

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

Suffolk was once Phillips Patch

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

JOHN PHILLIPS and his son Edward never resided permanently in Mahanoy City but they played significant roles in the early history of the town and neighboring township.

The Phillipes were pioneer coal operators whose colliery at Suffolk gave employment to many of the immigrants who settled in Mahanoy City during the pioneer decades of the borough's existence.

The historic old village known today as Suffolk originally was called Phillips Patch after the father and son who came a long way through physical and financial hardship until they arrived in the Mahanoy Valley and subsequently operated the Suffolk Coal Company from 1864 to 1884.

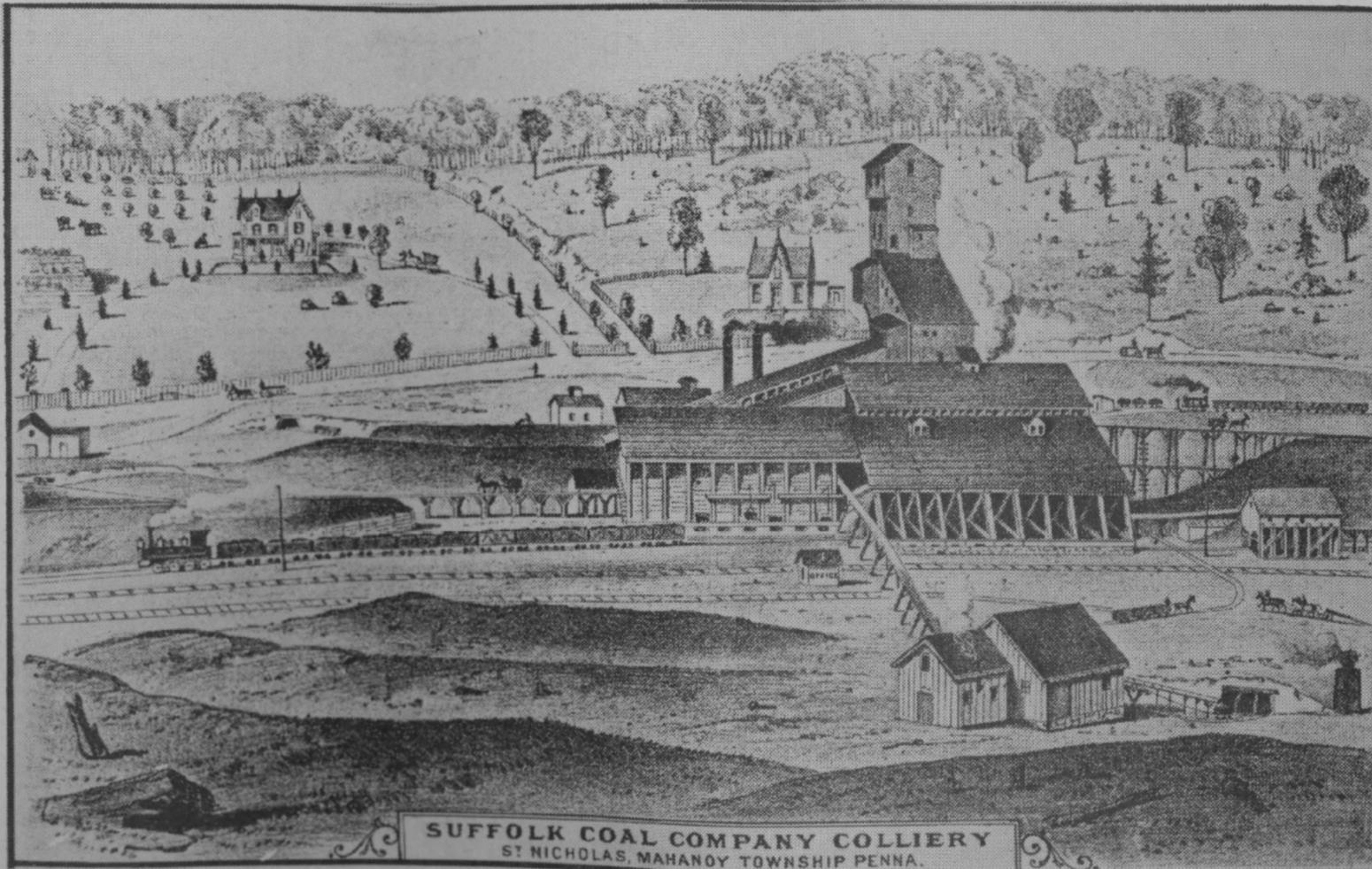
JOHN PHILLIPS was born in England on June 23, 1815, and came to America in 1840. He went directly to Pottsville, then a comparatively small settlement at the head of the Schuylkill Canal via which goods and people were transported to and from Philadelphia.

Shortly after reaching Pottsville Mr. Phillips became a coal operator, but he soon found that the business in that primitive era was risky and unpredictable.

His first mining venture was in partnership with Richard Dennis. They established a coal market in Philadelphia and it looked promising for a while, until an economic recession put their customers and themselves out of business.

After some time working at other enterprises, Phillips decided to try his luck at mining again, this time at Kaska as manager of the Busby Colliery for its owner, Dr. John Steinberger. Once again bankruptcy struck, but Phillips soon found another job at the Milford Colliery near Tuscarora, operated by Samuel Silliman. Silliman later joined his brother, Edward, in the opening of the North Mahanoy Colliery on the northern outskirts of Mahanoy City, but the colliery at Milford didn't fare out too well. It went bankrupt and the colliery at Milford didn't fare out too well. It went bankrupt and John Phillips again found himself seeking a job. This time he joined the nearby Silver Creek Colliery, operated by Dr. Steinberger.

Finally he hooked up with P. W. Sheaffer (founder of the vast Sheaffer Estate holdings) and worked as superintendent of the company operations in the



SUFFOLK COAL COMPANY COLLIERY
ST NICHOLAS, MAHANOY TOWNSHIP PENNA.

HISTORIC COLLIERY — This 113-year-old drawing depicts the Suffolk Breaker which occupied the site of the current Saint Nicholas Central Breaker. The mansion on the hillside at upper left (west of the breaker) was built as a residence for the coal company

superintendent and for many years was home to a succession of colliery bosses with names such as Phillips, Machamer, McDonald and Prescott. In 1935 the J. H. Zerbey History of Schuylkill County described the dwelling in these words: "A beautiful twenty-two room house stands

between Suffolk and Patriotic Hill. It is built on a hill." The stately old structure was a familiar sight as it stood proudly on the hillside for more than a century. Last occupied in the 1960s, it subsequently fell into disrepair, was damaged by fire and finally was bulldozed under the black earth.

Locustdale vicinity. It was Sheaffer who recommended Phillips to serve as superintendent of the new Suffolk Coal Company colliery being developed at Saint Nicholas by the Fisk Coal Company, which had a 20-year lease with the landowner, the Philadelphia and Mahanoy Coal Company.

Shortly after Phillips became superintendent, the colliery was sold to a group of Massachusetts capitalists headed by Leverett Sofia to a group of Massachusetts capitalists headed by Leverett Saltonstall who was port collector for the City of Boston. When these owners lost their lease at Suffolk (the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company took over in 1884) they had the distinction of being the last group of eastern capitalists still here since the coal rush era.

Mr. Phillips managed the

Suffolk Colliery for the Boston group until 1868, when he turned the job over to his 24-year-old son, Major Edward Phillips, a Civil War hero.

EDWARD PHILLIPS was born at Westwood on Feb. 26, 1844. At the age of 15 he he found employment as a machinist at Port Carbon, but two years later the Civil War erupted and he answered President Lincoln's call for volunteers. He enlisted at Pottsville on Sept. 23, 1861, and served three years with Company C, 96th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers.

Under command of General Sherman he participated in 27 battles and suffered a severe facial wound in 1864 at Spottsylvania, Virginia. The would

cost him nine teeth, part of his jaw and tongue.

Following his discharge on Oct. 23, 1864, he made his way to Mahanoy City and worked briefly as a clerk, and then attended the Dickinson Seminary at Williamsport for several months. In 1865 his father hired him as clerk and shipper at the Suffolk Colliery. Three years later, with the retirement of his father, he became the colliery superintendent and served as such until 1884 when the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company took over.

Phillips then became superintendent of the Draper Colliery at Gilberton for two years. In 1886 he went to Honduras, Central America, to serve as general manager of the Saint Lucia Mining and Milling Com-

pany. In October 1889 when he returned to this region, purchasing an interest in the Llewellyn Nagle Company Colliery (subsequently named Ferndale Coal Company) a mile northwest of Mount Carmel.

FATHER AND SON Phillips left their imprints on early society in Mahanoy City.

The father was a director of the town's first financial institution, the First National Bank. He was also a director of the Miners National Bank of Pottsville, the Pottsville Water Company, and the Pottsville and Mahanoy Railroad. He retired to Pottsville in 1875 and died there on March 6, 1889.

The son was a member of the three Mahanoy City masonic organizations (F&AM Lodge,

Royal Arch Masons, and Knights Templar).

SUFFOLK PATCH in its heyday was a hub of activity in Mahanoy Township, being situated at the crossroads between Mahanoy City, Shenandoah and Gilberton. Bustling collieries were operating on all sides, the busy Reading Railroad yards were at the village doorstep, and the township's central elementary school brought hundreds of children there from 1937 until the new Mahanoy Area Educational Complex opened in 1980.

A major slice of the village was taken away in the late 1920s when the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company decided to build its central breaker complex. Twenty-three homes along the east side of the highway were torn down, which represented more than half the 42 families who made up the village from as long ago as 1868.

Most of those evicted residents moved away, but one still remains: Helen (Thomas) Phillips. The family (parents and five children) was fortunate enough to find a vacant house across the road being vacated by the Hyle family. She still resides in that house at the upper end of the patch.

The years have seen many dear neighbors, friends and relatives leave the village while Helen Phillips remained. Two years ago, one former neighbor, Margie Bolavage, returned from the West Coast to visit Helen, and the two of them cried as they stood outside the old homesteads thinking of the happy days that used to be.

Helen still attends the little church (Saint Nicholas Union Church) at the lower end of the village. The original church, built in 1874, was destroyed by fire on Nov. 10, 1922. The new church was dedicated on Sept. 26, 1924.

Among the other regular worshippers there is Billy Adamson, whose family roots date from the early days of the patch. He lives in Park Crest but makes the trip back "home" to Suffolk each Sunday.

The bell atop the church is the same one presented to the congregation in 1874 by the pioneer colliery superintendent, John Phillips. If it were to ring out today, its echo would recall names such as Thomas, Phillips, Davis, Davidson, Calloway, Hughes, Jones, Roberts, Rissinger, Kinsinger, Machamer, Campbell, DeLong, Adamson, Cathers and all the other folks who made Suffolk Patch a place to remember and love.