situated along the French Creek in Phoenixville. People visiting the SRHC can walk across the restored 1871 Phoenix Column bridge and enter the Schuylkill River Trail to take a walk or ride their bike.



Phoenixville's special qualities as an inclusive community, and the preservation of many places to enjoy in various ways have made Phoenixville's Renaissance happen.

The Schuylkill River Heritage Center is open every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM. Admission is free, but donations are welcome.

We welcome visitors of all ages and encourage groups to make plans for special tours as well.

One final note is that our museum owns and maintains the Phoenixville Mural and Renaissance Park. We also own the oldest "Ferris" wheel in the world that was made by the Phoenix Bridge Company in 1895. When we are able raise the funds needed, the Phoenix Wheel will be restored and installed as a 72' high sculpture, adjacent to the French Creek Trail on West Bridge Street. This historic "piece from the past" will be an asset that encourages Heritage Tourism for Phoenixville.

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