
According to Paul F. Paskoff, the history of the Pennsylvania iron industry between 1750 and 1860 is one of continuity characterized largely by the persistence of traditional forms of organization, and his conclusions may surprise many people who have not studied this industry closely. Paskoff, in this slim volume, which is the third in the series “Studies in Industry and Society,” sponsored by the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation, examines the iron industry as a whole and as a study in the experiences of individual firms. He pays particular attention to the relationship between iron production and the market for iron, both at home and abroad, and he attempts to supplement the pioneering study done by Arthur C. Bining by adding quantitative data.

Paskoff examines the effects weather, geography, the transportation revolution, wars, the tariff, and the booms and busts in the economy had upon the Pennsylvania iron industry. He also notes the regional differences that developed in the industry, for example, the predominance of anthracite furnaces in eastern Pennsylvania by the 1840s and 1850s and the heavier use of steam power and the company form of organization in the western part of the state. Paskoff convincingly explains the reasons for the continuation of charcoal furnace technology in a period (1840s and 1850s) when the technology necessary for coke and anthracite iron production was easily available and already in use in many places. He also demonstrates that, contrary to many previous historians’ claims, the railroads did not really demand a significant amount of Pennsylvania iron before the Civil War. He concludes that furnace size was directly related to the swings in the business cycle and that iron producers effectively minimized their risks by watching carefully both the iron market and the economy in general. The 1850s, he says, were the years of greatest change in the iron industry in Pennsylvania, and, although most firms were still operating in fairly traditional ways at that time, by the eve of the Civil War, they were poised on the brink of a new era in the industry.

Although Paskoff’s conclusions seem to be accurate, his methods of arriving at them leave the reader with some questions. First of all,
he generalizes from what is, in some cases and for some periods, very little data. He has overlooked — or has chosen not to use — one of the sources of the production information he says that he has had difficulty finding, the local newspapers from the iron regions of Pennsylvania. The author has limited his sources almost exclusively to eastern Pennsylvania when using anything other than published industrial reports, although he then generalizes for the entire state. Records are available for some central and Western Pennsylvania firms and furnaces, but Paskoff has apparently not looked at them. He uses the term "western Pennsylvania," but he never defines it. Does it begin at the Susquehanna River? He also never distinguishes between the major nineteenth-century iron producing areas, the Juniata iron region of central Pennsylvania and the area around Pittsburgh and the true Western Pennsylvania counties. Paskoff ignores major iron markets other than Philadelphia and Lancaster, despite the fact that the central and Western Pennsylvania iron producers often used Baltimore and the growing cities of the West as markets.

Paskoff emphasizes the tariff and its effect on iron markets, but the treatment and the quotations are superficial, particularly in light of the fixation of Pennsylvanians on protection in the first half of the nineteenth century. He never mentions the Second Bank of the United States and its role in keeping the state in economic turmoil into the 1840s. Likewise, the lack of specie was a constant problem for iron producers in Pennsylvania throughout this period, and it should be taken into account in an examination of the market and business cycles. The quantitative data are interesting, but the reader gets the strong feeling that the author could probably have come to most of the same conclusions without using them.

_Industrial Evolution_ is an interesting and readable book, and it makes some important points about the nature of the Pennsylvania iron industry between 1750 and 1860. It is a good, useful study, but it is only a beginning in the examination of the technological, business, and economic history of this very important industry.

_The Charleston Museum_  
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