

## MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

# Plenty of history in Foundry Row

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Herald Writer

ALONG ROUTE 54, just west of the Mahanoy City Borough line, stands a compact row of 20 homes known as Foundry Row.

Hidden behind that name is a pivotal slice of history which, in passage of generations, has been lost to most of today's Mahanoy residents. But it's history that every local citizen ought to know, for without the contributions of that pioneer foundry, Mahanoy City might never have been the bustling boom town that it grew to be.

And what better time to learn this bit of history than now, as the community begins its 125th year as a borough.

MORE FITTINGLY, Foundry Row might have been called "Wrenville" as a tribute to the pioneer whose enterprise and inventive genius brought the industrial revolution to the Mahanoy Valley.

Thomas Wren was 40 years old when he arrived in the newly created borough of Mahanoy City in 1864. Behind him lay 14 years of industrial enterprise that helped put Pottsville on the map as America's first industrial boom town.

Twenty-five years earlier, when Wren was 15 years old, he arrived in Pottsville by Schuylkill Canal boat with his widowed mother and six other children. The father had died in Nova Scotia.

In Pottsville, Thomas and his brothers, James and John, became apprentices in the Haywood and Snyder foundry. By 1849, they had saved enough to enter business for themselves and formed the company of J. Y. Wren and Brothers, leasing an old foundry once used to make cannon balls for the government.

A year later the brothers erected a new plant which they called the Washington Iron Works. It was located at Norwegian and Railroad streets, later the site of the Reading Railroad depot and today occupied by the plaza office building.

The Washington Iron Works went into production in 1850, a time when the anthracite industry was striving to develop markets in the metropolitan regions to the south and east. The Wrens designed and produced custom-made machinery and engines that enabled the coal industry to



**Thomas Wren**  
Pioneer industrialist

vastly increase production and realize its potential as a major fuel.

It was through the Wrens' influence that the first rolling mill came to Pottsville, erected in Fishbach (northeastern section of the city) by Harris, Burnish and Company, to produce T-rail and bar iron for the mining industry. The Wrens also furnished the mechanization for a second rolling mill at Palo Alto, operated by Harris, Bright and Lee Company.

WHEN THE WREN brothers opened their Washington Iron Works in Pottsville, the eastern section of the Mahanoy Valley was a wilderness. There were no such places as Mahanoy City, Gilberton, Shenandoah, Girardville and Ashland. In the area from Shenandoah to Mahanoy City there were but two or three residents who lived in log houses and served as landholding agents for large real estate speculative companies.

By the early 1860s, the railroads were extending their lines to the coal-rich Mahanoy Valley, and the new frontier beckoned to men of pioneer spirit. Such a man was Thomas Wren.

He withdrew from the family business in Pottsville and turned his attention to the newly

created borough of Mahanoy City, where he proceeded to build the Grant Iron Works. Beginning production in 1864, the plant consisted of a complex of stone buildings along the main road leading westward out of the borough. Included were a foundry building, machine shop, erecting shop, smith shop and office.

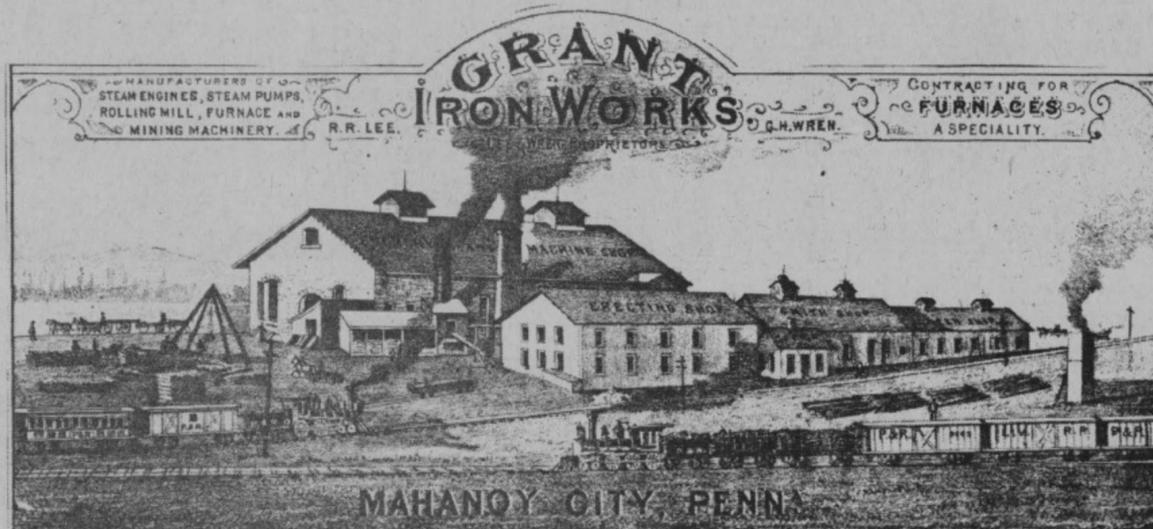
It was here that a corps of 50 workmen produced the steam engines, steam pumps, rolling mill stock and other machinery that mechanized the many collieries booming in the area.

Why Wren chose the name Grant for his new enterprise is not known. However, since the Civil War was raging at the time, and 11 members of the Wren clan were serving in the Union Army, it may have been that the foundry was named in honor of General Ulysses S. Grant.

THE GRANT IRON Works came into existence at an opportune time for the new borough as well as for the nation. The government sorely needed fuel for the furnaces producing munitions for the war effort, and the Mahanoy Valley had vast stores of anthracite waiting to be mined for that purpose. By supplying the collieries with the machinery that made it possible to greatly increase production, Thomas Wren made a vital contribution to the Union cause and likewise enabled the valley to do its share to answer the call of President Lincoln.

With the end of the Civil War, a slump settled over the anthracite industry. However, the boom of 1863-65 had given the new borough of Mahanoy City a solid start that enabled it to weather its first recession, just as it would survive recessions to come during the century ahead. Thanks to the Grant Iron Works, the mechanization of the collieries created many jobs to attract a great influx of immigrants who came to stay, thus sparing Mahanoy City the ghost town fate which befell boom towns of the West.

With the war rush over, Wren decided to return to Pottsville to devote attention to other interests which included mining, banking, manufacturing and utilities. He owned collieries at Eagle Hill (Pottsville), Saint Clair and Mount Laffee, was a director of the Miners National Bank of Pottsville and First National Bank of Mahanoy City; a stockholder in the Hamburg



**IRON WORKS** — This 1881 sketch depicts the Grant Iron Works complex which once occupied the site of what is now Foundry Row. Built in 1864 by Thomas Wren of Pottsville, the

plant manufactured the steam engines and machinery that enabled the anthracite industry to boom in the Mahanoy Valley.

Savings Bank and the Shamokin Banking Company, a founder of the Orwigsburg Shoe Company and a director of the Edison Electric Illuminating Company in Pottsville.

THUS, IN 1867 Wren turned the Grant Iron Works over to his son, George H., who had been serving as the plant business manager up to that time. An 1864 graduate of Eastman Business College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., George was adept in the business end of the operation, but he needed a partner with expertise in the foundry trade. He chose Ralph R. Lee who had been assistant superintendent of the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company shops in Pottsville.

The Lee & Wren Company operated the Grant foundry for the next 10 years. In 1877 they dissolved the firm and George Wren became sole owner of the plant which continued to operate for the remainder of the century. Lee remained in Mahanoy City until 1881 when he returned to the P&RC&I shops in Pottsville.

A COUNTY HISTORY of 1893 (Samuel T. Wiley) reports that Thomas Wren maintained his principal address at 600 E. Norwegian St., Pottsville.

The family originated in Scotland, where Thomas was born on June 10, 1824. In 1831 his father, William, and his oldest son, William, were recruited to work for an English company developing coal mines in Nova Scotia. They sailed to the new

world, leaving Mama Wren (Jean McCreath) and eight other children in Scotland. A year later, Papa Wren sent a message to his wife telling her to "pack up, sell off your goods as best you can and come to us in America. We have paid your passage and expenses to make you comfortable on the way."

The William Wren family had six happy years in Nova Scotia, until 1838 when he died of pneumonia, leaving the mother with eight children.

Word about the United States had reached in Nova Scotia, and Mrs. Wren sent her oldest son, William, to investigate. He made his way to Pottsville and found work in the mines. A year later he sent for the rest of the family, which by then was reduced to six children, since one of the boys, Hugh, had died.

Leaving her little piece of ground, log house and cows, Mrs. Wren and the children they sailed to New York, took a train to Philadelphia and boarded a Schuylkill Canal boat for the trip to Pottsville. Here, the oldest son, William, continued to support the family while the younger children went to school or eventually went their own ways.

FOR THOMAS WREN, Pottsville was home for most of his adult life, but Mahanoy City was a major beneficiary of his legacy as a pioneer whose contributions made it possible for the new borough to grow and prosper. He was a key figure in the First National Bank of

Mahanoy City opened in 1864, and the Wiley history also lists him as a past master of the Mahanoy City Free and Accepted Masons Lodge 357 which is still alive and doing well.

Thomas had eight children by two marriages. His first wife was Mary Hay of Pottsville. They were married in 1844 and she died in 1853. Their children were Mrs. John (Agnes) Kemmerer, whose husband was a Pottsville saddler; William, the Civil War veteran; George H., Mahanoy City; James, a machinist at the Grant Iron Works; Robert, a Pottsville Machinist; Joseph, a Pottsville moulder.

His second wife was Sarah Shorno of Pottsville. They were married in 1861 and had two children: Mary and Martha.

SOME OF THE Grant Iron Works buildings were still standing in 1921 when the Lutz Lumber Company purchased the property and erected lumber sheds along the Reading Railroad siding.

Lutz also razed the abandoned foundry buildings and constructed the 20 homes which inherited the name of Foundry Row.

Next time you pass that way, think of the history that reposes there and remember the pioneers like Thomas Wren whose courage, foresight and enterprise provided the foundation that made it possible for Mahanoy City to be around to celebrate its existence 125 years later.