

# **LEHIGH SLATE COMPANY MANTEL FACTORY SLATINGTON, PA**

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## **STATEMENT OF HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The purpose of this section is to provide a succinct narrative. Substituting previously printed materials, such as chapters from a local county history, newspaper articles, etc. will not be accepted as a substitute for the statement of history and significance.

Be selective about the facts you present. Consider whether they directly support the significance of the property. Avoid a detailed narrative of all owners and activities. Focus on the events, activities, or characteristics that make the property important. For example, identify significant architectural details if a building is significant for its design, or explain the role the property played in local commerce or industry. Organize your narrative as follows:

**1. For the history section, provide a brief overview of the property – changing ownership, use or function, and role in local, state, or national events, since its construction to the present. Consult historical maps, tax records, and historical aerial photographs (available online) to trace these changes. Be sure to answer the following questions:**

**The Lehigh Slate Company Mantel Factory, constructed circa 1859 in Slatington, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, was an industrial building erected for the manufacturing of various slate products, such as mantels, vaults, billiard table tops, counter-tops, flagging, blackboards, electrical insulators, etc.**

**This mantel factory is the only surviving slate manufacturing structure from the formative years of the slate industry in the Slate Belt region of Upper Lehigh and Upper Northampton counties. The slate industry in this region was responsible for the area's economic growth in the late nineteenth century, and by 1900 thousands of men were employed in close to a hundred quarries and associated manufacturing facilities in the Slate Belt region producing roofing slate, school slates, blackboards and other slate mantel products. Both the Slatington Historic District and the Bangor Historic District have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places as reflective of the importance of these towns in the development of the slate industry.**

a. Who constructed the resource and why?

**The Lehigh Slate Company Mantel Factory was constructed circa 1859 by the Lehigh Slate Company (chartered in 1854, re-chartered 1874) as part of its slate mining and manufacturing operations in and about the borough of Slatington. The factory manufactured a variety of slate products for the company. The Lehigh Slate Company was the first chartered corporation in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania focused on slate mining and manufacturing.**

b. Who owned the property and when? If there were many different owners, only the most important (those that were significant in shaping the history or appearance of the property) need to be mentioned. A complete deed search is not required.

**According to early historical accounts, the Lehigh Slate Company Mantel Factory was erected in 1859 on the north side of Trout Creek near the company's "mantel quarry." (Note that the dates of 1854 and 1857 appear in some other accounts of the origin of the factory.) The factory superseded a much smaller facility that had been located on the opposite side of the creek. The new mantel factory had much larger machinery available for the expanded production of mantels and other slate objects, and excellent waterpower was available on the Trout Creek.**

**Some early statistics from The Slatington News show the production (shipped via the Lehigh Valley Railroad) of the Lehigh Slate Company for one week in May 1870:**

**105 squares roofing slate  
12 cases school slate  
4 cases mantels  
9 cases blackboards**

**In 1880, because of financial problems, James Hess, et al of Easton, Pennsylvania, purchased the Lehigh Slate Company and its land, mantel factory, slate quarries and town property at a sheriff's sale. The company, including the mantel factory, now operated under the name of Hess & Co. James Hess eventually bought out his partners, and on his death ownership of the mantel factory and other property passed to his estate.**

**Some statistics from The Slatington News show the production (shipped via the Lehigh Valley Railroad) of the mantel factory as James Hess & Co. for one week in August 1882:**

**3 cases mantels  
1 case blackboards**

**The mantel factory was operated from about 1888 to 1900 by Walter Bachman (1845-1904) under the name of the Old Lehigh Slate Co. Eventually his sons (Bachman Brothers) succeeded him as operators of the factory. In 1902 the Hess estate sold the property to Ida Daum, Walter Bachman's daughter, and the factory was then operated by her husband, Howard Daum, followed by her brothers John and Morris Bachman (the Pennsylvania National Slate Blackboard Co., a.k.a. Pennsylvania Blackboard company). The firm mostly engaged in the manufacture of blackboards through the 1920s and 30s.**

**At some point in time, production of slate products ceased at the factory. The property was seized for non-payment of taxes, and then in 1947 the property was purchased by Charles H. Mantz for use in a coal and later fuel oil business.**

c. How has the property been used? What changes have been made, and why?

**For decades, first by the Lehigh Slate Company, then under the ownership of James Hess and his heirs, and finally under the control of the Bachman and then Daum families, the factory was used to manufacture slate products. The slate business began to decline after World War I, and the property seems to have been used by various business operations in the 1930s. After World War II, the factory ended up in the possession of Charles Mantz who used the property for his coal and then fuel oil business.**

2. For the significance section, explain why the property is important. Be sure to answer the following questions:

**This Lehigh Slate Company Mantel Factory, dating to the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the slate industry in eastern Pennsylvania, is the only surviving manufacturing facility that remains of the early slate industry in Upper Lehigh and Upper Northampton counties. The structure is an excellent example of the type of building used in slate manufacturing. While commercial, religious, and even residential buildings that are associated with the slate industry in this region survive from the nineteenth century and have been recognized in the Slatington and Bangor Historic Districts respectively, the mantel factory is unique as the sole surviving industrial building. Furthermore, it was also a property of the first incorporated slate quarrying and manufacturing corporation in Pennsylvania, the Lehigh Slate Company, chartered 1854.**

a. Is the property associated with an important event or trend? What is it?

**Property is associated with the beginning and growth of the slate industry in the Slate Belt region of eastern Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century.**

b. Is the property associated with an important person? Who is it? Why is the person important and how is the property connected to the person?

**The property is associated with Robert McDowell and Daniel D. Jones, the organizers of the Lehigh Slate Company in 1854, and the founders of the borough of Slatington as it was laid out in the 1850s and then incorporated in 1864.**

c. Is the property's design or construction typical or unique? Was it designed or built by an architect or artist? Does it have high artistic values?

**In one respect the building's design was not overly unique as it fit the basic slate factory/mill design of being longer than wide (roughly rectangular) so that the machinery could be sited along a long central access. But the building was also unique in that it was not built of wood as most of the slate factories in the area were. The unknown builder made use of plentiful remnant/scrap slate in combination with concrete to build a utilitarian structure that would serve simply as a manufacturing facility. The building's solid construction allowed it to survive**

numerous floods. Despite an interior with wooden timbers, the fact that the exterior of the building was not made of wood (the typical construction material for slate quarry buildings and for other school slate or mantel factories) probably helped this building to survive. It did not burn down like the Fulmer Slate Factory (1886), the American Slate Works (1912), the Zellner Blackboard Factory (1920), the Pennsylvania Blackboard Company (1934) or the former National School Slate (1979).

The building was also rather unique in that it was a two-story structure with the upper floor most likely being used for lighter carpentry work in support of the slate production. It also appears that the upper floor was at one time used for borough meetings.

d. Is there the potential to discover archaeological information from the site?

Probably not. Before the arrival of European settlers in the eighteenth century, the area along the north side of Trout Creek was the location of native American (Lenni-Lenape) activity and the site of an Indian trail called the “warrior’s path.” This path ran approximately along the present-day course of Factory Street and then along Main Street in the lower part of the borough. With the industrial use of the property, it is doubtful whether any archaeological information can be discovered on the site.

*For historic districts, also include information on the historical development of the district, and examples of how surviving resources in the district illustrate this development. For example, if a district traces its origins to the early eighteenth century but it is important as a commercial center between 1790 and 1930, only briefly mention the district’s origins before 1790 and its history since 1930. Focus primarily on the development of commerce in the district between 1790 and 1930 and how existing resources portray this development. Individual buildings can be mentioned, but the focus should be on the overall district.*

3. Include descriptive and historical information about the area where the property is located to orient the reader to the property’s surroundings and the kind of community or place where it functioned in the past. Again, focus on facts that help explain the property’s role and illustrate its importance

The initial European settlement of the Slatington area dates to the mid-eighteenth century. The earliest land grant of five hundred acres was to Nicholas Kern (d. 1741). That grant encompassed much of what is now Washington township and the lower part of Slatington, including the area around Trout Creek which flows into the Lehigh River about two miles below Lehigh Gap. The Kern family constructed a saw mill and grist mill on Trout Creek to support the family’s farming activities. The upper part of Slatington was settled and farmed by Ambrose Remaley (d. 1837?) and his descendants. In 1851, after purchasing part of the Remaley land, the upper town was laid out by Daniel D. Jones and Robert McDowell. A post office was soon established, and in 1864 the borough of Slatington was incorporated.

Discovery of slate in the area in the 1840s led to the economic development of the Slate Belt region stretching from east of Bangor and the Delaware River to the west of Slatington and into Lynn township (Upper Northampton, Lehigh and Berks counties). Two of the first slate quarries that opened around Slatington were the "Tunnel quarry" (1845), located along the Welshtown Road leading north out of Slatington, and the "New York" or "mantel quarry," (1847), located in the hillside along the southern bank of Trout Creek.

McDowell and Company (1847), working the mantel quarry, formed the basis of the succeeding Lehigh Slate Company, chartered in 1854, re-chartered 1874, as the first slate quarrying and manufacturing company in Pennsylvania. Robert McDowell became the company's treasurer and general superintendent with Daniel Jones, the general agent.

The arrival of the Lehigh Valley Railroad in the town in 1856 provided cheap and reliable transportation for slate products to cities in the mid-Atlantic like Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, Philadelphia and New York. By the end of the Civil War in 1865, the slate industry was on a path of rapid expansion. Slate was needed for roofs (both residential housing and also industrial buildings); slate blackboards were needed in school rooms; and school slates were needed for students. There were other useful slate products like mantels, burial vaults, kitchen counters, and even electrical insulators. As the U.S. economy expanded through the second half of the nineteenth century, slate production also soared.

In 1852, slate production in Slatington was estimated at  
2,500 squares roofing slate (each square equal to one hundred square feet)  
800 cases of school slates

By 1871, slate production, shipped via the Lehigh Valley Railroad, was  
50,642 squares of roofing slate  
10,910 cases of school slates  
2,226 cases of mantels  
217 cases of Blackboards

In 1890, slate production, shipped via the Lehigh Valley Railroad, was  
120,000 squares roofing slate  
35,176 cases of school slates  
19,476 cases of blackboards  
1,461 cases flagging  
11,522 pieces

Relevant slate production statistics for 1900 also included shipments from Walnutport, across the Lehigh River from Slatington:  
205,304 squares roofing slate  
207,716 school slates  
22,706 blackboards

## Statistics from issues of The Slatington News

As the slate industry grew, the population of the borough also increased rapidly. Many of the new residents of the town were immigrants from Wales who came to work in the slate industry.

1860            500 (estimate)

1870            1,508

1910            4,454

See statistics at [www.ctevans.net/Slatington/Statistics.html](http://www.ctevans.net/Slatington/Statistics.html)

The slate business began to decline after World War I. During the war, slate quarrying and manufacturing were deemed non-essential, which led to a cutback in production as fuel was not available. Unemployed slate workers found other jobs, for example, at the New Jersey Zinc Company factory in Palmerton, Pennsylvania or at the Bethlehem Steel plant in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Many workers then never came back to the quarries and slate mills. Alternative roofing products, such as asphalt shingles, appeared that lessened the demand for roofing slate, and paper products cut the demand for school slates. The depression in the 1930s further reduced slate production, which fell further during and after World War II. Currently, circa 2017, only one quarry/manufacturing operation (The Penn Big Bed Slate Company) remains active in the vicinity of Slatington.