Lehigh County has the distinction of being the only county in the United States where school slates are now being manufactured. The first school slate factory in the United States was started by James and Roberts in 1847 on Factory Street in Slatington. Other sections produced them for some years but the disuse of individual school slates in the public schools has caused the contraction of the industry to its present condition. Certain beds in the Slatington-Slatedale district furnish the most desirable material. Two companies, the National School Slate Co. and the American Slate Works, are active. The former obtains part of its slate from its own quarry, the Blue Ridge Quarries, but also purchases from some of the other quarries of the region. The latter company does not operate any quarry but buys from different concerns that obtain material of the necessary quality. In every case the soft black variety desired constitutes only a small part of the quarry product. The qualities that fit it for school slates render it unfit for roofing purposes in that the conspicuously black color is not permanent but fades on exposure to sun and rain.

Toy blackboards and bulletin boards are made from the same kind of slate. The toy blackboards are mainly marketed by the chain stores. School slates are nearly all exported. They go to the Central and South American countries, to the Netherlands East Indies, and South Africa. Italy and Germany in previous years supplied a considerable part of the demand but since the outbreak of the European War in 1939, Lehigh County has had little competition in the school slate industry of the world. The production in 1940 of 1,604,272 pieces considerably exceeded that of 1939, and the 1941 production is expected to show further gains. The two companies market a variety of products in various sizes and frames. One common slate has one side lacquered in white for the use of colored crayons.

School slates are made from beds darker than the usual light-gray slate, but not as dark as the "ribbon" or highly carbonaceous layers. The slate is split, like roofing slate, and then trimmed with a rapidly rotating saw shaped like a square with a triangular prolongation at each corner. The sizes of school slates vary from 4 x 6 inches to 9 1/4 x 14 inches. "Toy blackboards" measure 18 x 20 inches.

Each piece of slate is first sent through a beveler; this bears a carriage by which the slate is propelled over knives which have their blades inclined in such a way that one edge of the slate is beveled in transit.

When the piece has been beveled on all edges, it is forced between two knives placed with their blades only far enough apart to permit the passage of the desired thickness of slate (1/6, 1/7, and 1/8 inch, according to the grade specified). This machine is called the shaver.

For the final surfacing, the beveled and shaved slate may be passed between two paper covered cylinders which rotate rapidly in opposite directions; this machine acts as a buffer.

Some slates are ruled, especially if destined for use in Continental Europe. The grooves of the rulings are colored with red lead. The last step before framing is a thorough washing.

School slates destined for domestic use are framed here as well, and a bit of colored goods is applied to the outside of the frame. Foreign slates are set in wire-bound frames. The finished slate is carefully packed in boxes.

In recent years two school slate factories have operated between Slatington and Slatedale. (Behre, 1933.)