

Back at Centre Foundry, Cast iron was refined around the clock from “buttons” and scrap steel from blast furnaces all over the Ohio Valley and Pittsburgh. Hoisted by cranes outfitted with huge electromagnets, this iron was dropped into the vertical channels of the furnaces, a process known as “charging.” Alloys were added to adjust the chemistry and a method called “pushing” was used to break the crust on top of the molten iron to release impurities. “We had [electro] magnets there that picked up anywhere from 10,000 pounds [of scrap] to 65,000.” Frank said.

The liquid iron was poured into a ladle or “tipped.” The ladle was ten feet in circumference, holding up to 50,000 pounds of molten iron. Impurities were again skimmed off using a wooden hoe. The molten iron was poured into a runner cup, which was lined with 4-inch ceramic tile that ran down inside the flask creating a void so the iron could be poured to the bottom, into a mold with risers to allow air to escape. After cooling, with the sand, risers, and drag removed the casting was then cleaned by a “chipper,” whose job it was to remove sand and various coatings from the casting. In the old days, hand tools such as a hammer and a chisel were used. In modern times a pneumatic hammer, chisel, or grinding wheel.

In 1979, with the Wadsworth subsidiary already closed, Dyson-Kissner-Moran Corporation bought out Centre Foundry and its remaining subsidiary, Washington Mould, ending the Young family’s 98-year ownership.

**The Steelworker**



In 1989, Centre Foundry had the honor of casting a tribute to the metal workers of the Ohio Valley. Created by artist Dimitrios Akis, the “Ohio Valley Steelworker Statue” depicts a ladelman wearing silvers. it stands

near the Steubenville Public Library.

In the 1990s. Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel upgraded to continuous casters, meaning they no longer needed Centre Foundry, which was left with only smaller, specialty steel companies as customers.

Frank told us about an additional function of Center Foundry: its molten iron was used by law enforcement agencies to dispose of drugs, weapons, and other contraband when a case was concluded. The FBI even used it to dispose of files from the infamous Paul Hankish prosecutions.

**Centre Foundry and the United Steelworkers**

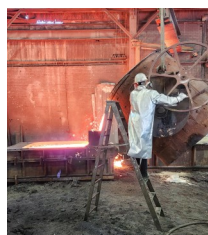
On September 24, 1952, Centre Foundry employees, after 112 years without a union to represent their interests, voted to join the United Steelworkers of America.

Local 4842 was born. When the company ceased operations in 2023, 37 union employees lost their jobs.

**The End of the Iron Age**

Trends with steel and specialty steel had been spiraling downward in recent years. “[Our customers were] all steel companies.” Frank explained...And of course...once the steel companies started to go out of business, you had major companies like US Steel and Standard Steel. Republic went out. We used to make molds for Shenango. They’re gone. They’re all gone.”

But the sudden end of Centre Foundry took employees by surprise. Many felt blindsided. On August 31, 2023, just one day after signing a contract extension with the union employees, the company announced that Centre Foundry and Machine “would be ceasing operations” because the company had been sold. The painful process of emptying the foundry of its iron, patterns, and tools began.



**The Last Pour.**  
Watch video of The Last Job Ever Poured at Centre Foundry. 09-01-2023. Courtesy Frank VanSickle.



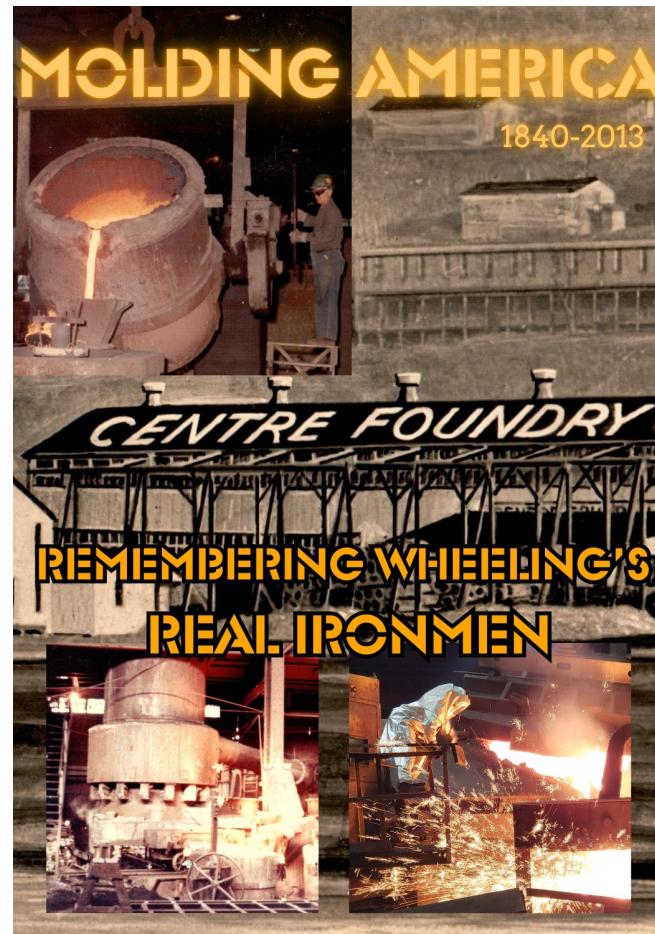
Asked for his parting thoughts, Frank said: "I'm gonna miss the place. It's heart-wrenching to know that it's not a foundry anymore. All the patterns are gone, all the scrap is gone, the employees have moved on..." That's the one thing about that place. Everybody had to work together, and they did, and you know, if someone was down and out, we'd all chip in to help. That's the part I'm gonna miss...I do miss it. That's it."

Special thanks to Jim Yuncke (former Controller at Centre Foundry), Tom Hoffman, Jr., MarySue Szymialis, Frank VanSickle, Laura Carroll, Ellery McGregor, Johnathon Porter, Dillon Richardson, and Sandra Caldwell (McClellan Signs).

**Sources:** Centre Foundry Collection, OCPL Archives.; Doman, D. "Centre Foundry & Machine Co., Wheeling, West Virginia, 1840-2001." Compiled 2001; OCPL Archives interviews with Frank VanSickle, July 24, 2024 and July 31, 2024. "Ohio Valley Made: 165 Years of Centre Foundry." *Valley Magazine*. Nov. 2005, pp 16-18; *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer and Wheeling Intelligencer*, Aug. 8, 1853; September 7, 2023; *Wheeling Register and Wheeling News-Register*, April 5, 1928; Aug. 14, 1972; Sept. 24, 1972; July 8, 1973; Sept. 10, 2023.



Read the full story on [ArchivingWheeling.org](http://ArchivingWheeling.org)



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## Molding America: Saying Goodbye to Wheeling's Real Ironmen~by Seán P. Duffy

— Kids who grew up in Warwood remember passing a place called Centre Foundry & Machine Company thousands of times without really knowing what went on behind its sun-bleached corrugated metal walls. Turns

Centre Foundry as it looked in 1955.

out this remarkable little plant had been doing business in Wheeling for nearly two centuries by 2023, when that business was unceremoniously ended.

The foundry was born in 1840 when Martin Van Buren was president and Rebecca Harding, who would later expose the harshness of life for workers in the iron mills as a groundbreaking writer, was a nine-year-old child living in Centre Wheeling near the location of the foundry where some of the men she later wrote about who would “skulk along like beaten hounds” likely walked to work. There was as yet no wire bridge suspended over the Ohio River and Wheeling would remain a Virginia city for another quarter century.

Over time, even as its men forged monstrously heavy iron castings and ingots, Centre Foundry crafted cannon balls for Union troops, machine parts for La Belle Nail, castings for the Suspension Bridge, decorative iron trim for the restoration of WV Independence Hall, and a life-sized monument to steelworkers.

Wheeling made quite a list of “things,” such as glass, tile, and stogies. But what should be listed first is what Centre Foundry did best—they made iron. Those laborers were, with all due respect to the beloved semi-pro football club, Wheeling’s REAL Ironmen.

### The Iron Archive

Sadly, in Sept. 2023, operations at this time-tested foundry came to a screeching halt. And in May 2024, the Ohio County Public Library’s Archives team and the video team from Wheeling Heritage had the privilege of a tour of what was left of Centre Foundry with guide Frank VanSickle. Scan to see Wheeling Heritage’s video of our tour.



Centre Foundry’s last owners then donated numerous artifacts that are now part of the Library’s archival collections and our new exhibit, alongside artifacts from OVGH/OVMC under the banner: “A Fond Farewell to Two Wheeling stalwarts.”

Stalwarts indeed. But why did Centre Foundry -- one of our city’s most durable businesses -- close?

### Baggs Foundry

It all started in 1840, when James and H. Andrew Baggs erected a foundry on the corner of John and Fourth Streets (now 16th and Chapline). Baggs Foundry and its 10 employees produced small iron castings using sand molds to make things like iron stoves and boiler grates.

In 1855, the company was purchased by Alexander and Charles Cecil, who moved it to what is now 2011 Main S. in Centre Wheeling. After the Civil War, with J.R. McCourtney and Edwin Hobbs running things, cast iron and heavy machinery was manufactured for rolling and nail mills as well as parts for steamboats.

To make “gray iron castings,” Centre Foundry used wood patterns packed into an iron box known as a “drag” and filled with special hardening silica “green sand” and clay. When the pattern was removed, a void remained that was then fired and hardened. A cupola furnace was used to melt iron to make large castings as well as cast iron house fronts and gates. By 1881, an English immigrant pattern-maker named John Young had acquired a controlling interest in the company. Though Young died in 1892, the Young family would own the company until 1979, when Dyson-Kissner-Moran Corporation took over.

During the late 19th-century, Centre Foundry continued making nail machines, castings, rolls, and nail plate shear, shifting to molds and castings of 500 pounds and heavier after the turn of the century. Ads of the period boasted “cast-iron house fronts,” “ornamental fencing,” “window lintels and sills,” “ore pulverizers,” “gearing, pulleys, and all kinds of machinery castings.”



1928 work crew.

In 1923, the foundry moved from Main St. to its 11-acre site in South Warwood, retaining the name “Centre.” By 1927, the company employed 85 men and made 20 tons of castings per year. During this time, they made repair parts to the specifications of purchasers all over the United States. By 1928, employment had increased to 100 and by 1938, the company employed 150 people making 800 train car loads of cast iron pots, stamping and drawing dies, and machinery castings per year.

**The CWW Group**  
In 1964, Centre Foundry acquired Washington Mould, Machine, and Foundry of Washington, PA, and in 1967 Wadsworth Foundry of Wadsworth, OH. This



expansion significantly diversified the product portfolio for Centre Foundry to include ingot molds, massive grey iron castings of up to 70 tons, slag pots, and blast furnace runners. Yet by 1979, both subsidiaries were closed, largely because they could not competitively meet new environmental standards.

At the Warwood location, Centre Foundry long produced ingot molds and castings, primarily for the steel industry. “Ingot molds were used by the steel companies.” Frank explained. “They could pour their alloys [and] steel into it...The iron molds...would dissipate the heat of the steel, and could be re-used over and over...and that was the reason why we were so good at what we did.”

“The Specialty Steel companies... could take their product and roll it into different sizes to make railcar wheels or...surgical instruments, or space shuttle parts, airplane parts, appliances, etc.”

Even through the 1960s, the melting facilities consisted of old-style cupolas. Cast iron was produced using coke and limestone to melt pig iron at 2,300 degrees. This was not a clean process, producing huge amounts of air pollution. But a cleaner method existed.

### Cleaner Air - Replacing the Cupolas

In 1973, two modern, clean-burning, electric Ajax Channel Induction furnaces with a total capacity of 55 tons, were installed on more than 2 million pounds of concrete. They were supplied with electricity from power stations located north and south of the plant. This eliminated cupola use and helped the foundry to meet Clean Air Act standards. The original 69,000-volt transformer is still there.

**Note:** An effort is underway to save one of the cupolas to preserve it as a monument to our industrial heritage, much like the Clinton blast furnace at Station Square in Pittsburgh. For more information, scan the code at right.



By 1973, Centre Foundry workers had spent two years experimenting with architect Ammi B. Young’s original plans to reproduce cast iron trim on exterior steel doors for the rebirth of Wheeling’s Custom House as WV Independence Hall. Although the trim could not be reproduced in the same way it was originally created in Italy, with skilled craftsmen creating patterns in wood (the modern version used plastic), the end result was remarkably accurate. After the iron trim was installed on the steel, the entire door was painted to resemble wood grain, as was done originally.