Quincy Smelter Transcripts

Of the many historically significant copper mining sites found throughout the Keweenaw Peninsula, the Quincy Smelter in Hancock, Michigan is one of the most complete. Built in 1898, the Quincy Smelter Complex is the best example of a 19th century copper smelting operation left in the U.S., and possibly the world, featuring 17 buildings.

During its hey-day, the smelter was a hub of both human activity and mechanical processes, and remains a testament to the industrial technology of its day. The work done at the smelter, called smelting, was the final stage of a larger process of purification to transform ore into copper usable for industrial purposes.

Before arriving at the smelter, copper ore was brought to the surface from mines deep underground. The ore was then sorted and crushed in the shaft rock house. After being loaded into rail cars, the crushed rock was sent to a stamp mill, where giant stamps pulverized it, helping separate the copper from the remaining waste rock.

The resulting copper concentrate was brought to the Quincy Smelter and heated in giant furnaces. As the copper concentrate heated up, the remaining non-copper material, known as slag, separated from the copper and rose to the top. The slag was skimmed off the surface and dumped near the smelter, where it hardened into glassy piles. Testing the purity and conductivity of the copper in the furnace as it melted was a critical step before the molten copper was cast into its final form. Keweenaw copper was cast into ingots, or cakes, depending on its intended use. Strategically located on the Hancock waterfront, the smelter allowed for immediate and convenient shipping to ports like Detroit, Chicago, and Buffalo. Keweenaw copper was used nationwide in many products; including electrical wiring. It helped to illuminate growing cities, like Chicago and New York, at the dawn of the 20th century. Quincy Smelter not only preserves this important industrial process, but it also helps illustrate the roll that the Keweenaw's copper industry played in a rapidly industrializing America. As a result, the smelter is a key component of the Quincy Mining company National Historical landmark district. Despite years of neglect, much of the Quincy Smelter Complex still remains, and due to the smelter’s national significance, there is a strong interest in saving this site for public use and education. To that end, the Keweenaw National Historical Park Advisory Commission, Franklin Township, The National Park Service, and its partners are actively taking measures to preserve this site.