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Mural on the corner of Bridge St. & Main St. in Phoenixville. Photo by David Christman

PHOENIXVILLE . . . *Back to Life*

Cooky McClung

Spanning four centuries, they've spelled marauding tribes of Lenni-Lenape, blocked British soldiers from advancing west during the American Revolution, activated the Civil War's largest volunteer militia and thwarted a gelatinous alien from engulfing their entire city.

No surprise the same iron-clad resolve energizes Phoenixville's 21st-century battle against the triple enemies of despair, decay and decline following closure of their largest employer.

End of an Era

"The downfall began in the 1950s after Phoenix Steel was sold to a gentleman from New York, then resold to a French consortium," explained Manny DeMutis, Phoenixville native and president of the family-owned DeMutis Group developers.

Named for the fabled bird that rose from the ashes, world-renown Phoenix Steel crafted the legendary Griffen gun (an infamous success in the Civil War) and became part and parcel of the Eiffel Tower, the Brooklyn Bridge and

every lighthouse along North Carolina's Outer Banks. There were dozens more high-profile projects before the company's powerful economic engine stalled with the advent of super efficient concrete casting.

"When the plant shut down in the 1980s, we lost virtually every single job in town. Half of my high school class didn't return in the fall," said DeMutis, remembered as an outstanding football star and, later, head coach of his alma mater.

Seeds of Change

While the devastating downturn could easily have induced down-and-out natives to pull up stakes and bolt, intrepid Phoenixville movers and shakers took aim at a rapidly decaying commercial core unable to sustain residents and businesses or attract visitors.

"It was pretty rough in places where people just didn't feel safe coming downtown at night," DeMutis admits. "We started by determining the major problems, then developing a plan that addressed them."

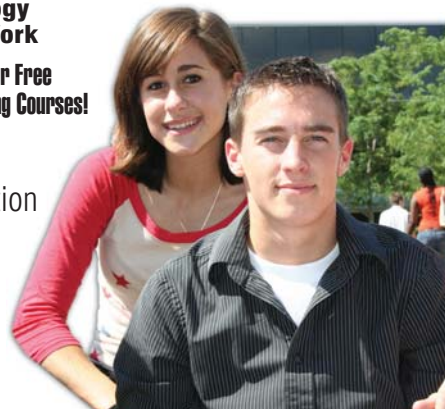
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Though everyone seemed to fall in love with the plan, kick-starting an economic engine sputtering on life support required an extraordinary team who lived by the creed "the difficult can be done immediately; the impossible might take a little longer."

Fortunately, it was a mantra custom-crafted for local community leaders that included Barbara Cohen, then Phoenixville Area Chamber of Commerce Director, current Main Street Business Manager Barry Cassidy, developer John MacPhee and Colonial Theatre Director Mary Foote.

"Barbara was a voice in the wilderness," said DeMutis. "From the very beginning, no matter how difficult it seemed, she insisted 'we can do this,' while Barry wisely kept saying 'yes,' empowering key people who could implement the plan. The Jaycees, Rotary Club, Kiwanis . . . all our volunteer organizations did a wonderful job, and I can't say enough about the support we got from our legislators.

"I'm just Phoenixville's cheerleader, showing people what we're doing makes economic sense, and finding developers who understand it," DeMutis adds, downplaying his own company's significant impact on the revitalization.

New Life for Old Buildings

Endeavors to burnish Phoenixville's

leaden image hit high gear when the Phoenixville Area Economic Development Corp. zeroed in on the biggest blight on the block. Vacant and decaying for 20 years, the behemoth steel mill also known as the **Foundry Building**, newly clad in handsome stone and timber, is slated to become a world-class banquet/entertainment center.

A short walk away, the mill superintendent's long abandoned home, featured in the film "On the Terrace," will soon metamorphose into Baxter's Restaurant.

Yet another abandoned industrial site has found new life as a center for graduate and adult education in the city. Shuttered for the past seven years, the former 26-acre Polychem Company site has been transformed by developers Marian and David Moskowitz into the new **Franklin Commons**, a 180,000-square-foot educational site. In September, Neumann College offered a master's degree in education at the new facility, and future possibilities include the addition of pre-schools, charter schools, a roster of specialized classes and activities for seniors.

Like polished spokes on a shiny new hub, specialty shops ranging from 450 to 2,000 square feet share a handsome streetscape complemented by unique restaurants, coffee shops and pubs that beckon browsers in search of the chichi

Schuylkill Heritage Center
opening at the Foundry
Photo by Barry Taglieber



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and charming, often absent in generic shopping centers.

First and Every Friday

“We were getting beat up by the malls for a while, and we knew we needed something different for shoppers, which is why special meals, deals and top-notch entertainment have made First Fridays events that draw hundreds of people” DeMutis explained.

“In the downtrodden 80s you didn’t see many families strolling around. Today we host 600 to 1,000 visitors of all ages. Folks with baby carriages, toddlers, teens, young couples and senior citizens fill the streets, because there’s something of interest for everyone, residents as well as visitors,” said DeMutis.

“The truth is, every Friday has become First Friday in Phoenixville. We spend \$50,000 a year to put music and entertainment on the street,” DeMutis reported. Visitors will also find beautiful artwork and sculpture on display,

including new exhibits every month from **Phoenix Village Art Center**. There’s truly something for everyone.

Visitors who haven’t set foot in the city for a few years are often stunned at the transformation.

“I couldn’t believe I was in Phoenixville,” admits Leah Myers, a Chester County resident remembering the city of “old.”

“The stores are amazing, all very different and very nice. There are wonderful places to eat and the whole street is just beautiful.”

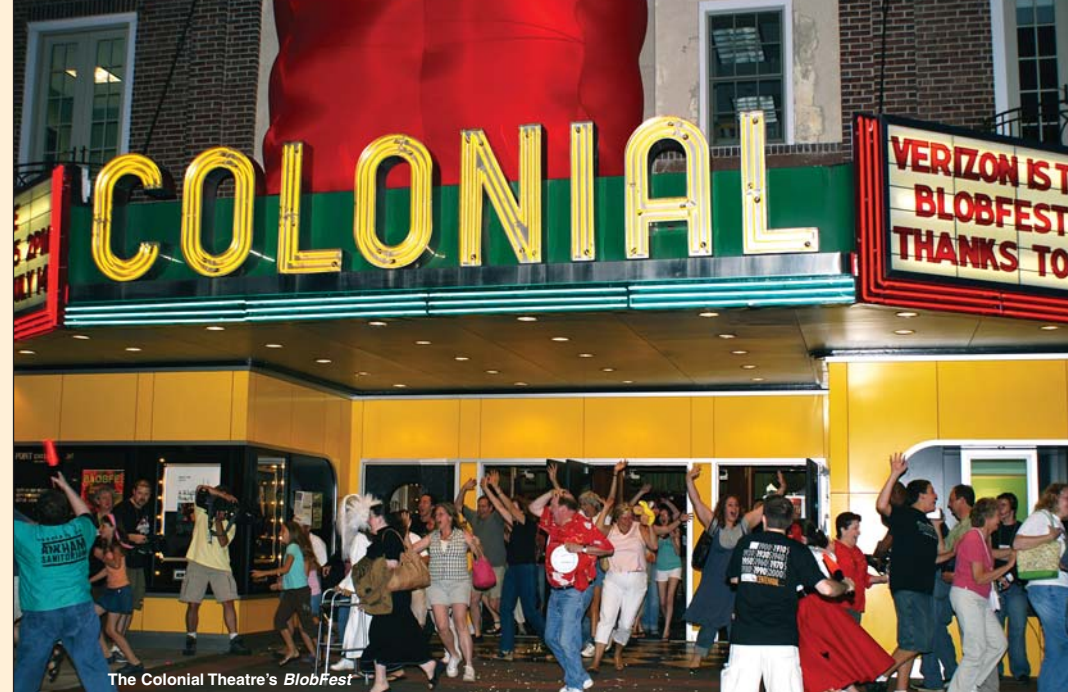
New York City transplant Alan McLaughlin concurs. “Someone told me this was ‘the’ place to go, and frankly, I thought, ‘yeah, right.’ I mean, I just moved from the best. But you know what; the stores and restaurants here just blow me away. Honest, for me it’s better than Philly, because it’s easy to get to and park and everything you could want is in one place.”

Shops Galore

A mere sampling of sensational shopping for browsers in search of the unique includes **USA Kilts & Celtic Traditions** (singer Madonna wears one of their creations) and **Earth Mart**, offering organic and recycled items and local produce good for you and Mother Earth.

Tiny Hiney displays fun duds for the smallest fry . . . no same-old embroidered ducks and bunnies found here (and a portion of every sale supports a charity.) The sensational **Scarlet Begonias Lifestyles** is such a treasure trove of things to wear and for the home that owners Karen Phelps and Linda Buskirk have just one rule for shoppers, “You have to take at least two laps around the store to see everything.”

Hipster Home’s bold and beautiful interiors showcase décor and more, rarely discovered at chain retailers; including Gus Modern custom designed furniture from Canada, giftware from the Savannah School of Art Design, unique fireplaces and clocks, wall treatments and five fanciful “Ugly Dolls” for children.



Ellie’s Choice displays a dazzling collection of stained glass, jewelry, and candles at incredible prices and all new hardbacks sell for \$3.95 at wholesaler **Armadillo Books**.

Wolfgang’s Book Store invites browsers to explore their rare and readable literary treasures or take a favorite selection to their comfy reading room.

And Food, Too

So many choices! You know a town has arrived when **Iron Hill Brewery** has chosen to locate there. Another anchor of the restaurant renaissance, and consistent favorite since 1893, is always top-of-the-line **Columbia Bar & Grill**. Or try worth-the-drive **Majolica** or neighborhood fave **Black Lab Bistro**, for food, fun and drink along the streetscape.

Recently opening their doors, Irishmen Connor Cummins and Declan Manion welcome guests to **Molly McGuire’s**, for those who savor pub food, drink in surroundings as authentic as “Paddy’s pig” (right down to the “priest’s hole” where the monsignor can drink unseen!).

Hosted by **Robert Ryan’s Columbia Station**, this year’s sixth annual “Taste

of Phoenixville” recently featured culinary delights from more than a dozen local restaurants and markets, offering succulent servings ranging from deli delights to ice cream and brewhouse fare, all benefiting Phoenixville’s Good Samaritan Shelter.

Homegrown Events

Keeping another tradition on track, thanks to the intrepid fundraising and perseverance of Colonial Theatre Foundation Executive Director Mary Foote and her tenacious team, the handsomely restored **Colonial Theatre** continues to host the infamous annual **Blobfest**, celebrating the 1958 local filming of the Steve McQueen cult sci-fi horror film. *The Blob* (that tried to devour Phoenixville) still scares the antennae off audiences. A generous \$10,000 grant will boost this summer’s July party for their alien host, marking its 50th year. Mark your calendar!

The Colonial operates as a hub of Phoenixville entertainment throughout the year with a noteworthy line-up of children’s movies and vintage, art and classic films and an Oscar Party complete with awards and red carpet. It’s also the site for live entertainment,





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with performances such as **The Sounds of Sinatra** presented by **The City Rhythm Orchestra** and countless rockers both old and new. In January they also hosted the **Robert Burns Whiskey Tasting**, where guests sampled single malts, limited edition whiskeys and fine cheese. (Check the schedule at thecolonialtheatre.com.)

Later this year, look for December's **Firebird Festival**, which showcases the rebirth of the city with a bonfire as dancers, storytellers and musicians celebrate the rebirth of the city.

Shoppers in search of superb local produce, bakery items and other foods are invited to browse through the **Phoenixville Farmer's Market** (Bridge St. and Taylor Alley) for locally grown fresh food and bakery items each Saturday from May through December as well as selected weekends in January through April. (Call 610-933-0486 for specific winter dates.)

Live, Shop, Work, Play

While Phoenixville's handsome commercial streetscape, with its gracious façade, colorful gardens, artwork and sculptures attract hundreds of visitors, a bigger picture defines the quintessential elements of a city where residents can live, shop, work and play.

"One of the reasons Phoenixville has had such a resurgence is people are coming here to realize the American dream," said DeMutis. "We offer a diverse choice in housing ranging from condominium units above businesses to townhouses and single homes that are selling for what they should in Chester County. They're more affordable here than anywhere else, but we're in line. When the townhouses went up for sale, people camped overnight, some two nights, to buy one. And the older residential areas are also being redone.

"The block with most of the shopping is about 50 percent completed, but the whole project has a long way to go," continued DeMutis. "I'd say the town is about 5 percent of the 100 percent we want it to be."



First Friday on Bank Street. Photo by Barry Taglieber.

Easy Riders

To simplify road travel, the proposed French Creek Parkway will link Routes 29 and 113.

"Our road system takes you in and out of Phoenixville avoiding the hazards of Routes 202 and 422. We're the elbow between the corporate centers in Malvern and Colledgeville and everyone drives through Phoenixville to get to and from work in those areas. Once we get the office space built, we fully expect to have people relocating to Phoenixville within the next five years. In fact, *Philadelphia Magazine* recently named Phoenixville the best place to relocate in Chester County," boasted DeMutis.

More glad tidings for the work force is a proposal to revive railway commuting with a new station on a 19-acre parcel along the bluffs across the French Creek that was served as the intersection of the Philadelphia-Reading Railroad line.

"Currently it's an abandoned freight line that's still intact, with all the

bridges in place," DeMutis explained. "The tracks and ties were upgraded seven years ago by Conrail, so we'd like to complete the new project within the next couple of years. We need to gain consensus to put trains back on the tracks, but everything is in place except the station, and they're easy to build."

Rounding out the plan's live, shop, work and play design, a prime recreational component incorporates a walking trail from Phoenixville connecting to the existing 22-mile Schuylkill Heritage Trail that takes hikers and bikers to Penn's Landing in Philadelphia and west to Berks County.

"We've done our part, now we're waiting for Upper Providence to finish theirs," said DeMutis.

Perhaps visitor Marty Bauman, who vows he'd move from Philadelphia just for the Birchrun Blue Cheese sold at **Ramondo's** sums it up best: "No matter where you're from, when you're in Phoenixville, you always feel like you're home." ♦