

In 1836, Elias Baker and his family moved from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to settle in what is now Altoona. Elias came here to buy the Alleghany Furnace. Imagine loading all of your furniture into horse-drawn wagons and travelling almost 150 miles to a new home. Elias, his wife Hetty, and their sons Woods and Sylvester, settled into a simple house. Anna was born soon after and three years later, another girl, Margaretta, was born, but she died at the age of two.

What kind of work did Elias Baker do at the furnace? As the “Ironmaster,” he ran the entire business. His furnace heated iron ore until it melted away all of the impurities. Then, the pure iron was sold to make everything from cooking kettles to wagon wheels.

More than 50 men worked at the furnace, which provided a variety of skills. Some of the workers dug the iron ore out of the ground, while others made wood into the charcoal which was needed to fuel the furnace. Others quarried and crushed the limestone that was placed in the furnace in order to draw out the impurities from the ore. Some men poured these materials into the top of the furnace and prepared the purified iron for purchasing. Elias Baker’s employees lived in log cabins, which were built by Elias, and located near the furnace.

Mr. Baker made a great deal of money from selling iron, and in 1845, he decided to build a large, fancy house. His mansion took four years to build and it cost \$15,000. It was built in the Greek Revival style, which reflected the look of an ancient Greek temple. Since iron was his business, Mr. Baker used iron to make many of the outside decorations. The bases, the tops of the columns, and the designs above the windows were all made of iron. Then the iron was painted to take on the appearance of stone.

Inside, the mansion had marble fireplaces and decorative plaster work on the ceilings. It had the latest devices, such as a central heating system, speaking tubes to talk between the different floors, and a dumb waiter to carry food from the basement kitchen to the upstairs. But, even with these advancements, there were many things that were different from a modern house. There was no electricity, running water, telephone, television, nor a refrigerator. Imagine all of the work that the servants had to do by hand, such as cooking the food, washing the clothes, and keeping the house clean.

Elias’ son Woods moved to Philadelphia when he grew up. He married Sarah Tuthill and they had a daughter, Louisa. Woods was killed in a steamboat accident when he was 28, but Sarah and Louisa continued to spend their summers with the Bakers at Baker Mansion.

Elias Baker died in 1864, and his other son, Sylvester went on running the furnace for the next 20 years. Sylvester, his sister Anna, and their mother, continued living in the mansion until Hetty, nearly 97 years old, died in 1900. Sylvester died in 1907 and Anna continued to live alone in the house. After Anna died in 1914, the mansion was closed.

In 1922, the Blair County Historical Society opened Baker Mansion as a museum. Besides showcasing some of the rooms in the mansion, the museum also displays many items that provide a window into the past. Visitors can experience the way people worked, played, traveled, and lived over 100 years ago.