The history of the earliest development of the iron industry in eastern Pennsylvania is somewhat obscure. All records seem to indicate that the first iron ores used were the magnetite ores of Durham, Bucks County, about two miles south of the Northampton County line. These deposits seem to have been guarded by the Indians as early as 1698, which probably means that the early Dutch and Swedish traders had recognized their value. A tract of 5,000 acres containing the Durham iron deposits was part of William Penn’s purchase from the Indians and was surveyed by Jacob Taylor in 1701. There was a settlement on this tract as early as 1723, and it may be inferred that the deposits were operated at that date, although the first definite information obtainable is that a furnace was erected at Durham in 1727 and put in blast in the spring of 1728. With iron furnaces in operation so near the borders of Northampton County, it is probable that some magnetite may have been mined in the nearby hills of this county where ore of the same kind occurs in small quantities.

A bloomery is said to have been built near Jacobsburg, a few miles north of Nazareth, in 1803 and another one in 1809. Both of them used local limonite ores, probably from mines in the vicinity of Nazareth. In 1824-25, Mather S. Henry erected a blast furnace north of Nazareth, which was put into operation in May 1825. He states that “the principal part of the ore used was the columnar or pipe species of hematite ore of Lower Mount Bethel Township, as also the brown hematite from Williams and Hanover townships in Northampton, and Whitehall in Lehigh counties.” This is the first definite information regarding the use of the iron ores of the county.

Between 1830 and 1840 many limonite ore mines were worked along the south side of Lehigh River between Easton and Bethlehem. The condition of the industry in the summer of 1840 is thus described: ¹⁸

About three miles westward from South Easton, a mine has been opened, at Jacob Woodring’s, in a hollow between two spurs of the primary chain. It was not wrought at the time of our examination. The shaft here is said to be 90 feet deep, passing through clay and clay for 55 feet, before any ore was found. The ore is moderately rich, but contains some manganese. The limestone shows itself on the surface, about 500 yards north of the ore. Westward of these localities, surface signs of ore are abundant, as at Isie’s and Brotzman’s, half a mile north of the Lehigh. At Brotzman’s, where some manganese is associated with the ore, the diggings were made probably too high in the side of the hill, being apparently outside of the edge of the limestone. The ore here is rough and sandy, and contains compact black oxide of manganese in some abundance. A little hill, further west, on the same farm, lying within the limestone, shows a much better ore on the surface. On Richards’ farm, in the same range as Brotzman’s, but farther west, surface ore is quite abundant, some of it being fibrous hematite. The next farm westward, presents the same indications.