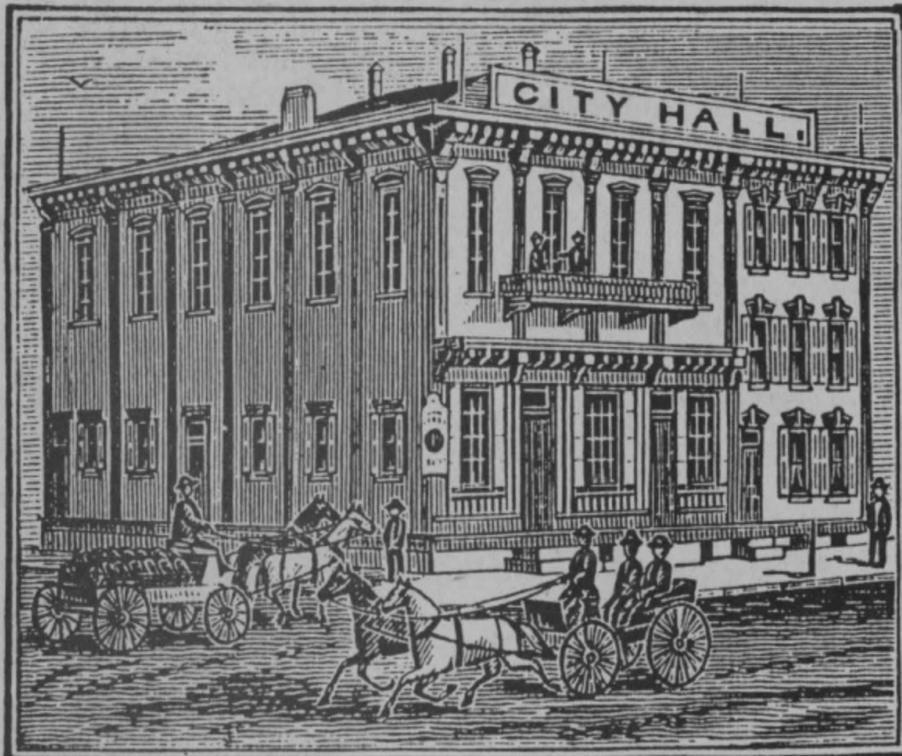


MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

## Burgesses in charge of law, order



**FOR ENTERTAINMENT!** — Mention "city hall" and you think of headquarters for local government. But the city hall pictured above in Mahanoy City had nothing to do with government. Rather, it was an entertainment hall (the town's first opera house) more than a century ago. Located at the southeast corner of Main and Market streets, it was built in 1874 by Ferdnend Metz, who operated a tavern on the ground floor and opera house on the upper level. Metz was one of the founding fathers whose signature appears on the 1863 charter for incorporation of the borough. In 1885, the property was sold in to Charles D. Kaier, who later remodeled the bottom floor and reopened it in 1893 as the Kaier Opera House. It became the leading theater in the region until it burned down on Oct. 15, 1913. Today, the site is occupied by the Victoria Theater which opened in March 1925. The sketch above is from an 1880s atlas of Schuylkill County.

We begin our Mahanoy City Chronicles with biographical sketches of the pioneers who served in the office of chief burgess during the first two decades of the borough's existence. The information comes for various 19th century publications focusing on county history.

**JOHN EICHMAN** was the first chief burgess, having been elected in 1864. Born in Germany in 1817, he came to America in 1847 and to Mahanoy City in 1863. He became superintendent and collector for the Mahanoy City Water Company in 1867 and was named borough treasurer in 1879.

**JAMES HINES (HEINS)** became chief burgess in 1867. Born in Hamburg, Berks County, in 1822, he settled in Mahanoy City in 1863 and opened the town's first meat market in partnership with Frank Wenrich. He and his wife, the former Mary Harper, had one daughter, Mrs. Tobias Gearhart.

**JOHN T. QUINN** became chief burgess in 1870. He was born in Pottsville on Nov. 1, 1838 and lived in Port Carbon for 25 years before coming to Mahanoy City in 1864, opening a butcher shop in the 300 block of East Centre Street, north side. His wife, the former Margaretta Kennedy, came from Salem, N.J.

**EMANUEL BOYER** was elected burgess in 1871. He was one of the earliest settlers on the site of Mahanoy City and is considered to be the first permanent resident, arriving in 1853 to serve as an agent for the Little Schuylkill Navigation, Railroad and Coal Company. Born in Schuylkill Township in 1829, he spent some years in Middleport where he operated a tailor shop, later moving to Tuscarora where he worked in the Joseph Adler store. He was married in Tuscarora in 1850 to the former Elizabeth Horne, a resident of Union Township. They had 12 children, one of whom, William, was the first male child born (Feb. 15, 1858) on the site of Mahanoy City (10 E. Centre St.)

**FRANK WENRICH** became chief burgess in 1872 and later served on borough council which he headed as president in 1879. Born Aug. 18, 1937, at Myerstown, Lebanon County, he operated a meat market in Tuscarora for two years before moving to Mahanoy City in 1862. He served in the Civil War as a member of the Schuylkill County First Defenders and in 1875 became first lieutenant of Silliman Guards militia. Wenrich was accused of having been one of the masked vigilantes who in October 1875 shot to death a man and pregnant woman at a Wiggins Patch home where some Molly Maguires were boarding. He was tried but acquitted by a county jury. He and his wife, Kate Bobb, had eight children, one of whom, Willie, was killed in the explosion of the "Gem" railroad locomotive at the Mahanoy City station in 1879.

**GEORGE MAJOR**, a native of Wales, assumed the duties of chief burgess in March 1874 and was killed in the line of duty during a riot seven months later. On the night of Oct. 31 a fire broke out in the center of town and a brawl erupted when the town's rival fire companies (Humane and Citizens) arrived to battle the blaze. Shots were exchanged and the burgess was fatally wounded. As a result of this and other lawlessness, the local Silliman Guards militia was formed in March 1875 to keep peace. Frank Wenrich, treasurer of the Citizens Fire Company, was named second in command of the guard unit. That same year, the Citizens Fire Company procured its first engine which was named "Major" in honor of the late burgess.

**WILLIAM F. JONES** was elected burgess in 1878. Born in South Wales, he worked as a miner in Wales, Australia and California before arriving in Mahanoy City in the late 1850s to assist with the opening the first mine drifts in the area. In 1862 he opened a store in the first block of East Mahanoy Street, south side, which he turned over to his son in 1880.

**JAMES MATHIAS** is listed next as having held the office of burgess, but no information can be found on his background. The March 1878 minutes of borough council state: "Whereas James Mathias, chief burgess of our borough, has left town under circumstances which satisfy us that he intends not to return, it is therefore resolved that we declare a vacancy in the office of chief burgess and proceed forthwith to an election to fill such vacancy."

**JAMES K. WATKINS** was chosen by borough council to succeed James Mathias, but his occupancy of the office was the subject of dispute, as noted in the Dec. 30, 1878, minutes of council: "A writ of ouster by the county courts was read in the case of James Watkins and Frank Jones versus John Jones. The writ excludes John Jones from holding or exercising the office of chief burgess by virtue of any supposed election to said office on the third Tuesday of February, 1878. John Eichman (the town's first burgess 24 years earlier) and John Jones were nominated for the office of burgess, with Eichman being elected by a voted of 7-2."

**RYCE J. GRIFFITHS** moved into the office of chief burgess in the election of 1879 after having served as justice of the peace the previous year. Born in Wales, he came to America as an infant. He had been a carpenter but later entered the insurance business. His wife, the former Eliza Davis, is a native of Wales.

**JOHN WEBER** took over as chief burgess in 1880. Born in Bavaria in 1831, he came to America in 1853, settling in Saint Clair. He located in Mahanoy City to serve as an agent of the Yuengling Brewing Company.

Like the sheriffs and marshals of the old wild west, these were the men of courage took charge of law and order in the turbulent times when Mahanoy City was a frontier town groping its way to maturity.