“Pittsburg is a wretched place for me, bad water and a thick murky atmosphere in which the white flakes of coal ashes are perpetually falling like the cinders from Mt. Vesuvius [sic]. The number of furnaces of various descriptions here is incredible. Every thing is carried on here by the force of steam...a dark cloud of smoke hangs perpetually over the place.”
Most people would think this quote dates to the late-19th or even mid-20th century, when Pittsburgh was widely known as America’s Steel City. But the quote actually dates to 1817. It is excerpted from a letter Jacob Cist sent to his wife Sarah about his experiences in a Pittsburgh coal mine.¹

Pittsburgh’s smoky city legacy was a product of its geography: abundant coal supplies fueled both homes and industries. The impression of the region as notably smoky can be traced to the early 19th century, when visitors to and residents of the region took pen in hand and recorded their memorable impressions of the soot and dirt of early industry. As Anne Royall wrote in 1829:

Of all towns (in our country I mean) Pittsburg excites most astonishment. Everything pursued in other towns is thrown into the shade by Pittsburg: even in the building of steam-boats it excels, by long way, our great city, New York. You see nothing but columns of smoke rolling out of these manufactories in every part of the city, and in every street.²

When Royall visited Pittsburgh from Baltimore in 1828, it was an accepted practice to tour the foundries and factories. Royall detailed her visits in a 19th century travelogue, writing about the workmen she encountered and the goods they produced. From the volcans at the forge in the cities ironworks to the master gaffers at Bakewell’s glasshouse, no detail escaped her attention.

It’s obvious that by the 1820s, from both recorded sources such as Royall and from artistic renderings of the city, Pittsburgh has achieved recognition as the Birmingham of America. As Richard Cobden noted in his American diaries, “the coal smoke reminds me of England.”³

Lady Wortley writing almost 20 years later made a similar, though more eloquently stated comment: “Pittsburg has as sable a complexion as Sheffield…. Nevertheless, in spite of its brunette coloring, it is a handsome town.”⁴

Russian traveler Aleksandr Borisovich Lakier remarked in 1857, “Suddenly before us appeared Pittsburgh with its countless tall chimneys from plants and factories…. Pittsburgh is a ‘very smoky town’ my neighbor told me, just as the English say of Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham.”⁵

George Thurston, writing in 1857, noted that smoke came from both industry and homes: “The smoke necessarily arising from its hundreds of manufactories, and the thousands of bushes of coal which are daily consumed by private families, pervades the atmosphere to a large extent.”⁶

Coal — so available and so cheap that every man could afford to be warm. Coal — the natural resource, the gift from underground. The reason for the smoke is often overlooked, but it played a crucial role in shaping not just the city’s atmosphere, but its development and history. Pittsburgh, the “smoky city” has a legacy much older than most of us imagine, a legacy tied to earth and the environment.

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¹ Collections of the Wyoming Historical and Genealogical Society, Wilkes Barre, Pa.
² Anne Royall, Mrs. Royall’s Pennsylvania or Travels Continued in the United States (Washington, 1829): 110.
⁶ George Thurston, Pittsburgh As It Is (Pittsburgh: W.S. Haven, 1857): 42.