

LUMBERING IN ELK COUNTY

Elk County lies within Pennsylvania's Pine and Hemlock Belt, a vast and seemingly inexhaustible forest that once covered the state's entire northern tier. Lumbering in one form or another has been the primary industry since the time of initial settlement.

Pioneer families engaged in the first wave of lumbering in the region, followed by small, family-based firms conducting larger-scale lumbering in the era of water transportation. Huge quantities of saw logs, square timber, and finished lumber were floated down the larger streams like the Clarion and Allegheny rivers. Much of it went to distant markets where it contributed to Pennsylvania's urban growth and economic expansion during this period.

The earliest saw mills of the rafting era employed waterwheels and reciprocating blades, but by the 1870s steam power and circular saws brought greater efficiency and promoted lumbering on a much larger scale. After areas along the rivers had been stripped of timber, logging railroads extended the reach of the axe to every remote corner of the northern plateau. As the stands of white pine were depleted, loggers harvested hemlock bark for leather tanning and hardwoods for building materials.

The evolution of forest industries, from lumbering to tanning to wood chemical production, eventually ended in the degradation and abandonment of the land. In the early 20th century new concepts of forest management led to the large-scale acquisition of denuded and ruined timberland by the federal and state governments in order to promote recovery and future use. The creation of Allegheny National Forest in 1923 led to reforestation and controlled lumbering throughout Elk and surrounding counties.



THE STORY OF IRWINTOWN

In 1849 the 33-year old lumberman Thomas Irwin sold his interests in a sawmill at Beech Bottom in Spring Creek Township and used the proceeds to purchase 1,000 acres of timberland along the Clarion River at the mouth of Irwin Run. There he constructed a water-powered sawmill and began to harvest timber. His mill at "Irwin's Bend" developed first as a lumber processing site and later as a rafting center, producing lumber for direct sale to dealers.

Thomas Irwin was a typical "pioneer lumberman" of the early rafting era, operating a small, isolated family operation at a site that, though remote, featured reliable waterpower and good river access. By 1860 the Irwin mill was processing 2,500 pine logs into 500,000 board feet of lumber. Irwin and four employees also produced flatboats for the transport of their product, and likely the product of other operators, downstream, bypassing large-scale mills and wholesalers. Irwin's operation was in the second tier of local firms, falling midway between the large mills employing 70-80 men and the tiny one-man operations. Unlike firms that would "cut and run" on leased land, Irwin owned the land he worked, requiring him to practice selective logging to sustain his operation.

By 1870 Irwin had diversified into shingle production. His mill was now powered by a 37-horsepower steam engine which greatly increased its efficiency. He owned \$32,000 in real estate and \$18,000 in personal estate, making him by far the wealthiest man in the township. His property at Irwintown included 1,578 acres of land, a steam-powered sawmill, five houses, a barn, and a stable.

However by this time most of the timber had been stripped from the more accessible tracts bordering the Clarion River. Faced with a shrinking resource base and intense competition from large producers, it was difficult for small operators to survive. Irwin went into debt and lost his property at an 1879 sheriff's sale. He and his family soon left Elk County and disappeared from the historical record. After its abandonment the town site reverted to nature and since 1925 has been part of the Allegheny National Forest.

ARCHAEOLOGY AT IRWINTOWN

In 1993, while examining areas to be affected by a parking lot and other visitor facilities, Allegheny National Forest archaeologists discovered the long-abandoned Irwintown Cemetery as well as building foundations scattered through the woods. More remnants of historic Irwintown were documented during recent archaeological studies sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. As a result the story of Thomas Irwin and his forgotten village at the mouth of Irwin Run is finally beginning to emerge.

HISTORIC IRWINTOWN

ELK COUNTY
PENNSYLVANIA

A 19TH CENTURY
LUMBERING COMMUNITY
ON THE CLARION RIVER



At the mouth of Irwin Run once stood the small village of Irwintown, typical of the small rafting-era lumber towns scattered along the streams and rivers of Pennsylvania's "northern tier" counties. Today it is a low-impact recreational site managed by the Allegheny National Forest and containing a canoe launch and trailhead as well as the remains of historic Irwintown.



- KEY**
- ① Irwintown Cemetery
 - ② Probable barn foundation
 - ③ Probable well or cistern
 - ④ Sawmill foundation
 - ⑤ Clarion River Railroad grade (1890-1940s)
 - ⑥ Timber cribwork (possibly associated with sawmill pond)
 - ⑦ Possible ford or crib-dam
 - ⑧ Possible former pond adjacent to Clarion River Railroad bed
 - ⑨ 19th century house sites
 - ⑩ Stone pier
 - ⑪ Bed for tram line
 - ⑫ Boulder with possible raft mooring hardware embedded - not shown (approx. 450 feet south of 10)
 - ⑬ Former wagon roads

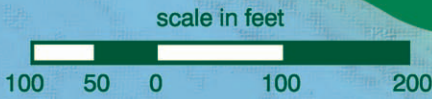


IRWINTOWN SITE
ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST
ELK COUNTY, PA

Irwintown is an important historic archaeological site which is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. It provides a rare link to the early logging era in northwestern Pennsylvania. While most rafting-era lumbering communities have been destroyed by later development, Irwintown was abandoned at an early date and has remained relatively undisturbed since that time.

NOTICE:

As part of the Allegheny National Forest, this property is subject to the Archaeological Protection Act of 1979 (ARPA), which protects archaeological resources and sites on public lands. Visitors are responsible for complying with the provisions of ARPA.



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