

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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JOHN C. KNAPP – MAHANOEY PIONEER

John C. Knapp was a Mahanoy City pioneer whose name is perpetuated in the structure which has occupied the southeast corner of Main and Centre Street for the last 116 years.

The Samuel T. Wiley Schuylkill County history of 1893 described Mr. Knapp as belonging to “that well-to-do substantial class of Germans who have by their industry, economy and thrift added greatly to the prosperity of Schuylkill County”.

He was 35 years old when he arrived here in 1862 with the intention of launching a business. An immigrant from Germany, he was born in Wurtemberg in 1827, son of Charles and Maria Regina (Nuffer) Knapp.

At age 24 he crossed the ocean to the new world and reached Schuylkill County in 1851. After four years at Minersville he went to Port Carbon and spent four more years working in a flour mill. In 1859 he moved to Pottsville and became a butcher, the trade he brought to Mahanoy City to establish his permanent foothold three years later.

In 1863, the year the Mahanoy frontier town became a borough, there were two butchers doing business here. One was John C. Knapp, the other John Quin (Quin's shop was located in the old Cooperative Building at the northwest corner of Main and Centre until 1921 when the structure was razed to make room for construction of the Union National Bank).

After getting his start as a butcher, Mr. Knapp added a bakery and confectionery line, and within 10 years he accumulated enough capital to construct one of the town's most substantial buildings at one of the prime business locations. The three-story brick building Knapp Building opened for business at the southeast corner of Main and Centre Streets in 1874.

The ground floor of the Knapp Building consisted of store rooms, the second floor was devoted to office rooms, and the third floor had a large hall for public use. The minutes of many of the local fraternal, civic, religious and other organizations of that era recorded the proceedings of meetings held in Knapp's Hall during the later 1800s.

Even the basement was utilized for business purposes, having been occupied for some years by a saloon and eating establishment, until 1922 when Jackie Davidson moved his barbershop there.

The Wiley volume of 1893 described John C. Knapp in glowing terms: “Mr. Knapp is a prosperous, energetic, honest businessman and through his own efforts has won for himself a place of recognition among the business men of this city. He attends closely to and superintends all of his business transactions and by exercise of care and prudence has succeeded in accumulating a fair share of this world’s goods. He is a good citizen, kind, generous and loyal to the interests of state and home”.

With press notices like that, it’s easy to see why his fellow citizens elected him to serve at various times on the borough council and the school board.

He belonged to the German (Christ) Lutheran Church, the German order of Harugari and the General Grant Lodge 575 International Order of Odd Fellows.

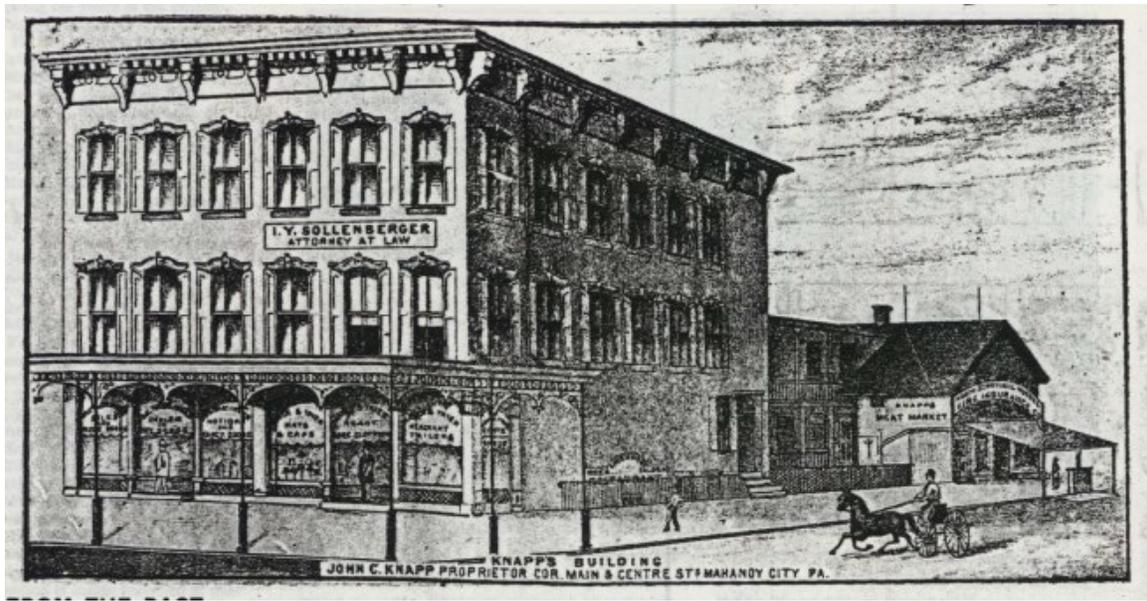
Mr. Knapp and his wife, the former Sarah Rieger, a native of Pottsville, had nine children who in 1893 were listed as: Rosa, wife of Wallace Haldeman, Mahanoy City; Maria, Sarah, Laura, Charles, Laura, William, George and John, at home.

The children of John and Sarah Knapp are gone from the scene and their descendants have scattered far from Mahanoy City. The building named after the family no longer is the center of activity that it was in days gone by. The structure has been vacant and in disrepair for some years. A buyer is interested in the site, reportedly planning to develop the corner for other business purposes, and local realtor James Babcock has been trying to facilitate a transaction but has found it difficult trying to get the heirs together to arrange a sale.

Folks who were around Mahanoy City in the 1930s and 1940s recall the Bell Telephone switchboard being located on the second floor of the Knapp Building. In those days before dial phones, when you wanted to make a phone call, you lifted the receiver, placed it to your ear and waited for the operator to say, “Number, please”, whereupon you gave her the number you desired to contact. For instance, if you wanted to call Bob’s Rug Laundry, 718 E Pine St., you told her “39-J” (no seven-digit numbers in those days) and she dialed it from the switchboard. If she couldn’t make the connection, she informed you, “Sorry, that number is busy” or “Sorry, that party does not answer”.

The Mahanoy City telephone directory for 1987-88 lists two Knapp families in town, but neither is aware of any kinship with the pioneer named John C. Knapp.

(Note by transcriber: The Knapp Building and the Noonan Furniture Store were both demolished in the late 1980’s. Along S Main was the Hazel Maid Ice Cream Store, Kline’s Gas Station (later Davendish’s Drug Store, and on the corner of S Main and Market was Shandri’s News stand. Today the lots are a drive-thru bank and a small strip mall of shops along S. Main, one of which is occupied by the State Liquor Store).



FROM THE PAST - This was the bustling Knapp Building at Main and Centre streets, Mahanoy City, in 1875. The third floor was a large meeting hall. On the second floor were the offices of Atty. I.Y. Sollenberger. The ground floor housed two businesses. Mayer and Trier tailors%clothiers at right, Joseph Wadinger dry goods at left. In the basement along the South Main Street side (wrought iron fence protecting the stairway) was the Davenport Saloon and Restaurant. At right, along South Main Street, was John C. Knapp's family residence, meat market and the North Schuylkill Mutual Fire Insurance Company. The sidewalk awnings sheltering the Centre Street store fronts were the fashion of the era, protecting customers from the elements. Today, the building is vacant and waiting to be razed.