

The Furnace That Fueled a Revolution: A Trip to Cornwall Iron Furnace



Welcome back to **Lebanon County Legends & Landmarks**! Last time, we explored the fascinating history of the Lebanon Farmers Market. Today, we're heading a few miles west to Cornwall, where you'll find one of the most impressive historic sites in Pennsylvania: and one that literally helped win American independence!

If you've ever driven through Cornwall and spotted that incredible red-trimmed building with Gothic windows that looks **NOTHING** like a typical factory, you've seen the **Cornwall Iron Furnace**. But here's what most people don't realize: this wasn't just any industrial site. This was the furnace that forged cannons for George Washington's Continental Army! Let's dive into the wild history of this 280-year-old landmark and talk about what it takes to preserve an industrial giant like this.

Peter Grubb's 1742 Game-Changer

In **1742**, a guy named **Peter Grubb** looked at the Cornwall hills and saw opportunity. The area had everything an iron-maker could dream of: magnetite ore deposits, endless forests for charcoal production, limestone, and running water from nearby creeks. So he built what would become one of Pennsylvania's most important iron furnaces: and it operated for an INCREDIBLE 141 years until 1883!

Here's the crazy part: this furnace ran **24 hours a day, 7 days a week** during its peak operation. We're talking about producing 20-24 tons of iron **EVERY SINGLE WEEK** using nothing but charcoal, waterwheel power, and sheer determination. That's the kind of work ethic we respect at J.W.Wolfe Painting, LLC!

The Revolutionary Connection That Changed Everything

When the American Revolution broke out, Cornwall Iron Furnace became a military asset of MASSIVE importance. Peter Grubb's sons, **Curtis and Peter Jr.**, took over operations and became major arms suppliers to **George Washington himself!**

Think about it: Britain had cut off the colonies from their iron supply, so WHERE were patriots supposed to get cannons, musket balls, and tools? Right here in Lebanon County! The Cornwall furnace produced the iron that helped WIN American independence. Every time you visit this site, you're standing where history was literally FORGED!



Gothic Revival Meets Industrial Might: A Stunning Architectural Surprise

Now here's where Cornwall Iron Furnace gets REALLY interesting from a preservation standpoint. When the **Coleman family** (who bought the furnace after the Revolution and became Pennsylvania's first millionaires!) rebuilt and modernized the site between 1856-57, they didn't just slap up a boring industrial shed.

They went FULL Gothic Revival! We're talking pointed arches, decorative trim, and those stunning red-painted window frames that make the building look more like a castle than a furnace. It's the ONLY charcoal-burning iron blast furnace still intact in the Western Hemisphere, and it's absolutely gorgeous!

The Gothic Revival style was an unusual choice for an industrial site, but it worked. Those intricate wooden window frames aren't just beautiful: they're architectural marvels that require SERIOUS maintenance expertise to preserve.



Inside the Beast: A 32-Foot Engineering Marvel

Step inside the furnace building, and you'll see the massive **32-foot stone stack** where molten iron flowed like a river of fire. The furnace was fed from the top with layers of iron ore, limestone, and charcoal, while massive bellows (later replaced with steam-powered blowing tubs) forced air in to create temperatures hot enough to melt rock!

The scale is BREATHTAKING. And it presents unique challenges for anyone working on historic restoration at this site.

The Technical Challenge: Preserving Industrial-Scale History

So how do you maintain a 280-year-old industrial complex? As **industrial painting contractors** who've worked on everything from residential homes to atomic power stations, we can tell you: it takes specialized knowledge, A+ quality materials, and the right relationships with preservation experts!

Here's what makes industrial historic sites like Cornwall Iron Furnace so challenging:

1. Specialty Coatings for Extreme Conditions

Historic industrial sites weren't built with modern weatherproofing! The stone, brick, and metalwork at Cornwall Iron Furnace face constant exposure to Pennsylvania's freeze-thaw cycles, humidity, and temperature swings. That means we need breathable, protective **specialty coatings** that:

- Repel water while letting moisture escape from inside
- Protect against UV damage and oxidation
- Maintain historical authenticity (you can't just slap modern paint on a Revolutionary War-era building!)
- Stand up to industrial-scale wear

2. The Window Frame Restoration Challenge

Those beautiful Gothic Revival window frames? They're made of WOOD, and they've been exposed to the elements for over 160 years! Recent restoration work at the site has focused on carefully preserving these intricate frames, and it's NO small task.



Wood restoration on historic buildings requires:

- Careful removal of old, failing paint without damaging original wood
- Repairs using period-appropriate materials and techniques
- Multi-coat systems that protect while maintaining breathability
- Attention to historic color accuracy (that signature red trim isn't random!)

At J.W.Wolfe Painting, LLC, we LOVE these kinds of challenges. We've built relationships with preservation specialists throughout Lebanon County, and we understand that historic restoration isn't just painting: it's preserving our shared heritage!

3. Scale Matters: Industrial-Sized Projects Need Industrial-Sized Expertise

A residential home painting project might involve a few hundred square feet of surface area. Cornwall Iron Furnace? We're talking THOUSANDS of square feet across multiple buildings, plus that massive stone stack interior!

This is where our experience with large-scale projects (including work at atomic power stations) really shines. We know how to:

- Coordinate multi-phase projects that minimize disruption
- Work efficiently at height and in challenging access areas
- Deliver A+ quality on EVERY surface, not just the easy ones
- Finish ahead of schedule without cutting corners

Why Cornwall Iron Furnace Matters to US

We're not just **painters in Lebanon, PA**: we're preservationists. Every time we work on a historic site like Cornwall Iron Furnace, we're protecting a piece of American history for future generations!



The furnace represents everything we value: craftsmanship, durability, and the importance of doing things RIGHT. Those 18th-century ironworkers didn't cut corners, and neither do we. They built something that lasted nearly 150 years of continuous operation. We approach every project: whether it's a Victorian home in Annville or an industrial site in Cornwall: with that same commitment to excellence.

Planning Your Visit (And Your Next Project!)

Cornwall Iron Furnace is open for tours as a National Historic Landmark and museum. If you haven't visited yet, GO! Walk through the building where Revolutionary cannons were cast. See that incredible Gothic Revival architecture up close. Stand inside the massive furnace stack and imagine the roar of fire and the glow of molten iron.

And if your visit inspires you to think about the historic preservation needs of YOUR Lebanon County property: whether it's a 19th-century farmhouse in Myerstown, a downtown commercial building in Lebanon, or anything in between: we'd love to talk!

At **J.W.Wolfe Painting, LLC**, we bring the same care and expertise to EVERY project, from residential repaints to industrial-scale restoration work. We're locals who understand Lebanon County history, and we're committed to preserving it one building at a time.

Ready to give your property the A+ treatment it deserves? [Reach out to us today](#) and let's talk about how we can help preserve YOUR piece of Lebanon County history!

Stay tuned for the next installment of "Lebanon County Legends & Landmarks" where we'll explore another fascinating piece of our local heritage! Have a landmark you'd love to see featured? Let us know!