

George Wiggan put town on map

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

GEORGE WIGGAN was one of the most important of the founding fathers who put Mahanoy City on the map 125 years ago, yet there's nothing here to remind succeeding generations of the debt they owe him.

The only hint of his long-ago presence in the Mahanoy Valley is found two miles west of the borough where his name is perpetuated in the little mine patch of Wiggans.

Although George Wiggan has long since faded from memory, his contributions to the founding and initial development of the town continue to benefit people here. Consider:

—His name is near the top (third) of the list of pioneers who signed the petition for the charter which gave birth to the borough of Mahanoy City.

—In the first borough election of Feb. 23, 1864, he was one of six men chosen to serve on the first borough council. In 1865 he was named president of that body.

—In February, 1886, he joined E. S. Silliman and H. M. Parmley in organizing the Mahanoy City Water Company which is still serving the community as part of the Mahanoy Township Authority system. He served as the water company treasurer.

—As a partner in Wiggan & Trebels (or Treibels), he was one of the earliest coal mine developers whose enterprise paved the way for people to begin migrating to the valley. His Bear Run Colliery in the vicinity of Wiggans Patch was opened in the late 1850s, several years before most other collieries began to

sprout up in the valley.

—He was one of a handful of county civic leaders who pressed for a hospital to care for victims of mine and railroad accidents. Their efforts resulted in the erection of the Miners Hospital which opened in 1883 and eventually became the Ashland State General Hospital.

Nor was Mahanoy City the only Schuylkill County community to benefit from the presence of George Wiggan. His contributions equally enriched the lives of people in Port Clinton and Tamaqua.

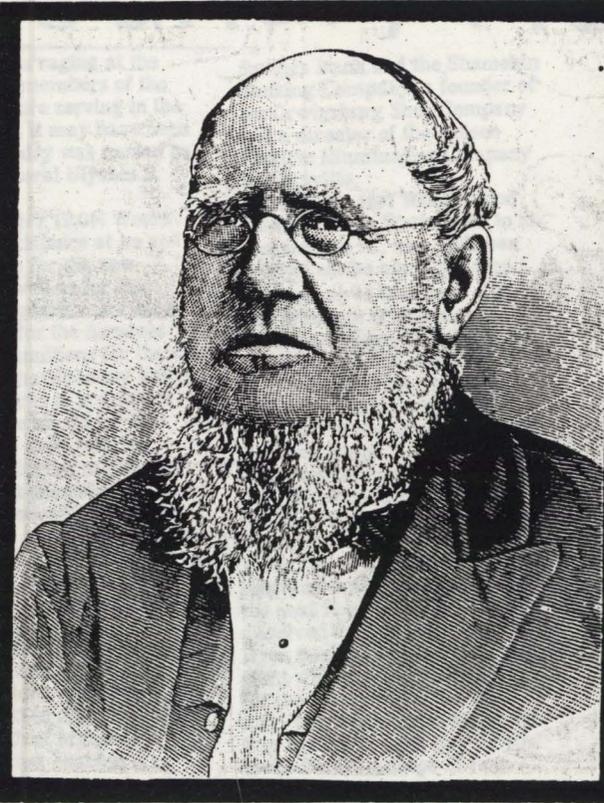
INFORMATION ABOUT him is found in various old county histories, such as those of J. H. Beers, Samuel Wiley and Henry Ruoff.

He was born in London on May 21, 1800, and was married in Saint George's Church there in 1826 to the former Susannah Draper.

He became known as a church volunteer who visited most of London's prisons and hospitals, as well as the dwellings where misery and wretchedness prevailed, to offer solace and assistance to the suffering. In doing so, he risked the wrath of the royal authorities, who on one occasion had him imprisoned in double irons.

George left England in 1834, migrating to America along with his wife and their two sons (two daughters had died in England). After a brief stay in New York City, they went to Philadelphia where George secured employment as the supervisor of a coal yard on Spruce Street for the Little Schuylkill Navigation, Railroad and Coal Company.

In March, 1840, he came to Schuylkill County to serve as the



George and Susannah Wiggan

company's agent at Port Clinton. While there, he established the community's first sabbath school and became an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church, supplying congregations in Tamaqua and Summit Hill.

In 1847, he moved to Tamaqua and established the firm of Wiggan & Son to engage in the mining business. When the First National Bank of Tamaqua was founded in 1853, he was a member of the board of directors. In 1854 he was elected chief burgess of Tamaqua, and later

served as treasurer of the borough school district.

WHEN THE railroads started moving northward to the coal-rich wilderness of Mahanoy Valley, Wiggan recognized the opportunity there. By the fall of 1853, the Mine Hill & Schuylkill Haven Railroad had been extended over Broad Mountain to the western section of the valley, and in 1859 construction was begun on the Mahanoy Tunnel which would open the eastern end of the valley to rail transportation.

George Wiggan put down his stakes in the valley in the late 1850s, so that by the time the Mahanoy Tunnel opened in 1863 his Bear Run mine was ready to ship coal.

He also involved himself in the formation of the new borough which he envisioned as the hub of the coal industry activity in the eastern nook of the valley.

THE RESULTS of the leadership which a handful of men such as George Wiggan provided are reflected in the census figures: In 1860, three years before the borough, the

population of Mahanoy Township (including the site which would be Mahanoy City) numbered a grand total of 573 inhabitants. By 1870, only seven years after the borough was born, the population of Mahanoy City alone had increased to 5,533.

In addition to his leadership in the valley's industry and the borough's government, Wiggan also played a role in making sure the citizens of the new borough were supplied with basic goods — he opened a grocery store on West Centre Street just east of Catawissa, where the early settlers could purchase foodstuffs and dry goods.

Wiggan made all these contributions at an age when most men are thinking retirement. He was in his mid-60s (an ancient age in those days) when Mahanoy City made its debut, yet he plunged himself into the birth and growth of the community.

AFTER HE had done his share to launch the new town on its way to solid boroughhood, George decided it was time to take it easy. He was approaching his 70th birthday when the minutes of the Mahanoy City Borough Council on Nov. 26, 1869, made the following comment:

"Wiggan resigned as president and member of council to take effect Dec. 1 when he will move to Philadelphia. A resolution of appreciation was voted him and he turned over the charter and other borough papers to the treasurer."

It's a commentary on the respect an entire town had for George Wiggan to entrust him with sole possession of its official charter and other important borough papers.