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DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The shot tower is situated on a high sandstone cliff along the Wisconsin river. It consists of a 120-foot vertical shaft dug down through a ledge which begins about a third of the way down from the cliff top, a wood frame clapboarded tower from the ledge straight to the top of the cliff, and a frame melting house built on the top of the cliff. At the base of the cliff is a horizontal tunnel 90 feet in length, leading to the bottom and basin of the shaft. Tunnel and shaft were dug out by hand in 1831-1833, the principal tools being the lead-miner's pick and gad. Both the tunnel and shaft are about six feet in diameter. At the bottom of the shaft is a round basin of water about three feet deep.

The shaft and tunnel are of course original and are well-maintained. The wooden parts--tower and melting house were recently reconstructed, faithfully planned after the originals as shown in a sketch made in 1836 by John Wilson. Nothing remains of the other buildings associated the shot making industry.

In the melting house, lead from the nearby lead-mining regions of southwestern Wisconsin was melted in two large kettles and "tempered with arsenic in another kettle to give it the necessary brittleness. The dropping ladle, perforated with holes of various sizes, was partly filled and then tilted gently to spill down the shaft. The drops of lead assumed a spherical shape in falling and landed in a three-foot deep basin of water, which both cooled the shot and broke the fall." From the basin the shot was collected, taken by horse-drawn vehicle to another building, sorted to size, weighed, and put into kegs for shipment.

The original melting house equipment and machinery were sold after use of the tower was discontinued in 1861, most except the buckshot machine going to people in Dodgeville. The buckshot machine was sold to a Chicago shot company. An attempt is being made to obtain authentic replacement machinery with which to furnish the reconstructed melting house.



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PERIOD (Check One or More as	Appropriate)			
Pre-Columbian	🔲 16th Centur	y 🗌 18th Century	20th Century	
15th Century	📋 17th Centur	y 19th Century		
SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicab	le and Known) 1831-	-33; 1861		
AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Che	ck One or More as App	ropriate)		
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The old shot tower is both unique and important in Wisconsin history. It was not only the site of the only such industry ever carried out in Wisconsin--especially important in the lead-mining era of our history--but also played an important role in the state's early commerce when it "helped to connect the western and eastern parts of Wisconsin by establishing a trade route from the west to Green Bay and Milwaukee."

It is significant too as an engineering feat, because the workmen who dug the shaft and tunnel used no sets of drawings or surveyors instruments. In digging the tunnel to meet the base of the shaft they used a line of stakes for sighting and their tunnel met the base of the shaft almost perfectly.

Shot making was an important industry for a time and at its peak six men could make about two and a half tons of shot a day. The tower's operation was intermittent throughout its history, varying with economic conditions, changes in ownership, and interruption at one time when the melting house burned and had to be rebuilt. Started in 1831 with the digging of the shaft, the shot tower's construction was interrupted by the Black Hawk War of 1832, but completed in time for the operation to begin late in 1833. It was closed for good in 1861.

The town of Helena which developed near the tower site when the industry flourished, prospered for a time and weathered the panic of 1837 which caused the temporary closing of the tower two years later. But when the village was bypassed by the railroad in the 1850's the prosperity came to an end and the settlement was abandoned after the panic of 1857. Four years later the shot making industry in Wisconsin came to its final halt. The original settlement of Helena has now disappeared, but its site within Tower Hill State Park is commemorated by a marker.



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