

MAHANAOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

## Pioneers had courage, foresight

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Herald writer

GEORGE W. COLE was a major contributor to Mahanoy City's status as an anthracite boom town during the latter decades of the 1800s.

He was the founder of Cole's Colliery, more familiarly known as Tunnel Ridge, which operated in the area now occupied by the Mahanoy Area stadium.

Very little is recorded about Mr. Cole's activities on the local scene, but the existence of Coles Patch is testimony to the presence he once presented here.

He came to the Mahanoy Valley in the late 1850s, reportedly from Tamaqua, and was one of this area's earliest colliery developers, taking his place beside prominent contemporaries such as Edward Silliman who opened North Mahanoy Colliery, George Wiggan who founded Bear Run Colliery, Charles Hill who opened Mahanoy City Colliery, Alfred Lawton who launched Glendon Colliery, J. O. Robinson who developed Robinson's Colliery, and David Bowman who operated the Bowmans Colliery.

TO APPRECIATE the courage and foresight possessed by these pioneers, you have to understand the economic conditions prevailing when they risked their savings to invest in an industry that was by no means healthy at the time.

According to the Samuel T. Wiley history of Schuylkill County (published in 1893), the period 1857-62 was a down cycle for anthracite. There had been an extraordinary demand for hard coal in 1853-54, which attracted big city capitalists to Schuylkill County to get in on the boom.

It was during that boom period that the Mine Hill and Schuylkill Haven Railroad was extended northward over the rugged grades of Broad Mountain to the western end of the Mahanoy Valley. Thought also was devoted at that time to a proposal for driving a tunnel through the mountain, which would eliminate the difficulty of the surface

grades. At first it was thought the tunnel should run from Dark-water northward to Gilberton, but the distance made the cost too great. Eventually, the Buck Mountain site was chosen and the work began in 1859.

By that time, however, the coal industry was in a five-year slump and those who sank their savings into the new mining enterprises in the Mahanoy Valley must have been troubled by thoughts of bankruptcy. Still, they went ahead with development of the mines, and the gamble paid off when the Civil War brought a great government demand for anthracite. The year of 1863 saw an unprecedented boom — just in time for Mahanoy City to begin its journey into boroughhood.

Colliery owners played a prominent role in the creation of

the borough. The signatures of many of them appear on the court petition for incorporation. In fact, all those colliery pioneers mentioned above were signers of that petition, except George W. Cole.

Why Mr. Cole missed the opportunity to sign the borough petition is not known. Certainly, he was here early enough. Records reveal that Cole began shipping coal via the railroad as soon as the the Mahanoy Tunnel opened in 1863. This indicates that his colliery must have been under construction for some time prior to that date.

LIKE SO many other mining operations of that era, Cole opened his colliery on leased ground. The owner was the Philadelphia and Mahanoy Coal Company. When his lease expired in 1879, he sold his rights to the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company.

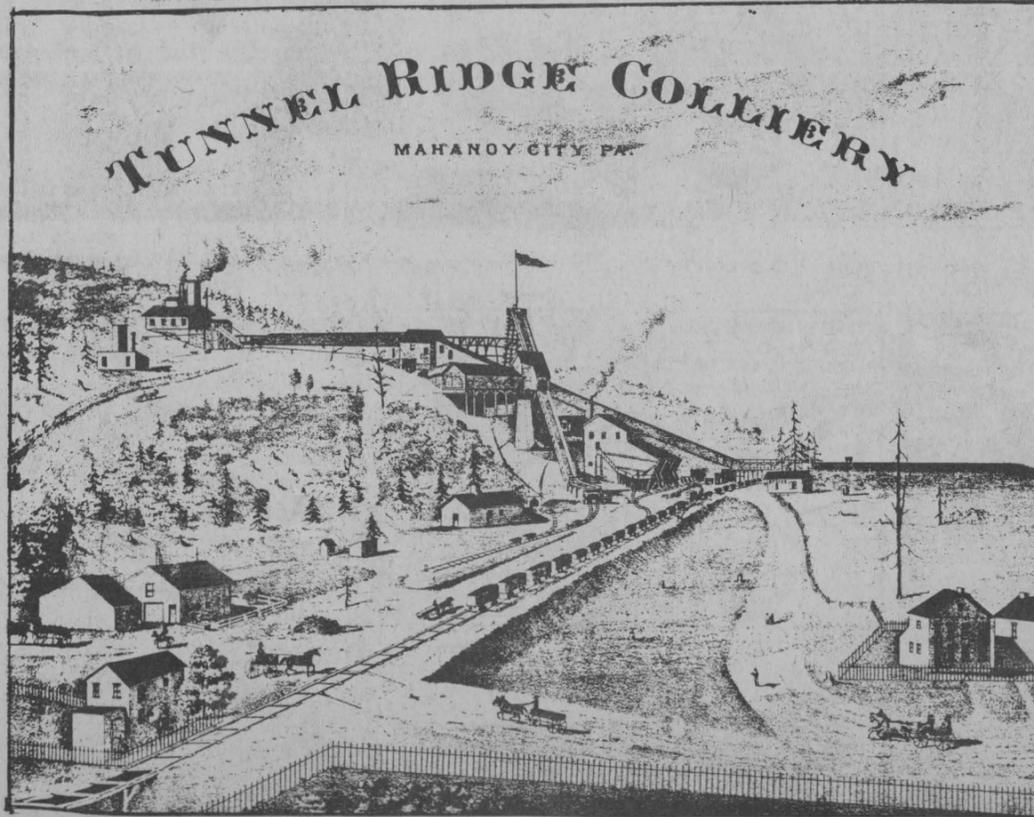
Tunnel Ridge was a thriving under both Cole and the P&RC&I ownership for 30 years, but it began running out of coal reserves around the turn of the century. When the workings extended eastward beneath the borough, it was necessary to protect the surface from subsidence by leaving bigger pillars of coal in the various veins. This reduced the percentage of recoverable coal, and the colliery declined into the status of a poor producer.

Some new life was injected when the P&RC&I decided to merge the Tunnel Ridge workings with those of its sister operation, the Elmwood Colliery, immediately to the north. A tunnel was driven beneath the valley floor to connect the workings, and thereafter the Elmwood coal was hauled underground to the Tunnel Ridge side where it was hoisted to the surface and prepared in the breaker.

A similar boost was given to the colliery in 1921 when the company decided to abandon the Boston Run Breaker and ship the coal to Tunnel Ridge. For this purpose, a railroad was built along the side of the mountain (the outline of the track bed is still visible) and electric locomotives with dumper bins were used to haul the raw coal from the top of the Boston Run Slope to the top of the Tunnel Ridge Breaker.

Back in the 1930s and '40s when Sunday strolls were a popular form of recreation, this old railroad bed was once a favorite hiking trail for townfolk. Along the way were some wells known as "the three cold springs" where hikers refreshed themselves with the clear, cold mountain water. The two-mile saunter down the mountainside afforded a scenic panorama of the valley.

THE GREAT Depression spelled doom for Tunnel Ridge, as it did for many other deep mining operations. The colliery was abandoned in 1931 and strip



**HISTORIC COLLIERY** — Two views of Tunnel Ridge Colliery show it in 1875 (top) and 1913. Some of the homes that once stood in that area, now occupied by the Mahanoy Area stadium, may be seen in the lower right corner of the top photo. The bottom photo shows the mineworkers, one accompanied by his lady,

lined up for payday. Pays were distributed twice monthly on Saturday, and there was usually a hot time in the old town on that evening. Judging by the attire on the gents in the pay line, they were ready to hit the town as soon as the pay envelopes hit their pockets.

mines began tearing up the terrain, obliterating the landmarks of the colliery where hundreds of Mahanoy City residents derived their livelihoods for seven decades.

Today, the only vestige of what used to be Tunnel Ridge is the culm bank along the mountainside where breaker waste was dumped. Even the culm bank is destined to disappear as the network of new cogeneration plants in the vicinity begin gobbling it up for fuel.

Tunnel Ridge saw its share of labor turmoil. One of the earliest shootings of the Molly Maguire era took place there on April 2, 1866, when one Patrick Dooling wounded Thomas Lewis, the inside foreman. Dooling himself was shot and killed by the return fire.

The violent strikes of 1900 and 1902 brought national guard cavalry troops to patrol the colliery and guard against the riotous uprisings troubling mining operations throughout the valley.

COLES PATCH, which was built to house employees at the Tunnel Ridge Colliery, has been around longer the Mahanoy City borough. This was noted in a previous Chronicle which pointed out that some of the men who came here to drive the Mahanoy Tunnel and build the railroad in 1859-63 were unable to find living quarters in the town, which then numbered less than 20 structures, so they boarded at a large rooming house at Coles.

The Coles that we know it today is but a skeleton of its original makeup. Today's oldtimers can recall when, as late as the 1950s, there were homes in the area on the south side of the Mahanoy Creek, behind where the Acme Market now stands, as well as in the area now occupied by the stadium.

There was a time when Coles was the educational center of Mahanoy Township. The village was the site of the first township high school, built in 1900, which stood beside a two-room elementary school.

The old high school served until 1916 when a new school was opened on the hillside at the south end of Fourth street in Mahanoy City, the site presently occupied by the Mahanoy Area Intermediate School.

The elementary school closed in 1937 when the central elementary building opened at Suffolk.

The most famous native son of Coles Patch was Dan Flood, who grew up to become a U. S. congressman. He was a boy when his family moved to Wilkes-Barre where he distinguished himself as a scholar, graduating second in his high school class.

His most noteworthy accomplishment in behalf of this region of his birth was the location of the Veterans Administration medical center in Wilkes-Barre.