



History – Tour Two Centuries of Bellefonte

Bellefonte's past is abundantly evident in its present – visitors cannot escape the signs of the more than 200 fascinating years that have shaped the town.

Recorded history says William Lamb built Bellefonte's first house in 1785. Known today as the Thomas Homestead (after later owner William Thomas), the home still stands in the Lamb's Crossing area, one of the stops on the historical walking tour map available at the Train Station. Col. James Dunlop purchased the Lamb properties in 1794 and collaborated with son-in-law James Harris to lay out a plan for the streets of the town.

Local lore credits exiled French statesman Charles Maurice de Talleyrand with inspiring a name for the town when he first saw the Big Spring and exclaimed, "La belle fonte!" Now the second-largest spring in the Commonwealth, the Big Spring produces 18 million gallons of water a day, providing water for Bellefonte and other users as well as for bottling by C.C.D.A Waters of North America.

Spring Creek, now popular for kayaking and fly-fishing, once figured in the famed competition for the seat of Centre County. Bellefonte won over Milesburg by hauling a flatboat up the creek during high water and claiming to be the "final port," thus worthy of the designation and eligible for the erection of a courthouse.

Recently restored, the current courthouse was built in 1854 but features a pillared classical portico dating to 1835. Stately Victorian buildings known as Attorney's Row line the street along one side of the courthouse and face the famed Garman Opera House across the street.

Numerous iron furnaces that sprung up with the discovery of iron ore gave Bellefonte an industrial base that mushroomed the town's prominence, making it the most affluent community between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh during the first half of the 19th century. Its prosperous citizens invested in the architecture visible throughout the town today, from the Gothic revival Brockhoff Hotel to the 1810 Georgian Linn Home to the 1889 eclectic mix of the Crider Exchange Building. Significant architecture abounds throughout the commercial downtown and in an eight-block area of Victorian mansions in the National Register Historic District.

Visitors can tour the reconstructed Curtin Village & Eagle Ironworks community nearby and explore local history at the Bellefonte Museum for Centre County and at the Centre County Library & Historical Museum. The latter is in an 1815 stone house built by Samuel Miles; the former is across the street in the 1810 half-Georgian built by Gen. Phillip Benner. To see highlights of the impressive achievements of the Bellefonte woman, who in 1920 became Pennsylvania's first female architect, guests can visit The Anna Keichline Exhibit in the Brockhoff House.

Newest to Bellefonte's historic rehabilitations is the 1899 Match Factory complex, now the American Philatelic Society's headquarters, showcasing rare stamps and serving as a reminder of the local lumber industry that fed the factory. Bellefonte has been designated a gateway to northern Pennsylvania's Lumber Heritage Region.