

MAHANAY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

Litsch Street: Should have been?

By BILL O'BRIEN
Herald writer

THERE IS NO Litsch Street in Mahanoy City, but there very well might have been, perhaps even should have been, as a memorial to a pioneer whose work made it possible for many of the streets to run the courses they do today.

Henry Litsch was a German immigrant whose legacy lives today in the walls of the Mahanoy Creek. His son, Maurice, also made significant contributions to business and civic life in the community.

Litsch arrived here in the wilderness settlement on Oct. 19, 1858. Chances are he was attracted by advertisements in the newspapers (Ashland, Tamaqua and Pottsville had papers in those days) offering building lots for sale and seeking labor for clearing of the forest and construction of a new town at the eastern end of the valley, where rich deposits of anthracite were waiting to be tapped.

It was in 1858 that the speculators who owned the real estate here began preliminary steps to launch the town they envisioned some day replacing the dense forest through which the creek bearing the Delaware Indian name of "Maghonioy" meandered on a westerly course through the valley.

When Henry Litsch first set foot on the local scene it was occupied by fewer than 10 structures and its principal access to the populated regions north and south was by way of the lonely trail known as the Catawissa Turnpike which wended its way over mountains and through valleys en route between the Schuylkill River at Reading and the Susquehanna River at Bloomsburg.

The landholders (Kear and Patterson in the eastern section of the tract; Dundas, Biddle and Troutman in the western section) engaged surveyors in 1858 to lay out an orderly system of streets and building lots.

HOWEVER. THE meandering



BOOM TOWN — This photo from the archives of the Schuylkill County Historical Society is identified as Mahanoy City in 1864. It's hard to believe that had a photo been taken from the same vantage point just 10 years earlier, it would have shown one or two buildings surrounded by a

creek interfered with the symmetry they wanted in their street plan. So enter Henry Litsch, a 36-year-old stone mason who had emigrated from Germany six years earlier and found his way to Ashland where civilization had taken hold in the western end of the valley.

Under contract with the Mahanoy landholders, Litsch joined another German mason, John Frick, and undertook the ambitious task of straightening the course of the creek. They engaged men to haul stone from the mountainsides for construction of walls for the relocated creek channel running a straight east-west line through the heart of the town.

While here, Litch became one of the 73 citizens who signed the court petition which brought boroughhood to Mahanoy City in December 1863.

BY 1865, THE CREEK project

had been completed and Litsch had enough money accumulated to take a trip back to Germany. He was born there on June 23, 1823, and was 29 years old when he left for America in 1852, staying two years in New York City before coming to Ashland in November 1854 and Mahanoy City four years later.

After 16 months in Germany, Henry returned to America, this time engaging in stone contract work at Slatington, Lehigh County, and subsequently spending a brief period in the west where he engaged in brick manufacturing. He finally returned to Mahanoy City, taking up residence at 833 E. Mahanoy St., and later served a term on borough council.

Henry and his wife, the former Catherine Wagner, had 12 children, five of whom were residing in Mahanoy City in 1890: Maurice, Henry, Peter, Kate and Lena.

dense forest. The view is looking toward the southwest from the ridge northeast of the Reading Railroad station. The large building with flat roof at right center was the old Cooperative Building which stood at the northwest corner of Main and Centre streets until 1921. The building with the

MAURICE LITSCH, the oldest son of Henry and Catherine, became one of the town's prominent businessmen and public officials.

He was born in New York on Oct. 31, 1854, and was four years old when his parents arrived here from Ashland. He attended local grammar school and when his father returned to Germany, Maurice went along and studied there for 16 months. He also completed a year at an academy in Buffalo.

For a while he helped his father in the masonry contracting work in Mahanoy City, but then became the local agent for the Singer Sewing Machine Company. In 1880 he was elected a justice of the peace and in conjunction with the duties of that office he opened an insurance agency. In 1885 he was appointed postmaster and served four years before returning to the insurance business

peaked roof to the left of it, across Centre Street, was the Mansion House Hotel, now the site of the high rise. Notice that the square west (right) of the Mansion House had no buildings and was still filled with trees from the original forest.

and opening a wholesale/retail liquor store.

Maurice began a family of his own after his marriage to the former Helena Blickley on May 14, 1885. They took up residence at 234 W. Mahanoy St. and as of 1893 (according to the Samuel T. Wiley history of Schuylkill County) the family included Cecelia, Maude, George and May.

JOHN FRICK left little information about his background but he was an important contributor to Mahanoy's early development.

It is known, from the borough's 1963 centennial booklet, that he was born in Germany in 1832 and used his masonry skill to build some major structures in Mahanoy City.

Frick is credited with erecting the first stone bridge over the creek at Main and Market streets. He also prepared the face

stone for the tower of the first Saint Canicus Church in 1865, and built the first Centre Street school, a three-story brick building, in 1867.

He also signed the petition for boroughhood and served as a justice of the peace.

The booklet states that in later years Frick left town and moved to Catasauqua where he opened a knife and saw factory. An 1890 directory of Mahanoy City lists him as 66 years old and residing at 831 E. Mahanoy St., next door to Henry Litsch.

JOHN WEBB is recorded in the Samuel T. Wiley History of 1893 as a real estate developer here.

In a town that grew as rapidly as Mahanoy City there was great opportunity in real estate, and those who delved into it were important contributors to the boom. They provided the homes for the throngs of immigrants who created the great melting pot that Mahanoy came to be.

John Webb was born in Pembroke, South Wales, on Nov. 24, 1826. He worked in the mines there until he was 37 years old and decided to try his luck in America.

After a brief stay in Dauphin County he came to the new borough of Mahanoy City in 1863 and found ready work as a colliery superintendent. During the course of eight years in that occupation he accumulated enough capital to purchase considerable real estate for development purposes, a field which he found very profitable. After a decade or so his health began to deteriorate and he retired from business.

Mr. Webb served a term on the borough school board and three terms as chief burgess. He was married to the former Margaret Lewis, a native of Wales, and they resided at 527 E. Pine St. They had a son, Richard.

The name of Webb is still very much present in Mahanoy City. Perhaps this sketch of the pioneer colliery superintendent/real estate speculator will acquaint the local Webbs with one of their ancestors who helped build the town they call home.