

Kirwan Heights Industrial District explored

[John F. Oyler](#) | Thursday, Nov. 1, 2018, 1:33 a.m.

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I recently gave a presentation to the Collier Township Historical Society on the industrial complex between Kirwan Heights and the Pennsylvania Railroad that thrived from the early 1900s through World War II.

C. P. (Casper Peter) Mayer was a remarkable gentleman, a charismatic entrepreneur long before either term became popular. Around the turn of the century he purchased a large block of land in southern Collier Township.

He quickly recognized its value and began to plan for its development. The first tenant was a new company, the Mayer Brick Company, which he organized in 1903 to take advantage of a valuable deposit of shale on the hillside.

The brick company was immediately successful, capable of producing 20,000 paving blocks or 30,000 face bricks each day of operation. The pavers, stamped with the company's name, are a familiar artifact everywhere bricks are collected. The brick yard operated well into the 1950s, producing millions of bricks.

The next firm to locate in the complex was the Flannery Bolt Company, incorporated by James and Joseph Flannery in 1904 to produce staybolts for steam locomotive boilers. Their unique design immediately took over this large market and ensured success of the company.

Joseph Flannery recognized the value of vanadium as an alloying agent for producing the staybolt steel and decided to go into the vanadium business. In 1906 he and his brother incorporated the American Vanadium Company and began construction of a plant adjacent to the Flannery Bolt facility. When the company was sold to the American Vanadium Corporation in 1919, it was the largest vanadium producer in the world.

The J. B. Higbee Glass Company was Mayer's next tenant. Orlando (Ollie) Higbee was able to purchase the proprietary assets of the bankrupt Bryce, Higbee Glass Company, primarily patterns, and build a new facility in Kirwan Heights.

The new company quickly became a major supplier of affordable pressed glass tableware and specialties. They typically introduced a new pattern each year and manufactured several dozen different items in it.

In 1919 Ollie Higbee died and the plant was sold to General Electric. They converted it to a facility that manufactured lighting fixtures – light bulbs, fluorescent tubes, etc. The "Glass House" operated profitably until 2017 when it finally was shut down.

The Universal Rolling Mill Company was incorporated in 1908. They purchased used equipment from the Waynesburg Forge, Sheet, and Tin Mills, where Walter Baker had been superintendent. He became superintendent of the new mill when it was constructed in the Kirwan Heights complex. They went into production in 1909.

By 1918 they were successfully producing specialty steels; that year they changed their name to the Universal Steel Company. In 1936 they merged with Cyclops Corporation, of Titusville, Pa., to form the Universal-Cyclops Corporation. In 1992 it was acquired briefly by ARMCO, who then sold it to an employee group who renamed it Universal Stainless and Alloy, Inc.

From 1910 into the 1950s the Kirwan Heights complex was an impressive collection of highly productive industries, providing employment for several thousand local residents. During World War II Flannery Bolt achieved national attention by earning one of the first Army-Navy "E" Awards, in recognition of their production of machine gun barrels.

John F. Oylar is a contributing writer. You can reach him at 412-343-1652 or joyler@icloud.com. Read more from him at mywutb.blogspot.com