

Robesonia Borough

Berks County's 250th Anniversary

Next week:
Rockland Township

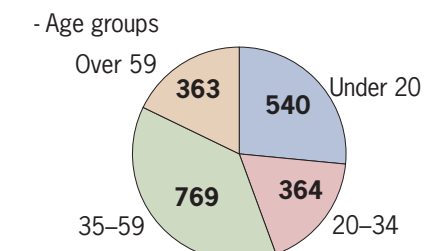
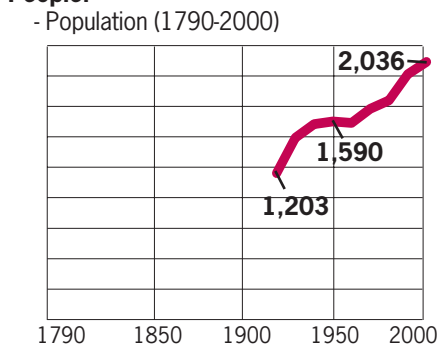
Facts & figures

Settled: 1723
Incorporated: 1913
Origin: Heidelberg
Founder: Henry P. Robeson
Total area: 0.9 square miles
Land usage:



 Agriculture	 Commercial
 Rural	 Commercial recreation
 Woodland	 Industrial
 Single family	 Public/nonprofit
 Multifamily	 Water

People:



- Poverty level: 3.3%

Economy:

- Median household income \$44,943
- Median home price: \$71,500
- Households: 827
- Total property value: \$81,360,300
- Largest employers: Sonoco Products Co. and Snap-On Tools Corp.

Government:

- School district: Conrad Weiser
- Top elected official: Mayor Frank W. Schnee

History:

- First elected official: Burgess Harry W. Sheeler, 1913
- Namesake: Henry P. Robeson
- Famous citizens: G. Gilbert Snyder, long-time school principal and host of the Wunnernaus radio show in the 1940s and 50s, very popular with Pennsylvania-Germans; Seeley Patterson, furnace superintendent at the turn of century, was considered the most civic-minded of all superintendents.
- Early churches: St. Paul's United Church, built in 1904, and the Furnace Chapel (now Trinity Lutheran Church), built in 1869.
- Oldest building: Robesonia House, 124 E. Penn Ave, built circa 1830.

Points of interest:

- Taylor Mansion
- Patriotic Order Sons of America lodge hall
- Furnace Mansion

Did you know:

- Henry P. Robeson ordered that Main Street in Robesonia be 100 feet wide and that several side streets be 80 feet wide.

Quotable:

"The cinder bank will be here forever," the cry of many Robesonia Furnace workers referring to the six-million ton pile of slag in town. The pile no longer exists, as the material was used as fill for roadways such as Route 422 and Route 61.

Iron drove Robesonia's economy

THOUGH NOW known by many as "The Garden Spot of the Lebanon Valley," the borough of Robesonia was not always a quiet community.

For well over a century an iron furnace drove Robesonia's economy, and supplied thousands of tons of pig iron to markets near and far.

George Ege established the Reading Furnace along Spring Creek, now known as Furnace Creek, in 1794.

By 1804, Ege, who also owned Charming Forge, was one of the largest manufacturers in Berks County and its biggest landowner, possessing more than 21,000 acres.

Ege also was a noted politician and judge, but by 1824 his furnace was faltering. When he died in 1829 at the age of 81, his businesses were in receivership.

In 1845, town founder and namesake Henry P. Robeson and partner Clement Brooke purchased the furnace and converted it to burn anthracite, which greatly increased production.

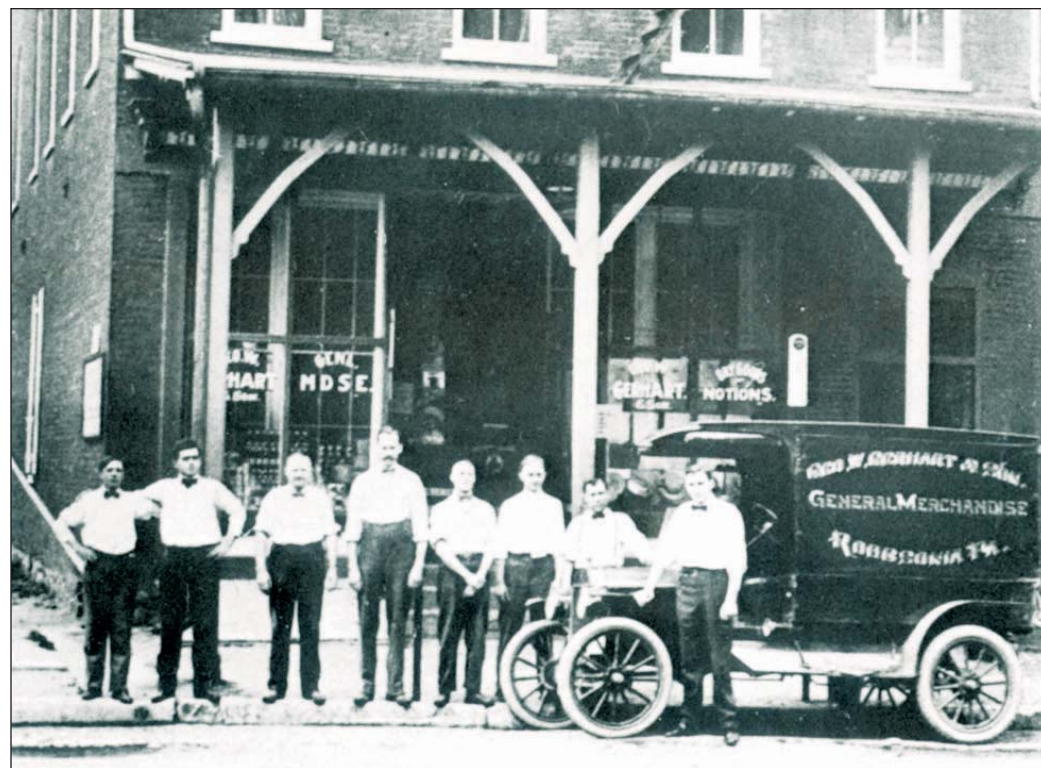
Renamed the Robesonia Furnace, the business flourished for decades. By 1914 its production had risen to 1,200 tons per week.

In 1927, Bethlehem Steel Corp. purchased the furnace to stop the drain on the ore supply and to eliminate competition. Bethlehem Steel dismantled the furnace.

First settlers

German immigrants were the first to settle the area now known as Robesonia.

The immigrants, many of



Employees gathered outside Gerhart's Store for this World War I-era photo. According to historian George M. Meiser IX, the top floor of the once three-story building was removed in 1975 due to decay and the building was remodeled as a residence.

whom were farmers, began arriving in 1723.

They had been mistreated in New York state and were invited to Pennsylvania by Gov. William Keith.

Robeson, whose parents were British immigrants, took preliminary steps to establish the town on furnace-owned land north of the iron works in the mid-1850s.

The town was first known as Heidelbergstown. The name was changed to Robesonia Furnace and in 1859 it became Robesonia.

Robeson's plan called for extremely wide streets, a central coal and feed station, park areas, a school and a church.

After Robeson's death in 1860 the town layout was modified and enlarged.

Over the years the town grew and the borough fathers wanted to incorporate so that any action they took would carry more force.

Residents were bitterly divided over the move, but in 1913 the borough was finally incorporated.

Robesonia was known as a

competitive sporting town at the turn of the 20th century.

Its teams were known as the Robins and Robinettes, and later the Pioneers, because the athletes were strongly supported by the Pioneer Hose Company.

Today the southern part of the borough contains the Robesonia Furnace Historic District.

Only ruins remain from the industry. Much of the 19th century iron makers village is still in place, although it is mostly privately owned.

THEN



This view from a turn-of-the-century postcard is of Centre Street. The Maple Villa is on the right.

NOW



The Maple Villa is now used as a residence.

Collapse of furnace stack killed 7 workers

The worst accident in Robesonia history was the collapse of a large stack at the Robesonia Furnace on Nov. 7, 1884.

Seven men were killed and eight others seriously injured.

The 40-foot stack stood on 30-foot high cast iron columns. It measured 50 feet in diameter and weighed 3,000 tons.

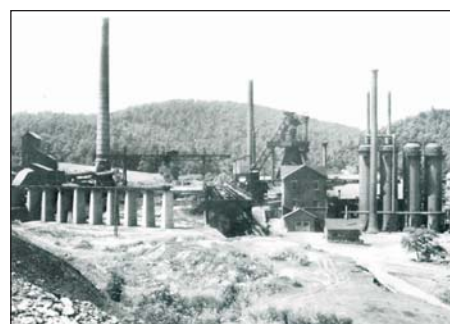
The collapse was blamed on the weakness of the support for the tower, which fell quickly and without warning.

According to an 1884 account in the *Womelsdorf News*:

"At 2:30 p.m. the foundation of the furnace gave way, causing the stack to fall.

Six men were buried in the debris and died, and another, Fred Foreman of Robesonia, was killed on the outside.

Foreman was cut in two by a falling



Bethlehem Steel Corp. bought the Robesonia Furnace the year this photo was taken — 1927.cutline

piece of sheet iron. He left behind several children whose mother was also deceased.

Also killed were Henry Putt of Rob-

esonia, Henry Spangler of Myerstown, David Parson of Newmanstown, Joseph Reed and Daniel Beckley of Stricklerstown and Monroe Peifer of Lebanon.

Most of the victims were masons.

Two men who were standing near the stack barely escaped by running for their lives.

Following the collapse the scaffolding inside the stack caught fire and burned for several hours. Later in the evening fire was again discovered beneath the stack.

There is a terrible excitement prevailing, as the remainder of the stack hangs in such a way that it may fall at any minute."

As a result of the tragic incident, the furnace had to be practically rebuilt.

Timeline

- 1723:** The first German settlers arrive in the region from New York.
- 1729:** Conrad Weiser comes to the area that would become Robesonia
- 1817:** The Berks and Dauphin Turnpike is built through Robesonia. The road, which links Reading to Harrisburg, includes the first bridge across the Schuylkill River in town.
- 1849:** The Furnace Post Office opens in the furnace store.
- 1857:** The railroad goes into service.
- 1869:** Furnace Chapel, a nondenominational church, is built by Nathaniel Ferguson, one of the owners of the Robesonia Furnace. A refurbished version of the church is still in use.
- 1882:** The Mansion House Hotel opens in what had been a private dwelling at 1 W. Penn Ave.
- 1885:** Robesonia Furnace is sold and becomes Robesonia Iron Company Ltd.
- 1887:** A two-story, four-room brick schoolhouse is built along the Berks and Dauphin Turnpike. The first graduating class consists of five students.
- 1893:** The Pioneer Hose Co. receives a charter to go into business.
- 1894:** Trolley service comes to western Berks County.
- 1898:** The Robesonia Water Co. is incorporated on Dec. 22.
- 1904:** The Robesonia Water Co. is bought out by the Womelsdorf Water Co.
- 1904:** Furnace superintendent Seeley Patterson has a wooden floor constructed at the Wigwam building, where indoor basketball games are played. The project eliminates "sawdust fog."
- 1916:** A modern school replaces the four-room schoolhouse.
- 1922:** Robesonia State Bank, now First Union Bank, is established.
- 1927:** The iron works closes.
- 1929:** Trolley service to Robesonia is discontinued.
- 1940:** Former furnace property is divided into 20 parcels.
- 1988:** The Robesonia Furnace Historic District is established in the southern part of the borough.
- 1996:** The new Robesonia Borough Hall is dedicated.

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