The discussion of the iron ore resources of Lehigh County may appear to be of little importance because for nearly a quarter of a century past there has been no iron mining and for nearly a decade no iron furnace in operation. In this situation this description must be confined almost entirely to history. However, numerous matters of geologic interest are involved, and, further, there are reasons for believing that the time may come when there will be a revival of the industry inasmuch as other factors than exhaustion of the ore were responsible for the closing of most of the mines. If, and when, that revival occurs it will be useful to have available as complete a record as can now be made.

Although mining and smelting of iron ores have ceased, there are many iron-manufacturing industries in the region, of which a considerable proportion is contingent upon these bygone activities. Their location was largely determined by the existence of workable iron mines nearby. The decline of iron-ore mining not only in this county but also throughout the State and adjoining States is one of the best examples of the rise and decay of important industries and the inter-relationship of varied economic factors.

The earliest record of iron ore in the United States concerns a shipment from Jamestown, Virginia to England in 1608. The earliest known Pennsylvania record of iron from local ores was in 1692. Before the Revolution iron mines, forges, and furnaces were in operation in some of the counties adjacent to Philadelphia, but not until 1809 do we have record of any in the region now Lehigh County. During the next hundred years, iron mines and furnaces were widespread within the county. The greatest activity seems to have been from the close of the Civil War to about 1885. A gradual decline took place in the latter part of the last century and the first part of this century. The furnaces were built for the purpose of smelting local ores but they survived by a few years the last operation of the mines. Magnetite ores from northern New Jersey and finally hematite ores from the Lake Superior district gradually, and eventually, entirely, replaced the local ores.

Only as one drives through the county and observes the numerous old mine holes and mine dumps can he realize the extent and distribution of former iron mines. Altogether 258 old limonite iron-ore mines have been located on the accompanying map. Magnetite and hematite mines also were opened in a dozen or more localities.

In the census of 1880 Pennsylvania led all the States in the production of iron ores, and Lehigh County led all the counties of the State. In that year the county produced 359,302 tons of limonite ores and 70,398 tons of magnetite.

History

Inasmuch as furnaces had to be erected before it became economical to work the ore mines, the first consideration is given to their history. Two conditions were important in their location, the proximity of ore mines and of timber for making charcoal. All the earliest furnaces used charcoal. In 1840, however, at the Catasauqua furnace of the