

Why the World's Best-Known Crayons Have Been Made in Lehigh Valley for 120+ Years

By Paul Muschick

LEHIGH VALLEY - The first Crayola crayons were produced in the Lehigh Valley in 1903. A box of eight sold for a nickel.

So, what drew Crayola to the Lehigh Valley so long ago? Why has it stayed here, expanding to multiple Lehigh Valley locations as it has grown to one of the most-recognized brands in the world? How has Crayola positioned itself for future success?

Those questions were at the heart of the conversation at Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation's Fall Signature Event, "Lehigh Valley: Making Products & Making Places."

Held Nov. 11 at Archer Music Hall in downtown Allentown, the event celebrated the innovation, resilience, and community spirit that has shaped the Lehigh Valley's economic renaissance.

Peter Ruggiero, a Lehigh Valley native who is President & CEO of Crayola, joined leaders from other global brands based in Lehigh Valley – Lutron Electronics, Mack Trucks, Martin Guitar, and Olympus – for a panel discussion about why the Lehigh Valley is such a draw for iconic makers.

Here's why Crayola crayons and other products are Made in Lehigh Valley.

Quality Slate and Limestone

Now headquartered in Easton, Crayola was founded as Binney & Smith in 1885 in New York, by cousins Edward Binney and Charles Harold Smith.

"Their two main products were carbon black - it's in every one of your car tires - and red iron oxide pigment, which is

"Turn of the century, they're very wealthy gentlemen, and they want to give back to society, and they decide to go into education. So why are we here? We're here because of slate pencils and slate chalkboards. The best [slate quarries] in the world are in Pen Argyl ... and then limestone from the quarries in Nazareth. And the Bushkill Creek of Easton is what powered our facility. We made slate pencils, slate chalkboards, and chalk until 1903 when we developed our iconic crayons."

Crayola is Born

Binney's wife, Alice, a passionate teacher, coined the name "Crayola" for the company's crayons. It stems from "craie," the French word for chalk, and "ola," from oleaginous - describing the crayons as "oily chalk."

In 1955, the company sold its chemical division to focus on crayons and over the decades its product lines grew to include other creative and art products such as markers, paints, and molding compounds. In 1969, it opened an additional manufacturing facility in neighboring Forks Township, and seven years later moved its world headquarters there. In 2007, Binney & Smith changed its name to Crayola.

Foundation of Manufacturing

"The foundation of our manufacturing is here. Seventy percent of our production is in the United States, all in the Lehigh Valley, 1.7 million square feet of integrated manufacturing and logistics," Ruggiero said.

That Lehigh Valley manufacturing has evolved tremendously over time.

"If you had looked at our plants in 2007 and looked at what they are today, the transformation of automation, productivity, and cost management have really enabled us to differentiate ourselves from our competition. Our scale, productivity, our quality, and the elements of our entire product range are at a whole different level," Ruggiero said.

How much has it progressed? In 2007, a worker would make 20,000 markers on a shift. Today, they make 220,000 per shift. In an interview with LVEDC following the Fall Signature Event, Ruggiero explained why the Lehigh Valley is a great location for Crayola's headquarters.

"We have great people, a wonderful talent pipeline from local schools, and an outstanding supply chain capability here," he said. "We came originally for the raw materials and for the Bushkill Creek. We've stayed because we've had generations of Crayola employees, families, working on our products. We're one of the most-renowned brands in the world, and the fact that we're able to manufacture here in a close-to-market responsive way is very important to our success."

"Lehigh Valley has always been a part of the tradition of Crayola. Our ability to manufacture here in the Lehigh Valley, with our supply chain close to many of the largest cities in the country and our ability to respond to unforeseen orders, has been an important part of our success."

Giving Back to the Community and the Environment

The power of the Bushkill Creek was the start of Crayola's deep connection to the environment.

"We give back extensively to the community," he continued. "Our employees foster a giving spirit. It's an element of our culture. Our employee volunteers will donate more than 15,000 hours to the community each year. We're very proud of that."

The company's internationally known Crayola Experience was launched in the Lehigh Valley in 1996, in downtown Easton, and has inspired creativity for generations of families.

Originally known as the Crayola Factory, today it draws more than 350,000 guests annually and is one of the Lehigh Valley's top tourism attractions, helping to put the region on the map as a destination.

The success of that flagship location led to Crayola Experiences in Orlando, FL; Minneapolis, MN; and Plano, TX. "And I'm very proud that in first quarter of next year we will open facilities also in China and South Korea," Ruggiero said. (Photos courtesy of Crayola, Marco Calderon Photography)



VEDC's Fall Signature Event.

