

Encyclopedia Of Detroit

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Eureka Iron Works

An influential entity in American iron and steel production, the Eureka Iron Works operated for nearly 40 years. In 1853, Philip Thurber spent a summer vacationing in Michigan's Upper Peninsula near Marquette. He was enthralled by the recent discovery of iron ore deposits in Northern Michigan. After testing a sample of the ore, Thurber returned to Detroit and reported the superior quality to a few potential capitalists. Among these men was Captain Eber Brock Ward, who would function as financial and organizational backbone of this venture. On October 15, 1853 the Eureka Iron Company was officially organized.

The next year, following an inspection of potential locations for the Eureka Iron Works, a decision was made to pay \$44,000 for a 2,200-acre plot known as "the Wyandotte," the summer estate of Major John Biddle. On Dec. 12, 1854 the village of Wyandotte was established, part of present-day Wyandotte, Michigan. With two miles on the waterfront, the location allowed for direct access to the Detroit River and was in close proximity to other natural resources including timber and limestone. Ward signed a contract with Captain William Bolton to transport the stone needed to construct the Eureka Iron Factory, consisting of two furnaces. The Wyandotte Rolling Mill Company was established in 1855 to make use of the iron produced by Eureka's furnaces, the stockholders for the two companies being chiefly the same.

In 1864, using a process developed by American William Kelly and named for Sir Henry Bessemer, the Eureka Iron Company produced the first steel ingots, marking the first time steel was commercially produced in America. By using Kelly's converter, Ward was able to remove the impurities from iron to produce steel. On May 25, 1865, the company produced the first Bessemer steel rails. With the implementation of this new technology, the Eureka Iron Works laid the foundation for the steel industry in the United States and modern America.

The Eureka Iron and Steel Company continued to flourish throughout the 1860s. However, during the 1870s the company began its decline, for several reasons. First, Eureka Iron Works was not designed for steel production. Instead of changing the factory's production methods, Eber Ward decided to shift steel production to Chicago. Secondly, the company's consumption of over 50,000 cords of wood per year resulted in a timber shortage, requiring the company to ship charcoal from greater distances at higher cost. Third, the iron market declined due to an increased demand for steel. The death knell occurred on June 1, 1888 when a boiler explosion rocked the foundation of the Eureka Iron and Steel Company. The company officially halted production in 1892 and the Eureka Iron Works dismantled.

