

SteelArt

By Emilia Boehm,
Curatorial Assistant

The Duquesne Works,
by H. M. Pettit,
oil on paper, c. 1940

History Center




In 1885, the Duquesne Steel Company began construction of a mill along the banks of the Monongahela River, and the rural community of Duquesne (incorporated in 1891) was forever changed. Carnegie Brothers & Company, Ltd. purchased the mill from Allegheny Bessemer Company, successor to Duquesne Steel in 1889. Specializing in unfinished and semi-finished products, the Duquesne Works grew to house four separate kinds of mills: blooming, roughing, finishing, and continuous casting.

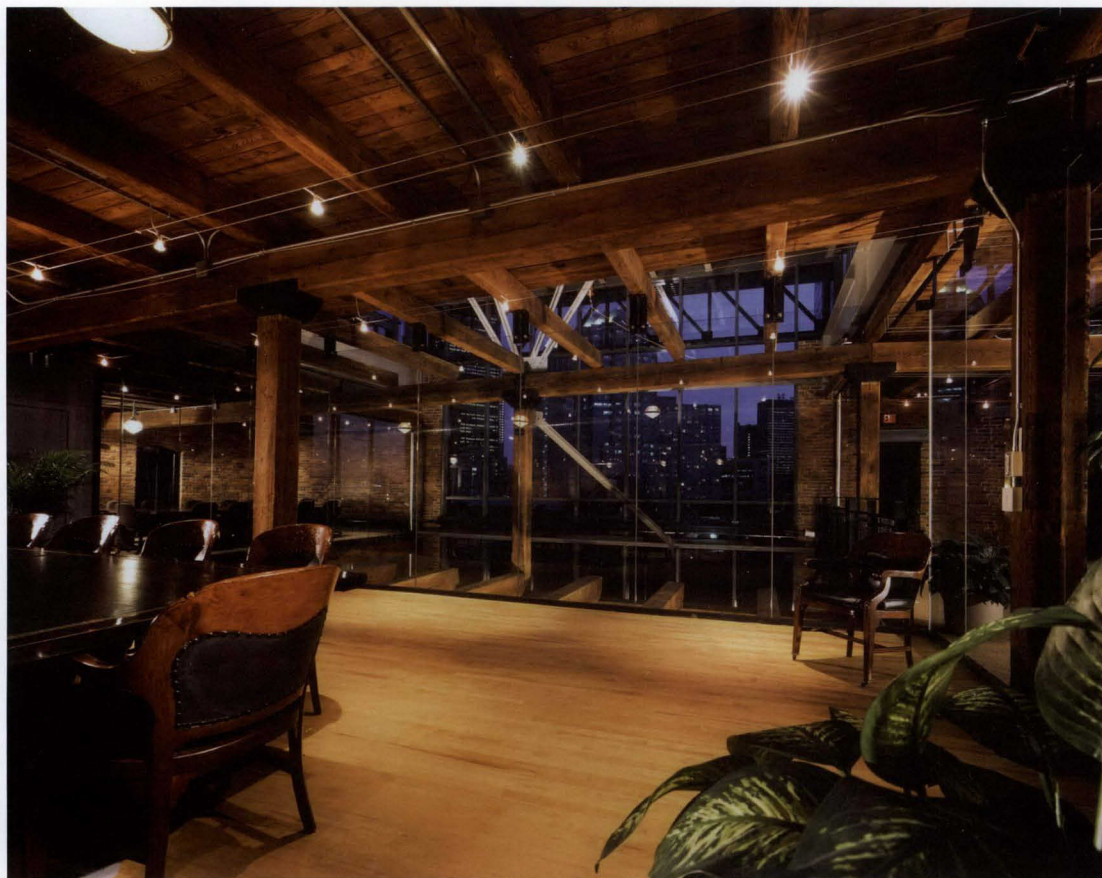
The plant expanded rapidly in the 1890s and was an integral part of the Carnegie Steel system, which also included the nearby Homestead and Edgar Thomson works. When the mill became part of the U. S. Steel Corporation in 1901, it ran for two miles along the river and covered nearly 250 acres. By the end of World War I, the plant had six blast furnaces, 33 open hearth furnaces, and several mills each for blooms, billets, slabs, and bars.

Expansion slowed in the Depression but resumed during World War II when the mill employed its largest workforce. More than 10,000 men and women produced ammunition and armor for the war effort. The mill closed in 1984, just short of a century of service, but its dominating physical presence is recorded in this work painted around 1940 by H. M. Pettit, nicknamed “the bird’s-eye view artist” for the aerial perspective he often employed.

A native of Rock Island, Illinois, Pettit painted numerous industrial and commercial sites across the Midwest and Northeast, including Pittsburgh’s Westinghouse plant and U. S. Steel’s Gary (Indiana) Works. He also served as the official artist for both the Chicago (1933-34) and New York (1939-40) world’s fairs.

This imposing and detailed mural hung in the headquarters of the U. S. Steel Duquesne Works. Former steelworker Steve Gluz discovered it in 1998 at the Duquesne Works, by then shuttered and its buildings deteriorating. He and artist Peter West took it upon themselves to restore the work, helping to preserve the legacy of both the artist and subject. Visitors to the History Center can see the 15-foot-long painting in the Library & Archives reading room, open Tuesday through Saturday. 

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