

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

## George Wren a key industrialist

By BILL O'BRIEN  
Herald writer

GEORGE H. WREN was one of the most important industrialists in Mahanoy City's early history.

A previous Chronicle in this series described how his father, Thomas Wren, came here from Pottsville in the early 1860s to build the huge Grant Iron Works just west of the borough.

After the father built the plant and launched its operation, son George came into the picture and ran the business from 1867 onward.

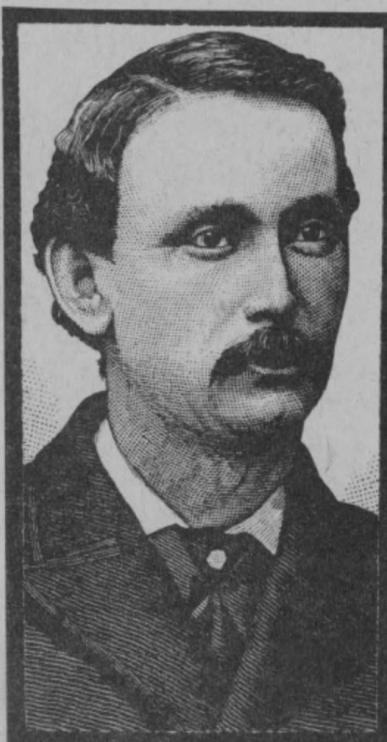
The Grant works consisted of four buildings constructed of mountain stone: The machine shop and foundry measuring 50 x 125 feet and 50 feet high; the erecting shop, 35 x 70 and 30 feet high; the smith shop, 30-by-60 and 16 feet high; the office, 17-by-32 and 15 feet high.

GEORGE WREN was born in Pottsville on Nov. 12, 1847, and went to the Eastman Business College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., to obtain the education he would need to assume his role in the family enterprise.

In 1865, at the age of 18, George became business manager and bookkeeper of his father's Grant Iron Works. By 1867 he had accrued enough experience to take over the business.

Recognizing his lack of expertise in the production end of the operation, young George engaged the services of an experienced foundryman, Ralph R. Lee, of Pottsville, with whom he formed a partnership to operate the plant for the next 10 years. Lee supervised the production while Wren administered the office.

During this critical decade in the anthracite industry, when bankruptcies were the rule and coal boom towns like Mahanoy City might easily have disappeared as fast as they had sprung up, the Grant Iron Works



George H. Wren  
Key industrialist

made it possible for many operations to survive and sustain the towns built around them.

Grant's craftsman had the rare gift of being able to design and build the steam engines, pumps and specialized machinery needed to keep coal production flowing at a profitable rate.

The livelihoods of countless local mineworkers were sustained by Grant's machinery. Without those jobs, Mahanoy City could not have attracted the untold legions of people who came to make their contributions to the melting pot and help it survive these 125 years.

THE 1870s also saw Lee and Wren enter the mining business in their own right.

They operated a mine known as the Rough Diamond Colliery (later Park Colliery) at Park Place from December 1870 to

February 1873, and in 1871 opened the Elmwood Colliery at Foundry Row which was sold to the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company in 1873.

The Elmwood Colliery worked the veins in the basin beneath the current site of the Mahanoy Area Education Complex. It was a productive mine until the Great Depression of the 1930s knocked the bottom out of anthracite, at which time it was among the many which shut down, never again to reopen.

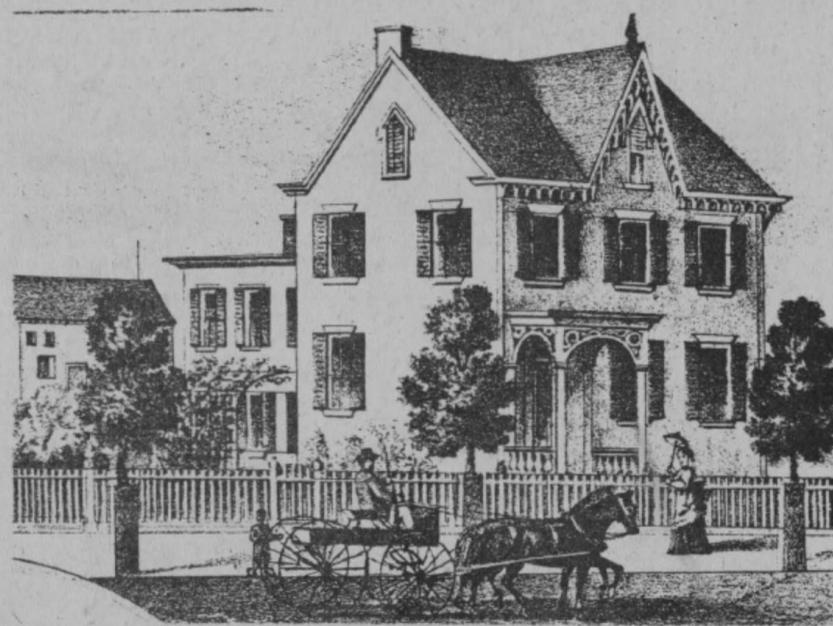
The Elmwood double-track gunboat slope was one of the most up-to-date of its era. It has concrete sides and roof and a perfectly aligned string of steel I-beam support pillars down the center.

The mouth of the slope was located just west of and a short distance to the rear of Foundry Row, along the north edge of the Reading Railroad. After abandonment, the slope stood open and deteriorating for decades. (This writer has fond memories of having picked coal in the old slope some 35 years ago, digging from a small vein about 30 feet below the surface, placing the cracked and scened coal in burlap bags, hauling the bags, three at a time, on a rickety old wagon up along the streets of the West End to the family dwelling at 510 W. Market St.)

THE SLOPE disappeared about two years ago when the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources had it covered as part of a program to eliminate mining hazards.

Although the upper part of the slope had stood open through the years, the company had taken the precaution of installing a battery of railroad sills about 100 feet down from the surface, to prevent curious explorers from venturing any deeper toward the watery depths.

The last person known to have descended to the bottom was Roland Harper of Frackville (now deceased) who was a



**WREN'S NEST** — This 1875 sketch depicts the home in which George Wren and his family lived for 80 years at 216 W. Mahanoy St., adjacent to the Episcopal parsonage. It was torn down in 1961 and replaced by the modern home occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Herman Janowitch.

member of the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company engineering corps. In the early 1950s, several years before the P&RC&I Company abandoned its deep mines, Harper told this writer of his exploration of the underground workings. He said he found the thick coal pillars at the foot of the slope in excellent condition, untouched by mining because they served as support for the nerve center of operations at that point.

LEE AND WREN also operated lead mines near New Galina, Bucks County.

Their partnership dissolved in 1877 when Lee decided to return to his former position as a foreman at the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company shops in Pottsville.

George Wren remained in Mahanoy City as sole operator of the Grant foundry. In community life he was a director of the Mahanoy City Park

Association, belonged to the Masonic lodge (F&AM 357) and the First Presbyterian Church.

He was married on Nov. 3, 1870, to the former Sallie Beddall of Port Carbon, who bore him two children: Mary and Thomas.

Today, all trace of the Wren family is gone from this town to whose development they contributed so significantly. Their foundry disappeared in 1921 when lumber company magnate Arthur Lutz bought the real estate for development purposes. Lutz tore down the remnants of the old stone foundry buildings and constructed the homes at Foundry Row in addition to a row of lumber storage sheds along the railroad behind the homes. The large abandoned industrial structure across Route 54 from the Mahanoy Acme was part of the original Lutz complex.

The Wren homestead, consisting of a mansion-type

dwelling with spacious garden, was located at 216-18 W. Mahanoy St. adjacent to the Episcopal church parsonage. It stood there from the 1870s until the last of the family, Mrs. Thomas Wren (daughter-in-law of George), passed on in the late 1950s. The old home was demolished in 1961 and replaced by the present modern structure occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Herm Janowitch.

DAVID B. KLINE was the man who supervised production at the Grant Iron Works after the Lee-Wren partnership broke up and Ralph Lee took his supervisory expertise back to Pottsville.

Kline was a member of an old Columbia County family dating back two generations. He was born there on March 28, 1844, and arrived in Mahanoy City in 1865 after serving in the Civil War.

During his teen years he had served an apprenticeship as a machinist, which qualified him for his job at the Grant Works. Five years later he was promoted to foreman and continued in that position many years thereafter.

In addition, he was a local contracting agent for the Exeter Steam Heating Company of New Hampshire, employing a force of men to construct and service such facilities in Frackville, Shenandoah and Tamaqua.

Mr. Kline served terms and Mahanoy City borough council and school board in the 1880s. His daughter, Jennie, was a member of the school district faculty.

The family resided at 301 W. Mahanoy St. Mrs. Kline was the former Valeria Sites of Easton. Their son, Harry, was graduated from Mahanoy City High with the class of 1889 and worked as a moulder at the Grant foundry. They also had a son, Leon.