

MAHANOEY CITY CHRONICLES

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Written by Bill O'Brien, Herald Writer
Researched by Lorraine Stanton

Transcribed by:
Shirley E. Ryan
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MAHANOEY TUNNEL: TROUBLED TIME RIOTOUS EPISODES AT START AND FINISH OF CONSTRUCTION

If any one event were to be singled out as the most significant factor in the founding and growth of Mahanoy City, it would have to be the opening of the Mahanoy Tunnel.

The tunnel gave the valley convenient access to Philadelphia and the eastern seaboard, and set off the local boom which began in January 1863 with the first shipment of anthracite in a 14-car train from Edward S. Silliman's North Mahanoy Colliery.

The impact of the tunnel is reflected in the population explosion during the borough's formative years. In 1860, two years before the tunnel opened, the population of all of Mahanoy Township, including Mahanoy City, was 573. By 1870, a total of 5,532 had settled in the borough. This increased to 6,892 by 1880, to 11,286 by 1890 and to 13,504 by 1900.

Dreams of a tunnel through the Broad Mountain to the coal-rich Mahanoy Valley had occupied the thoughts of landholding companies as early as 1830 when consideration was given to excavating a passage from the gorge north of Darkwater to the vicinity of what is now Gilberton Borough. Nothing came of that proposal, but 14 years later the idea was resurrected by the newly incorporated East Mahanoy Railroad.

Under the charter granted to this company by act of legislature on April 21, 1854, a railroad was to be built from Tamaqua to the south base of Broad Mountain, about four miles east of Mahanoy City, at which point a tunnel of 4,000 feet would pass under the mountain. From there, the road would extend westward to connect with other rail systems operating in the Mahanoy Valley via the Mahanoy and Gordon planes. However, the East Mahanoy company never followed through on the plan, possibly because of a slump in the coal industry during the mid-1850s.

In November 1858, the Miners Journal in Pottsville resurrected the proposal and promoted a tunnel as the most feasible way to open and develop the rich coal seams in the eastern sections of the Mahanoy Valley.

This brought the Little Schuylkill Railroad into the picture. In April 1859 the company (which was run by the same board of directors as the giant Philadelphia and Reading Railroad) leased the East Mahanoy line and received approval of the state legislature to revise the charter so that construction of the tunnel could begin that year.

Some of the valley's landholding companies, realizing that the value of their holding would be vastly increased by the tunnel, contributed towards its costs. Biddle, Troutman, Duncas & co., owners of much of the land in the western area of Mahanoy City, reportedly chipped in \$100,000.

A contract to construct the tunnel was awarded by the Little Schuylkill Company to Michael Barry of Lancaster and a man named Bauns. However, Bauns withdrew before the project began and sold his interest to Barry's brothers, Patrick J. and Philip, also of Lancaster (as reported in 1905 paper read before the Schuylkill County Historical Society by Mrs. T.H.B. Lyons of Mahanoy City)

When construction began in the summer of 1859, Patrick Barry assumed the duties of superintendent. He erected a temporary dwelling for his wife and three small children on the south side of the mountain - the settlement which later became known as Mahanoy Tunnel. Also residing with him were his brother, Philip; a nephew, Michael J. Barry of Lancaster; and a brother-in-law, N.B. Decker of New York state.

Barry's first mistake was recruiting a work force of Irish immigrants who came from rival clans traditionally at odds in "The Ould Country". Pat McCann was the leader of the "Fardowns" faction, and a man named O'Donnell led the "Corkonians". One group worked the day shift, the other the night shift.

A story of the trouble they fomented was provided years later by Frederick Reidinger, chief blacksmith on the tunnel job, who settled in Mahanoy City.

One day O'Donnell was in the blacksmith shop when McCann came in. They immediately began sparring and O'Donnell became so furious he picked up a heavy hammer and struck McCann so hard it was thought he would die. However, in a few days McCann was around again, blatant as ever.

When Barry learned of the trouble he fired both men. O'Donnell left the area, but McCann, who ran a speakeasy in the valley toward Lakeside, stayed around and when ready to work, he was put back on the job by Hugh Dolan, boss of the Fardowns. Barry found out about it and ordered McCann off the premises. In protest, the entire Fardowns crew quit.

Barry continued the job with only one crew, but the Fardowns began tormenting them, waylaying, badgering and stoning them.

Some of the idle men were married and lived with their families in shacks nearby. They went to Barry and asked to be rehired. He agreed to take the married men back, but refused to rehire any single men because they were the agitators.

During the last week of December 1859, notices appeared in the tunnel and outside the blacksmith shop threatening that if Barry didn't rehire all the Fardowns, he would face "THIS" – a revolver. Barry refused to back down. He told Hugh Dolan to tear down the notices and go on with the work.

On New Year's Eve, after nightfall, a crowd of men gathered outside Barry's home and shouted that they would ask him six times to come out, and if he failed to respond after the sixth call, he would suffer the consequences.

Barry prepared for battle. He instructed his wife and children to lie on the floor, he joined his nephew, Mike and brother-in-law, Decker, in positions with firearms poked out through the slightly opened slide-up board windows.

A shot was fired from outside and the Barrys responded in kind. Before the battle was over, 36 shots had struck the house and just as many or more had been returned. The mob also tore apart an outside fire place and used the stones to pelt the house. None of the Barrys was hurt but one of the rioters was killed and several wounded.

After daybreak, Barry went to Tamaqua and secured the services of Deputy Sheriff Henry Hugh and a posse. They tracked the rioters to various places, including Hometown, Tuscarora and Summit Hill (then known as Old Mine). A number of Fardowns were arrested at Hometown, but no convictions resulted as all provided alibis.

Also arrested were seven of the idle men who boarded in the shack with Blacksmith Reidinger. However, the blacksmith testified that none of these men left the shack that night. It was therefore concluded that McCann had recruited outsiders to cause the riot. McCann himself disappeared for several years but made the mistake of returning and was arrested.

After the riot, the tunnel work went smoothly. The crews worked on 12-hour shifts, beginning at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., with one hour for lunch. There being no jackhammers in those days, each hole for blasting had to be cut into the solid rock by hand – one man holding the steel bit and another striking it with a sledgehammer. Five pairs of men worked in each heading.

In the beginning, the men were expected to drill seven holes per shift, which they did handily. But then they spoiled it on themselves with spite work. One day, one of the shifts decided to drill eight holes. For spite, the night shift drilled nine. Then the dayshift made it 10. The nightshift countered with 11. Eventually, each shift was drilling 14 holes, which meant extra profit for Barry. He was being paid \$120 per running yard and the men were being paid by the shift (\$1.16 per day for those working at the headings where there was more danger from falling rock, and 87 cents per day for those working at

other jobs). As long as the men were drilling twice the number of holes for the same pay, it was a profit windfall for Barry.

Eventually, it must have dawned on the men that their spite work was hurting no one but themselves for both shifts cut production to the original seven holes. However, Barry wasn't buying. He told them if they could drill 14 holes for spite, they could do the same for pay. After some negotiations, they compromised at 11 holes per shift (one per hour).

In order to expedite the work, Barry had some crews working three consecutive shifts (36 hours) without sleep, then taking a shift to rest, and returning for three more consecutive shifts. Blacksmith Reidinger reported that he himself frequently spent four consecutive shifts on duty as his forge, keeping the drill bits sharp. On some occasions, he said, he spent seven shifts (84 hours) on duty with no time off.

When the tunnel was finished, it was time to celebrate and Mahanoy City was agog with excitement. The Barrys instructed all the hotels in town to serve unlimited eatables and drinkables to his construction crew as well as the railway hands, engineers and officials.

The Little Schuylkill Company ran a locomotive up from Tamaqua to test the tunnel. The test was satisfactory, despite a derailment at the Buck Mountain end when the locomotive struck a rock. The engine was retracked and continued into Mahanoy City where it was greeted by cheering townsfolk and construction crewmen.

However, the happy atmosphere soon turned sour. A misunderstanding arose between the Barrys and the railroad company concerning the measurement of the tunnel and the work done. The company withheld \$60,000 from the contractor, which meant that he couldn't pay the men three months' wages.

Barry called his men together and told them if they'd stand by him, he'd get their wages for them. The men agreed and Barry announced that the tunnel would not be surrendered to the company until he got his \$60,000. His force of 200 men armed themselves and erected eight-foot stone walls at each end of the tunnel, with portholes through which four cannons were positioned.

Great excitement prevailed in the town. There were reports that the railroad would bring in an armed force. With the Civil War going on elsewhere in the nation, it now appeared that Mahanoy City was going to have a war of its own. In fact, for years afterward the local folk referred to the episode as "the little railroad war".

In her 1874 history gleanings Pottsville teacher Sara McCool reported that Barry's men "organized, armed themselves and paraded with fife and drum through the streets of the town. Consternation spread lest serious trouble might result through the entire section".

The railroad company repeatedly sent engines up from Girardville but Barry refused them passage. Thinking to outmaneuver the contractor, the company next ran a passenger train up from Tamaqua, thinking that the tunnel defenders would not fire on a train filled with

people. When the train officials demanded to be allowed through, Paul Barry's response was to order the cannons trained on the engine. The engineer got the message and backed out of danger.

Hearing reports that the railroad company planned a show of force with an armed train to be sent up from Girardville, Barry recruited 300 men and within 24 hours they tore up all the track from the tunnel to Girardville, hurling the rails over the embankment.

The railroad officials realized they faced a formidable foe and decided to enlist government help. They took their case to Governor Andrew Curtin, asking him to send troops to force surrender of the tunnel.

However, Barry was not to be outfoxed. He engaged one of the most respected legal advisors in the commonwealth, Hon. Francis Wade Hughes of Pottsville, who was well-known and respected through the commonwealth. Hughes was recognized as one of the first few great land lawyers in the nation. He also served eleven years as a deputy state attorney general, two years as a state senator (1843-44), two years as secretary of the commonwealth (1851-42) and three years as state attorney general (1852-55). No other citizen in the history of Schuylkill County, before or since, has held so many high offices.

Attorney Hughes hastened to Harrisburg and laid the whole matter before the governor. The governor sent for the president of the railroad and told him to pay the just amount due to the contractors, and if the Barrys still refused to surrender the tunnel, he would take up the case again.

That settled the issue. The company paid the contractor, the contractor paid the men, the torn-up road was restored, the tunnel was turned over to the railroad and the men dispersed.

As the New Year 1863 got underway, everything was moving forward in the new community. The coal industry was growing rapidly, new buildings were going up all over the vicinity, Kaier's Brewery was being built, the railroad bringing in crowds of immigrants and the local civic leaders were preparing the necessary steps to put Mahanoy City on the map as the valley's newest borough.

No doubt, many of the crew who built the tunnel remained in Mahanoy City and took jobs in the mines. Patrick Barry himself bought two lots and built a home in the first block of West Centre Street, north side. He moved in on March 15, 1865, and (according to the borough's 1863 centennial book) his wife lived there for many years passed on. What became of the three Barry children isn't known. The Barry family who later lived in Yatesville Patch were not related, according to Tom Barry of Shenandoah.

Barry later opened a coal mine on the McNeal Tract along the Brandonville road two miles north of Mahanoy City. The site became known as Barry's Patch and in the 1880's consisted of 12 homes. The last of these homes, occupied by the Chesko family, was torn down 20 years ago to make way for strip mining.

Barry's Patch also made the railroad map as a junction for the Lehigh Valley Railroad which branched off at that point and carried passenger trains into Mahanoy City and thence to Park Place. Trains over this branch conveyed passengers to and from New York City, Pittsburgh and points between. The branch was abandoned in the 1920s due to mine cave-ins in the "swamp" between Barrys and Coles.

Today, the Barry brothers are long gone and forgotten. Likewise gone are Barry's Patch, Barry's Junction and the Lehigh Valley Railroad, all so much a part of the area's history.

As the people of Mahanoy City spend the next year celebrating 125 years of boroughhood, the saga of Patrick J. Barry and the Mahanoy Tunnel will serve as a reminder of the rugged spirit of the pioneers who brought civilization to the Valley of Mahanoy.



THE TUNNEL - This is the north portal of the Mahanoy Tunnel as it looks today, 125 years after its opening. The white dot in the distance is the south portal 3,404 feet away. During its three years (1859-62) of building, the tunnel had the amazing record of never having an accident in which a man was seriously injured. However, the project was marked by two riotous episodes, one at the beginning and the other at the end. Today's Mahanoy City Chronicle recounts the highlights of that saga.