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WHEN TIMBER WAS KING IN PENNSYLVANIA

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THE Editor has asked me to prepare a brief introduction to the splendid series of articles in this issue of PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY bearing upon the rich history of lumbering in the Commonwealth. There are, perhaps, two angles from which such an introduction might be approached. One might dwell in a nostalgic fashion upon the romantic and picturesque features of the industry, but it seems to me that this is a basic element in most of the articles themselves. The other approach is to analyze in brief the significance of the lumbering industry in the history of the economy and technology of Pennsylvania, and this I shall endeavor to do.

Perhaps it is just as well to start by recognizing that in our time few people appreciate the tremendous basic importance of timber in our early economy, or in helping along certain technological advances which gave us the machine age of today. It is certainly proper to speak of the years before 1840 as the "Age of Wood," just as we may characterize our own times as the "Age of Metal." But the use of a fixed date does not mean very much here. The metals age did not come into any full flowering until the twentieth century. Between 1840 and 1900 were the years when wood still remained of basic importance while our great metals industries were reaching maturity. The aluminum industry was still in its infancy in 1900. Steel was a little more advanced. Almost all of the combinations of metals which give us our variety of alloys so essential to our machines and our automotive and aeronautical equipment of today were unknown at the turn of the century.

But it was quite different in the early years of our civilization. Wood was basic. If we sometimes speak of our day as the time when "Steel is King," truly timber was king for more than a century in the history of our nation and state. Indeed, the giant stands of virgin timber which covered early Pennsylvania to the extent of fully ninety per cent of its land area were perhaps our most vital single natural resource. For two full centuries after Penn's landing this remained true. The resource was of the greater value because it rested not upon one type of tree but upon a great variety of both hard and soft woods adaptable to every use to which wood was put during those two centuries.

The truth of this statement is revealed clearly when we summarize the uses of wood in our early history—meaning down to about 1840. Sawing lumber in mills was one of our most basic early industries. The resulting lumber was used in building everything from homes to ships. It was the basic material in making most of our early tools, implements, and household equipment. Relatively little metal found its way into such items before 1840. The forests provided potash for domestic and export use. They furnished the material to make the barrels and casks with which to pack our preserved food. Bark from trees was the essential ingredient in tanning all leather. It even gave us some of our dyes. Our forests provided the charcoal upon which the great and growing iron industry of Pennsylvania depended almost exclusively as a fuel prior to the mid-nineteenth century. Not until that time did iron made with anthracite outdistance that made with charcoal as the base fuel. Even our most basic metal product—iron—could not have been made without our forest resources back of it.

As America grew, lumber became not less but more important and for many decades after 1840 Pennsylvania's production of this valued commodity increased steadily. Even before the Revolution the great timber resources of southeastern Pennsylvania were fast disappearing. But vast reserves still remained in the interior. Trego in his *Geography of Pennsylvania* (1843) declared that two-thirds of Pennsylvania was yet covered with timber. White pine for boards and shingles was still abundant. Our natural waterways were filled with log and lumber rafts on the way to market. With the growth of Pittsburgh as "Gateway to the West," vast quantities of lumber were finding their way down the Allegheny and its



White pine and hemlock in Watson Township, Warren County.

—From *Rafting Days in Pennsylvania*. Courtesy of Col. Henry W. Shoemaker

tributaries to western markets and used in building the new America. Lumber was still the basic building material for both homes and industrial purposes. The use of metal in building, to the extent we use it today, is of recent origin. Numerous tools and implements still utilized wood, and it was the basic material for most containers. Even our first crude oil was shipped in wood barrels. Carriages and wagons were built almost entirely from wood. Of course wood still went into making all kinds of furniture and it was still used in boat building. Hemlock bark continued to be the basic tanning ingredient in leather. It was not until after the Civil War that wood was completely replaced as a fuel for locomotives and it remained also as a major fuel in heating American homes. Few people realize the vast quantities of

timber used in our coal mining operations. As late as 1900 a great variety of articles and supplies which we now associate with metals were still made from wood. Some may recall that the first closed automobile bodies still relied heavily upon wood in their construction. Only recently have passenger and railway freight cars been manufactured without extensive use of wood.* We still do not know how to do away with wooden railroad ties.

Thus our timber resources continued to be of great value. And the state forged steadily ahead until in 1860 and 1870 Pennsylvania appeared as the leading lumbering state in the nation. The importance of lumbering as an industry is indicated by the fact that the value of the sawed lumber, staves, shooks, and headings manufactured in 1870 in Pennsylvania was reported in the census as \$35,262,590. Our steel production that year was less than seven million dollars and our pig iron from blast furnaces was worth a little over thirteen million. Lumbering was now one of our most valuable industries. This led quickly to the era of big business in lumbering, with the organization of large lumber companies, some of the largest in the United States, operating mainly in the northern counties which still had large reserves of virgin timber.

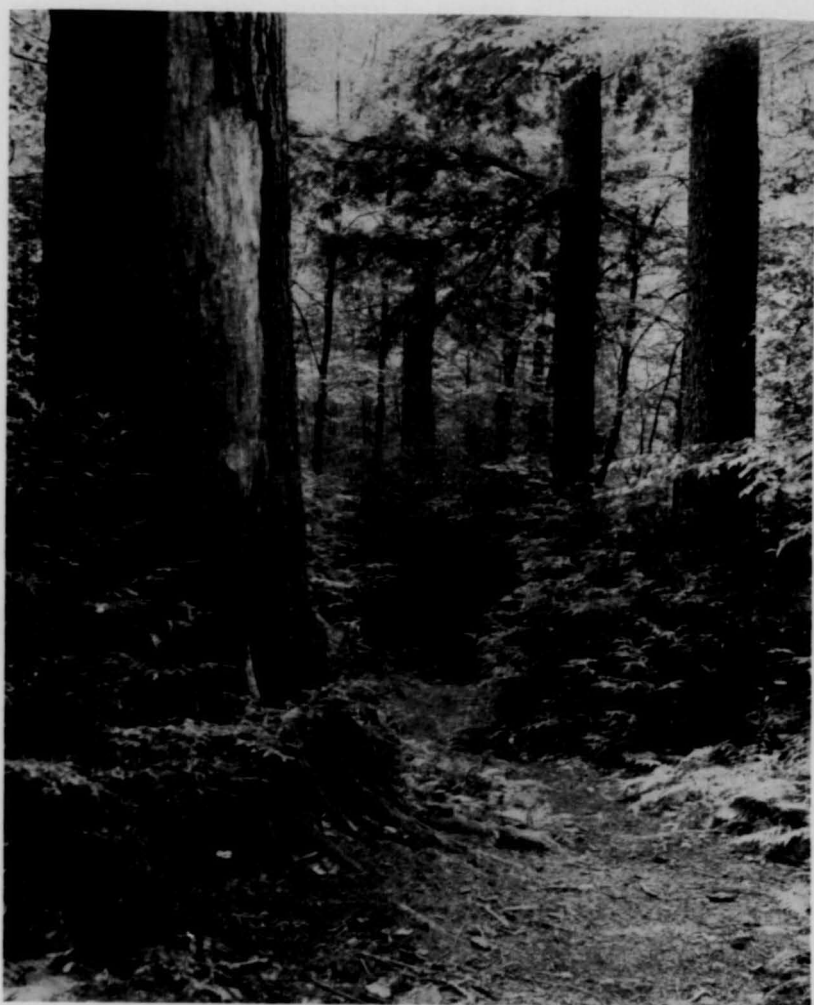
That was perhaps the golden age of the lumber industry in Pennsylvania, not only in terms of value and extent of lumbering operations but also in uses to which wood was put in our economy. In 1880, Pennsylvania ranked second, losing first place to Michigan as the heart of the lumbering economy moved westward. By 1900 we had dropped to fourth place in lumbering. In 1940 we ranked only twenty-second. Our production has increased slightly since that time, but there is no prospect that Pennsylvania's position will change materially in the lumber world. The great stands of timber are gone, except for the very few preserved in state and national park areas. Gone with them are the sound of the woodman's axe, the hurly burly of the wicked lumber camps, the whirl of the giant saws, and the atmosphere which belonged to lumbering as an industry. Old-time lumbermen would look with disdain upon the tiny lumbering operation of today.

A few years ago while in Portland, Oregon, I had a long talk with Stewart Holbrook about lumbering. He told me that Pennsylvania lumbermen with their capital, methods, and leadership had played an important role in the development of the great lumber

industry of the West and Pacific Northwest. Indeed the great Weyerhaeuser lumber empire in that region has a Pennsylvania background through the person of Frederick Weyerhaeuser. John DuBois, founder of the town of that name and a large lumber operator, is another Pennsylvanian whose name appears in the building of lumber empires in the northwest. Harry McCormick, native of Cherry Tree, was a lumber pioneer who organized in 1896 the McCormick Lumber Company in Washington State. William E. Dodge, heavy investor in northern Pennsylvania lumber enterprises, was also a leading figure in pioneering the lumber industry of the South. There is an interesting field for exploration in the story of how Pennsylvanians helped in the spread of the lumber industry to the west and south of the state in which they learned the business. Shadows of our once great lumbering empire lengthened and fell upon many parts of the land.



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Virgin timber at Heart's Content, south of Warren, Pennsylvania.
Courtesy Pennsylvania State Department of Commerce