

The next day, and the next: Doing industrial history after demolition

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ABSTRACT: Industrial history is still a fledgling field in the 21st century, one in which most of the important questions have scarcely even been identified. Comparing industrial preservation and historical interpretation projects today with the struggles of previous generations to preserve colonial sites, Victorian neighborhoods and frontier towns reveals that each generation's preservable past was the previous generation's hideous junk. As a product of the late twentieth century, industrial history reflects a far greater sense of context and system than earlier visions of preservation. The Calumet region has a deep, rich vein of this kind of "industrial system" history to mine, with tentacles that embrace changing power sources, technological innovation, global transportation, the impact of wars, patterns of immigration, and policies of segregation. This talk will argue that evidence of the industrial past is, almost literally, everywhere, and that industrial history and preservation demand a kind of systemic approach that the Calumet area is ideally positioned to pursue.

I wonder whether the mythic people of Atlantis, as they watched their island sink beneath the waves, felt as we feel watching a historical treasure taken down. Granted, one building cannot be the same as watching a whole way of life disappear, but then, in a way, it can be too. Americans are a working people; our work consumes far more of our energy and provides far more of our personal identity than work does for our counterparts in other industrialized nations. And from the start, the United States was a commercial enterprise. Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston looked seaward from their great ports, canals and railroads linked the Great Lakes to world markets, a maze of roads funnels traffic to the central business districts of our cities and towns. Even the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, the most painfully introverted of all the early colonists, looked upon hard work as something pleasing to God. Work has never been peripheral to American lives – not then, and not now. So when we see an industrial workplace disappear, we could be forgiven for feeling that we are losing something central to our lives.

But, as the grief is real, so is it also widespread. When you contemplate your frustrated effort to save the coking plant, you should not feel alone. What survives from the past has always been remarkably random – many things of great and known value vanish without anyone giving them a backward glance. The *Mayflower*, justly famous for bringing the Pilgrims to Plymouth in 1620, was sailed hard in succeeding years, then left to moulder when her captain died in 1622. As best we know, *Mayflower* was sold as a ruin in 1624, scrapped for the value of her wood. The Philadelphia house where George Washington and John Adams created the executive branch of the US government between 1790 and

1800, which had also housed the hero and traitor Benedict Arnold, British General William Howe, Revolutionary financier and naval pioneer, Robert Morris and Pennsylvania's proprietor, Richard Penn, did not survive even a generation. Quickly sold and converted into cheap storefronts, the worn out building was torn down in 1832.

Both these losses derived from the get-up-and-go commerce of their respective eras. Other losses are by tragedy, as witness the fires that consumed the Chicago Historical Society, twice, in the 19th century. And consider the million artifacts archaeologists found beneath New York's Five Points neighborhood, an impoverished and colorful 19th century crossroads central to understanding both the lives of the very poor and the development of moral reform. Unearthed in the 1990s, the collection was stored in basement vaults at the World Trade Center. Only eighteen pieces, on loan to nearby South Street Seaport Museum, survived the destruction of the buildings on Sept 11, 2001.

And so it goes. Treasures that should have been saved are lost; our resources for telling our stories are painfully impoverished. But mixed with our comprehensive regret are the seeds of recovery from those losses. Because, while a workplace, a neighborhood, a ship, or a brick may be the center and symbol of many lives, it can not, in fact, be the sum total of those lives. The same is true for the coking plant. What working people experienced at the plant, and what families, communities, and descendants knew about it from outside, still exists in three critical forms – memory, landscape, and system. In the days after our “island sinks,” we can start to animate those other resources, which will see to it that our history remains despite the loss of the sites of its enactment.

Memory is strong enough to bear this charge, though it might not seem so at first glance. One striking historical instance of memory triumphing over loss is in the history of African-American families under slavery. Evidence collected after emancipation revealed people who, though left without a living relative they could find, carried in their memories lists of names, dates of birth, sale, and death, and stories of resistance. One freedwoman, for instance, remembered not only the ages to the day of thirteen children who died as infants, but also the names of her father and mother, both sold away before she was five years old. Faced with the legal denial of family ties, and the systematic disappearance of family members, people relied on memory. Memory did not undo the losses but it was enough to give a person a history, a sense of place, and an orientation on life.

Memory here in the Calumet region can do the same kind of thing, and I would urge you to use it. Interviewing and recording the stories of people whose work sites are closed or gone, or whose communities no longer have the old economic anchor, will pay off in several important ways. The community will build technical skill by working with cameras, recording equipment, transcription, and storage. Developing programs, websites, and other methods of sharing these stories around the area and beyond will compound the skills developed in collecting them. Connecting them to each other, and testing them against other kinds of records will also help build skills, awareness, and visibility for your communities and your past.

Collecting and sharing individual memories also fosters the transmission of insight and wisdom between generations. Sociologist Robert Putnam has built a career around researching the disintegration of American communal life, shared enjoyments, social occasions, clubs and family time. But among many solutions he proposes, he neglects to mention that rich connections between the aging and the young are an essential pillar of civilized life. Your young people whose sense of the world has been conditioned by deindustrialization need to know, and will come to care for, the stories of work, camaraderie, ambition, skill, and resistance that shaped members of the American industrial workforce. And older people need urgently to hear and consider the pain and frustration of kids who see no future for themselves in their own communities. There is no easy solution to the economics and policies that battered industrial manufacturing, but shared memories provide a tool, a place to start, an experience that helps everyone recognize shared hopes, on a meeting ground of mutual respect.

And there's more, too. I've been working for four years in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, developing a community-based interpretive process for the abandoned steelworks there. One thing I've learned is that, in post-industrial communities, collecting and sharing workers' memories is exceedingly subversive. When Bethlehem Steel Corporation faced bankruptcy in the late 1990s, the company moved to assure its own legacy by creating a "history" effort, the linchpin of which was a proposed National Museum of Industrial History (NMIH). With all the clout and credibility afforded to large American corporations, and backed by Bethlehem Steel money, the vision won the endorsement of the Smithsonian Institution and the "museum-to-be" soon had a board filled with bankers, university presidents, and other luminaries. The corporate head of PR was appointed to run the project. The project commissioned the Disney corporation, and then another major exhibit design firm to develop the interpretation.

At no point did anyone involved invite contributions from the community, the unions, or individual workers. To no one's surprise, when the interpretation emerged, technical, engineering, and corporate narratives dominated the design, with workers and local residents rendered principally as background tableaux.

Interestingly, this is NOT what is going to happen at Bethlehem anymore. Unlike a corporation, which can go bankrupt, have its papers dispersed, and its property turned over to new owners, memory stands on its own, above the ebb and flow of the economy. The formal bankruptcy of Bethlehem Steel in 2003 abruptly cut off the flow of money to the corporate history effort. Without those subsidies to propel it forward, the project had neither backers nor momentum. By cutting itself off from the local community, the corporation's legacy project condemned itself, despite its seemingly unassailable position, to perish with the corporation. Four years later, there is no museum, no exhibitry, and no real prospect that the museum will ever come to be. In its way, that is a sad loss.

But, meanwhile, thanks to a mobilized community of steelworkers, who began collecting each other's stories, and a robust art community that uses those stories to engage audiences, the center of gravity for interpretation in Bethlehem has shifted decisively. Now, the steelworkers are the core of the narrative, the understanding of the Steel emerges from their eyes, from their work, from their

memories, and from their priorities. Research into the management, engineering, and technical materials continues, and belongs on the site, but the heart of the visitor experience – now -- is built around how life looked from the blast furnace floor and the worker's welfare rooms.

That's the power of memory – family feeling that slips the grasp of slavery, and a rearrangement of power that puts workers at the core of industrial history. [Gary Larson cartoon]. Loss is only partly loss – loss also creates vacuums into which creativity bubbles up. It creates opportunities for new powers to gain traction. I would welcome the chance to explore with you what memory might create here in the Calumet region.

With industrial history, there is an additional resource, in the systems and the physical imprint they leave on the landscape. All economies are systematic, and leave traces of themselves behind despite radical change. New York's Broadway, for instance, isn't just a street laid out for theatre goers. It is a surviving trace of how Lenni Lenape people used the island that became Manhattan. Broadway marks the path of a trading route and the route toward an annual politico-religious gathering. The annual gathering of the Lenape clans took place in a spot that today is a park outside, not accidentally, the American Indian Museum. (former courthouse) Closer to where I live, Lancaster Avenue in Philadelphia marks the straightest route from the best farmland to the busiest port, a relationship that defined the Mid-Atlantic mercantile and agricultural economy that succeeded the native economy. And, if you fly on a clear day from Philadelphia to Chicago, as I just did, the sudden appearance of straight lines demarcating the landscape below you announces the internal land-based economy west of the Appalachians, the way of life that trumped the colonial Atlantic ports.

The industrial economy likewise leaves traces. Because it existed on a gargantuan scale, and because we are still close in time to that way of life, its traces surround us, proving remarkably hard to eradicate. That blessed stubborn-ness puts resources in our hands for developing our industrial histories. Some of the traces look like junk – heaps of slag, abandoned tracks, closed schools, weathered homes. But today's junk was yesterday's triumph, and tomorrow's resource. Railroad tracks, or even just railroad rights of way, remain to mark out the route of people and natural resources into industrial areas, and the route of products back out. Communities of homes and schools exist where, now, no plant may be, but the silhouette of the plant is visible in the shape of the community, and the echo of industrial power in local architecture and civic institutions. Each of these surviving places is a site of industrial history – not because that place hosted a blast furnace, but because it hosted the people who tended the furnace. Churches that served hot meals during a strike, schools that pushed the sons and daughters of industrial workers toward college degrees, pubs and dens of vice that drained away good intentions, streets down which marched soldiers and sailors returning from war, homes that filled with mourning friends and neighbors after an accident at the plant – these are all places filled with industrial histories that visitors will come to our communities to hear, see, and understand.

The stories of 20th century people are also industrial history. Not just the places they lived, but the reasons they traveled, the dreams they carried, the sufferings they endured. Thousands came to this area because industrial jobs offered the best chance of a secure living. Away from the farming economy of earlier generations, drawn by the new skills, the union wages, the chance to be something different, to take part in building a new age, for all these reasons and more, people came to industrial places. Some found their chance, some didn't. Some worked hard to open doors for others; some worked just as hard to keep newcomers out. Industrial history is not just a story of production, it is a story of choices, risks, and opportunities. Industrial people have stories of striving and of futility, of lawlessness and innovation, of love and hate, rage and pride – in short, stories of human endeavor in all its colors and voices. Industrial history is the tapestry of the American 20th century, and each thread matters to understanding the whole. An empty place here or there need not long detain us -- a moth-eaten bit or a torn corner does not obscure the pattern, or even the beauty of the original composition.

The products of industry also remain for us to use in telling our stories, as they do for earlier historical periods. Industrial America was a workplace, yes, but like pre-industrial America, and early industrial America, industrial American was also a culture. It had its own set of habits of thought, movement, consumption, feeling and ambition, made possible by the conversion of a succession of fuels into motive power. That means that cultural artifacts are artifacts of industry too. Fancy museums are crowded with Chippendale chairs and Chinese porcelain; historic houses display hand-made furniture, quilts, and kitchen tools. Most were nothing special in their time – even the expensive items were more part of keeping up with the folks next door than any unique individual statements. And many of the remaining fragments of these early consumer goods survived the centuries in filled-in wells and privies, where they were dumped without ceremony after they chipped or faded. Turned up by archaeologists, they become treasures again. Funny business, history.

So it is with industrial products too, and we have an almost infinite variety of industrial goods to use to tell our stories. [Marking the last beam at the Steel.] Anything used in the plant, or brought home from the plant, is an industrial artifact with a story. More than that, steel and iron pervade our world. Flip a light switch, and electricity travels to you over transmission towers made of steel, some of which undoubtedly came from here. If water flows from your faucet at home, you can be sure that somewhere there is a water tower standing on steel legs regulating the pressure in the municipal water supply. On your way to work or the mall, you'll travel roads reinforced with steel rods, some of which were made right here. That may not be true in a hundred years. By then, we might have roads reinforced with Kevlar, or some mind-bending confab made of spider webs. Who knows? But right now, we are surrounded by a 20th century world made of steel. And it is there for us to preserve, to show our descendants that, in our time, the steel made here was the backbone of the world.

And finally, you have your landscape – not just the traces of industry upon it, but the reasons, the natural graces, that brought industry here in the first place. Those who study the history of human settlements argue quite

persuasively that there is nothing random about the way humans place themselves on the landscape. Indeed, choices about where to build, live, worship, etc. reflect the deepest concerns and highest purposes of human life. Evidence of settlements and trade routes built by the original settlers of this continent remains to tell stories about trading practices, building styles, family structure, modes of travel, agricultural opportunities, religious sensibilities, and political and military affairs. As with Native Americans, so too with European settlers and their American descendants.

But how can the landscape be an industrial story? Just north of Philadelphia is the site of Hopewell Furnace, an iron foundry that had its first blast in 1771 and went on to contribute signally to Continental victory in the American Revolution. In the 1770s, when charcoal was the only fuel available to smelt iron, Hopewell offered a perfect location for an ironworks. Close enough to major iron deposits, the site's real value was its seemingly endless surrounding forests. Hopewell Furnace consumed 200 acres of woodland each year of operation, and woodcutters were the single largest category of employees. [100 of 250 in 1835] Landscape ultimately doomed Hopewell furnace, though, when anthracite coal became available in the 1830s. Too remote for rail lines, Hopewell had to transport all its fuel, in addition to iron ore and flux, making the furnace entirely too expensive to run. The forest went from being an ideal location to being the worst possible place to make iron.

You could probably tell the story of the American economy just by tracking changes in the principal fuel. Wind and water shaped a certain industrial economy. Mills, the most important industrial workplaces of their day, were scattered through the countryside along small, fast-running creeks that gave them their motive force. Farmers located close to the mills, roads were built to link mills to ports, and towns sprang up around these centers of work and commerce. At every harbor on the Lakes, and along the major trading rivers, like the Hudson, the Delaware, the Ohio and the Mississippi, towns sprang up where currents changed, thinning waters required the use of shallower draft boats, or railheads came to the shore and goods had to be unloaded and repacked for the next stage of the journey. The culture and politics of the southeastern states derived principally from the fact that the sharp line of waterfalls divided each state into a tidewater area below the falls with access to wealth through international trade, including in slaves, and a piedmont area above the falls isolated and largely on its own.

Steam power produced another kind of landscape and new ways of life. I once read a history of the United States in student bloopers, where one hapless writer argued that "the invention of the steamboat caused a network of rivers to spring up." Silly, of course, since the rivers were already there, but the point isn't entirely ridiculous after all. Steam-powered boats and trains made it possible to go reliably up-river against the winds and currents, something wholly new in the history of the world. Trains whizzed goods past all the old intermediate communities, covering long distances without the need to change horses, crew, or mode of transport. Towns in the middle of the river valleys, long accustomed to regular loading and unloading at the river's edge watched in dismay as trains and steamboats carried all their old custom right past them.

Moreover, the steam engine meant that goods moved uphill and upriver at almost the same speed and with almost the same expenditure of power as they did moving downhill or with the current. That changed the price of goods, making it possible to ship goods profitably much farther than it had ever been before.

I offer these examples as a guide to looking at your own landscape for the resources that tell the story of industrial here. This region was a center of commerce and production thanks first to its waterways and the bounty of the Lakes. Like any productive area, it drew people to work it, to plumb its productive capacity, and much of the filling in and alteration of the landscape reflected the need to house those people, and create ways for people and goods to move about. For industrial investors, having all those people on hand to work compounded the attractions of the waterways and the Lakes, ideal for transporting iron and coal in, and carrying steel out. While out east people struggled to pierce the Appalachian range with canals, railroads, and roads, here in Calumet the Great Lakes ships floated the resources in from hundreds of miles away. Swiftly unloaded, transformed, and then returned to the ships, the industrial products of the Calumet floated out to the world. When Charles Schwab decided to make Steel east of the Appalachians, his colleagues and friends along the Great Lakes laughed him to scorn. There was no way, they asserted, to make steel profitably that far from the Lakes. And they were mostly right – Schwab made it work by figuring out how to use steel in skyscrapers, railroads, and bridges, uses for which there was a lot of regional demand. But his bread and butter at Bethlehem – which the 20th century provided in abundance -- was the cushion of wartime contracting.

If the landscape of the Calumet was an ideal industrial entrepôt, that means that the same landscape is today an interpretive canvas. All around you are changes made to the flow of water, to height of hills, the depth of valleys. All around you are belts of movement created to shift people to jobs, or locate jobs near people. Everywhere are the adaptations made to the land to move natural resources in and finished products out. Each of these is an industrial story, or a piece of one, or a legacy of one.

Beyond that, your landscape as a whole is an important story about the relationship industrial societies build to the goods and processes that sustain them. Many of the landscape modifications were made because American policies defined the landscape of the Calumet as “waste land.” The area’s marshes, which 21st century people now know to be essential and exquisite ecosystems, just looked like shallow water choked with weeds to 20th century eyes. Better they should be filled in and made productive. And now, postindustrial investment has, to a meaningful extent, again turned its back on the Calumet area and its people, defining the area as polluted. The story here is one worth telling – about our cultural tendency to ignore what lies behind us, to deny the legacies we leave, and to maximize the distance between our pleasures and their costs. Industrial America was, in many ways, the high water mark of this carelessness, the apotheosis of a historical willingness to mortgage the future for today’s uses.

That attitude, inscribed in the landscape of the Calumet region, has a history that can be told here, using artifacts that are all around you. The audience for that history is still forming, but it will come, because those chickens are coming home to roost. In the environment, the economy, in education, family life, and community connection, bills are coming due for our long history of gleefully squandering treasures without much considering what life will be like without them. This great spree and its inevitable bill are also artifacts of industrial America. In your natural landscape and the visible modifications made to it, you may have the resources to plumb the implications of that binge for a generation whose survival may depend upon understanding it.

These are the interpretive possibilities I see before you. You the people, fundamentally, are the story that is most important to tell. Industrial America did not exist apart from us – we built it, we used it, we cherished it, we hated it, we destroyed it. Its growth, its impact, and its disastrous decline are all stories of human choice, not of technological inevitability. Through your memories and your artifacts, through the systems that shape and mark your world, and through the ambitions and errors that shaped your landscape, you have resources to tell a history of the industrial 20th century that is deep and exciting, and urgently needed. And in your group, you have the beginnings of how to do that. The efforts you made to save the coking plant helped give shape to a communal sense of historic importance. The application for heritage area designation surely contributed to your knowledge base, and helped identify major stories, important locations, and hints of regional identity despite the state boundary that divides you.

I have tried to make your story even bigger – and I repose trust in you that your urge to tell your story will continue to motivate you to action. The important thing is, history does not, in the end, serve the past at all. Historians use the random and quirky bits that survive from other times to do the work of their own time. Nothing we do now will change the past – but everything we say about the past, everything we learn and share about the past, can shape the future.