

Understanding the History of Natural Roofing Slate

Understanding the history of most building materials may seem unnecessary as new materials are being developed replacing obsolete ones, yet natural roofing slate is the exception. Slate roofing tiles has a long history of protecting structures from the elements and helping to preserve history around the world.

Slate is a metamorphic rock created by the heat and pressure of the earth over millions of years. The stone is hard in density yet will split into thin sheets which makes it useful for construction. Slate was first used during the Roman Empire.

The unique stone was noted for its value in protecting forts from the elements and invaders. During the twelfth century, production oriented quarrying began to evolve in Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, as well as Ireland. In the late eighteenth century, roofing slate production in Europe began to grow rapidly. The increased production of the hard, durable roofing product resulted in slate being used on many significant structures of the time.

In the newly formed United States, a building boom was taking place. The settlers and elected officials wanted buildings that would last. During the 1700s slate was often used as ballast in the ships coming over to the New World from England. With the increased supply of slate, port cities up and down the coast began to roof with natural slate imported from England and Europe. The slate protected the structures from the sea air and the severe storms of the Atlantic. The United States also had several rich slate deposits of its own and by the end of the eighteenth century quarrying had begun in Virginia and Pennsylvania. Both states produced a dark slate ideal for roofing and capable of high production capacity. The uniquely colored slate deposits of Vermont and Maine were also soon discovered and as the year 1900 approached, the production of natural roofing slate in the United States was in full swing.



The United States had numerous deposits of rich roofing slate available, each with its own unique characteristics, attributes, and geographic disbursement. During the early twentieth century, Pennsylvania's Lehigh District was one of the most prolific producers of natural slate supplying over 42% of the roofing slate for the United States in

1929. Most of the Pennsylvania slate was known for its dark gray color and uniform consistency. The soft-veined slate yielded high production capacity that roofed a great deal of Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Baltimore, and numerous other larger cities. Pennsylvania also produced a smaller quantity of harder slate called Peach Bottom, a slate that was consistent in color with a life span of 200 plus years. The Vermont, Maine, New York region was the second largest producer of roofing slate during this time. The variety of colors available and ease of production made the stone a natural choice for architects and builders of the time. From the blacks and grays to the unusual purples, greens, and reds produced by the region, the color spectrum elevated slate to an art form with many possibilities. These unique colors had far reaching effects as architects from all over the United States began to explore the idea of choosing the roofing color. Virginia also produced a highly esteemed slate product. The hard vein that runs through Buckingham County produced a lightly textured stone with a rich, dark, lustrous tone. This material was difficult to produce into tiles yet can last over 200 years. Many of the original roofs of Virginia that were slated with Buckingham slate are still in service today.

Production of natural slate began to decline during the 1930s. Quarries were unable to sustain production at competitive prices as new alternative materials became available to consumers. Many of these new commercially available roofing products emulated the look of slate. Asbestos and asphalt shingles mimicked the overlapping characteristic and individual shingle appearance of natural slate. Yet, none of these offered the longevity, protection or aesthetic appeal of natural slate.



Roofing slate in the United States is only a fraction of the world-wide natural slate roofing market. In most of Europe, there are very few materials sanctioned and suitable for roofing. Therefore, roofing slate is one of the most popular. Each geographic region has its own method and style of slate roofing. In Scotland, they use thick roofing slate. France uses acutely thin material. Germany utilizes small rounded slate that are hung on an angle, each creating roofs that are unique and built to last a lifetime. Particular regions also prefer different colors and textures which has made global trade more of a necessity. Today, ninety percent of the world's roofing slate production comes from Spain. Other active quarries around the world include: Wales, Great Britain, Germany; Portugal, Italy, China, Brazil, and Canada. In the United States, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Virginia are still producing quality roofing slate. With today's global appetite for the material, slate is shipped around the world protecting structures and preserving history.

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