Chester County Press

In the Spotlight

Section B

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2022

LIVING HISTORY

by Gene Pisasale

Lenape Forge: A link to our industrial heritage

By Gene Pisasale
Contributing Writer

Forges were used throughout the 13 colonies to produce sturdy tools, beams, rods, plates and many other products. As Pennsylvania was one of the early leaders in iron production and the nation became more industrialized, forges took on more importance in our economy. One local forge which had its origins linked to transportation is running strong after nearly a century of operations and remains a vital contributor to the aerospace and power generation industries, as well as the U.S. military.

Lenape Forged Products Corporation operates on 42 acres situated along the Brandywine River in West Chester. The building containing its main operations first served as the Lenape Powerhouse for the West Chester Street Railway Company. According to Don McKay, the Railway Company constructed the Lenape Power House in 1903 to provide electricity for its trolley line extension between Lenape and Kennett Square. It was strategically located along the Wilmington and Northern Railroad line to allow for delivery of coal which it burned to generate power. The building was subsequently purchased in 1923 by C.B. Fairweather and converted into a producer of steel plates and renamed the West Chester Pressed Steel Products Company. The firm created a variety of products including boiler plate connections, manholes and transformer plates. A later name change to the Lenape Hydraulic Pressing and Forging Company accompanied its venture into supplying wheels to the automobile business.

By 1938, the firm was producing pressed and forged steel accessories for the oil and chemical industries, as well as for pressure tanks and power boilers. Its products were reported to be shipped to every state in America as well as to many Canadian provinces. The company changed hands in 1965 and was renamed Lenape Forge. The complex there today includes 135,000 square feet of production space, two office buildings, a laboratory, a parting, forging and forming department, as well as a heat-treating department, welding, grinding and numerous other operations.

Now known as the Lenape Forged Products Corporation, part of the Aerospace and Specialty Metals Group, the company provides high quality, specialty products created by a team of highly trained metallurgists, engineers and technicians utilizing 2,000- and 5,000-ton hydraulic presses. The website indicates that the main business is the manufacture of custom forgings made to rigorous specifications in a wide variety of materials and configurations.

As you drive by Lenape Forged Products, the red brick building makes you think you're passing a business which had its heyday decades ago, but it remains quite strong—and is growing. Products for the U.S. Navy, missile defense, commercial space launches and ones for the U.S. Army are all created here. In addition, items for the power, tolling, heat-treating and machining industries are produced within the walls.

A closer look reveals that Lenape Forged Products has supplied internationally known aerospace companies with items for space launch rockets and rocket vehicles. The company states that their alloy steel shaped nozzle forgings have been used since the 1980s on the Delta family of rocket motors. They supply North American rocket motor companies with copper, nickel, titanium and carbon alloy components in America's space efforts which are recognized as the top ranked in the entire world.

For the defense industry, Lenape Forged Products is a critical producer of materials for nuclear submarines, surface warships and terrestrial weapons systems. In a nation always needing power, Lenape Forged Products creates custom forged ball valves for nuclear generating stations. This field requires exactness and component reliability which are crucial to the safe and efficient operations of generating stations across America. Other products include openings and passageways for a variety of industrial applications, something it has been doing since 1934. Heat treatment of materials is also done to rigorous customer specifications.

From chemical plants and medical laboratories to missiles and nuclear submarines, Lenape Forge has for years created products which function to demanding specifications under often harsh conditions. A sign hangs on the side of their building which shows the business remains strong: "Lenape Forged Products Corporation—Help Wanted: Apply Within." With so many abandoned manufacturing plants across our nation, it is refreshing to see one nearby that is still thriving. Something else is there which is quite encouraging: "Made in USA." So, as you drive by the plant, with its rustic-looking windows, realize that you're passing a facility which has fueled America's growth and kept our country safe for the last century—and will continue doing so for years to come.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. His ten books focus on the heritage of the Chester County/mid-Atlantic region. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution." Gene's books are available on his website at www.GenePisasale.com and on www.Amazon.com. He can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.

Photo Courtesy Don McKay

A 1907 postcard of West Chester Street Railway with the Lenape Power House in the background.

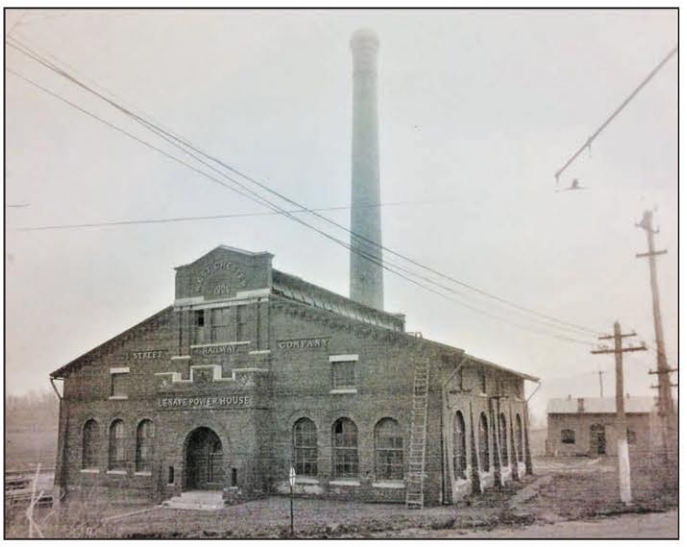
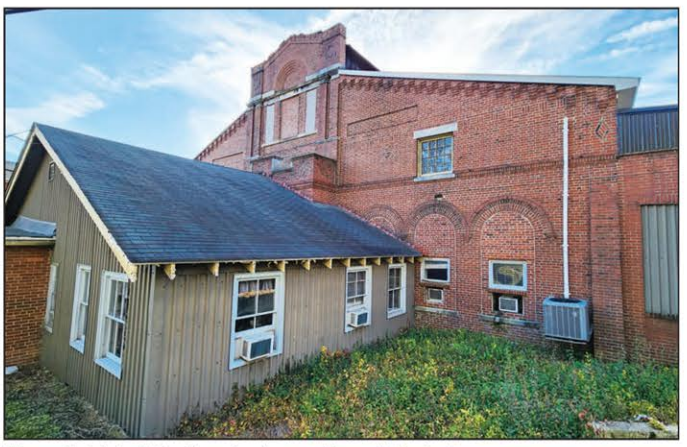


Photo courtesy Chester County Historical Society

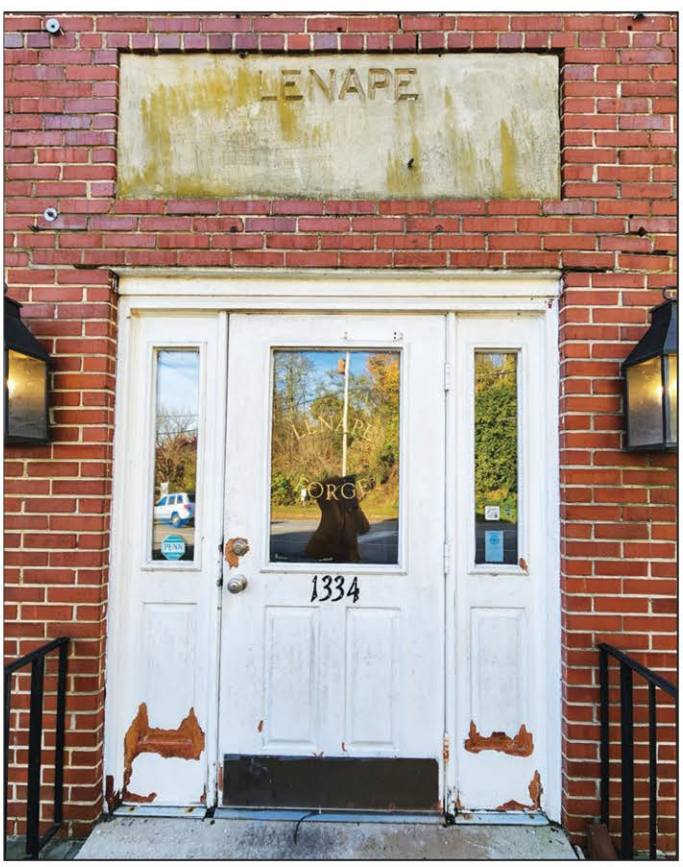
The Lenape Power House.



The red brick building housing Lenape Forged Products.

Photo courtesy Lenape Forged Products

A large slide press with freshly created product.



One of the old doors of entry into Lenape Forge.

A Lenape Forged Products sign touts the Made in USA products.