

## MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/ Special edition

# The tale of two suburban heights

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YOU'VE PROBABLY heard of Shenandoah Heights, McAdoo Heights, Hazleton Heights, Marion Heights and perhaps a few other heights in the surrounding region.

But have you heard of Mahanoy City Heights?

True, such a community does not exist, but it would have existed had the New Boston Land Company's plans become reality back in the early 1920s.

The land company devoted the time, trouble and expense of surveying the mountaintop south of town, mapping out 734 neatly aligned building lots and promoting them in the news media as the site for a new community. But alas, the dream came to naught.

At the time the New Boston Land Company conceived of the "Highlands" idea, the anthracite region was enjoying its greatest boom, brought about by World War I. The employment boom at the mines created a pressing need for housing to accommodate the influx of workers and their families, but there was absolutely no available spot on which to build within the squeezed confines of the borough. Nor was there any expansion acreage in the township area immediately adjoining the borough, since collieries and related workings proliferated the landscape.

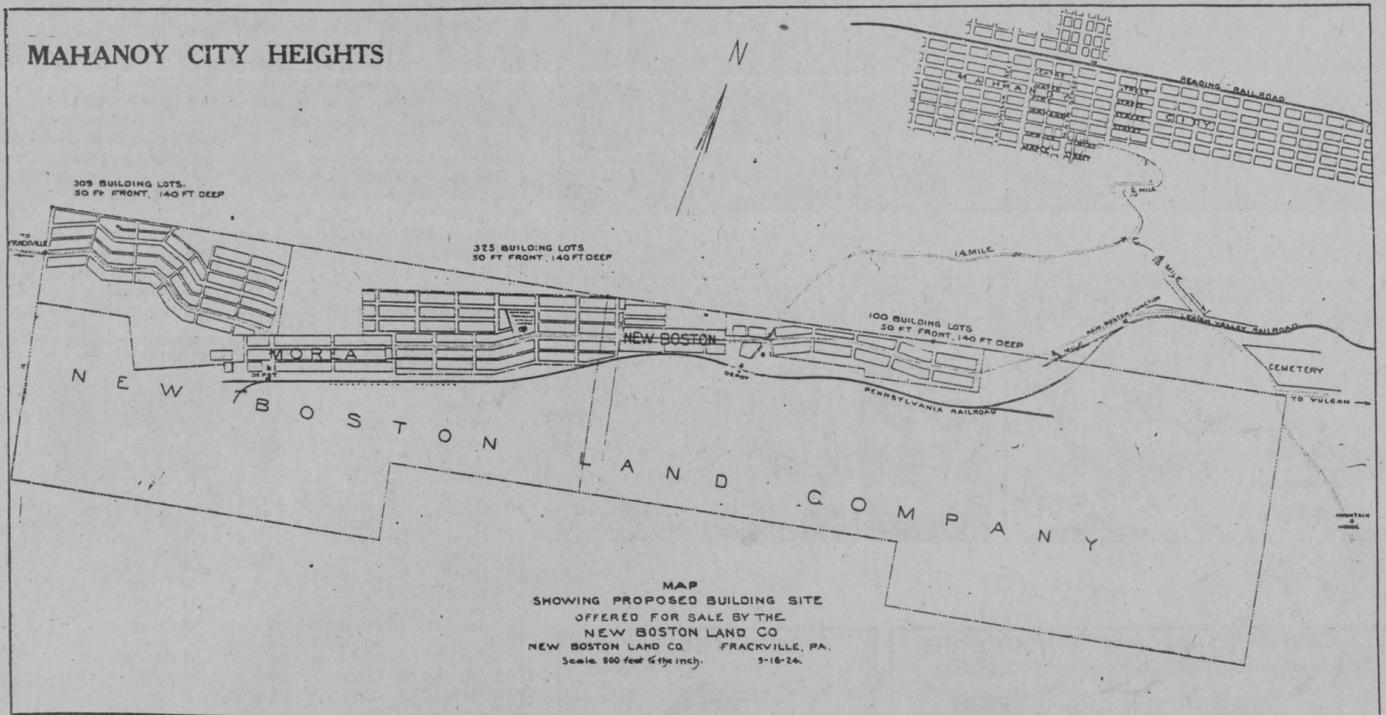
However, the land across the Broad Mountain expanse overlooking Mahanoy City was only available and ideal for home construction, since there were no underlying coal reserves.

HAD THE New Boston Land Company developed its idea it very well might have succeeded. But unfortunately, by the time the company finished mapping out and otherwise preparing its dream project for public promotion, conditions in the coal industry had begun to change. The war's end brought a halt to the boom. There were no more six-day work weeks at the collieries, mining jobs were no longer crying for workers, and the impact was becoming noticeable in population statistics.

The town's population leading into the war years (1914-18) reached the all-time peak of 15,938. In 1920 there were still 15,599 people packed into the borough, but the downspiral was already becoming slowly more and more evident.

The nation was heading for the dark decade of economic gloom which struck just a few years later with the stock market crash of 1929. Thus ended the New Boston Land Company's dream of a new mountaintop town.

IT WAS AN attractive suburban community that the New Boston



**FORGOTTEN COMMUNITY** — This map from 64 years ago outlines 734 building lots which the New Boston Land Company laid out for sale to develop a new mountaintop community designated as Mahanoy City Heights. Additional

housing was badly needed at the time, as no homes were available for families seeking dwellings in the borough, nor was there an available ground in the borough on which to build. However, the idea of a Mahanoy Heights (also

called Highlands) proposal lay dormant for half a century, until a decade ago when some home construction commenced along the New Boston state highway.

Land Company laid out for Mahanoy City Heights. There were 734 lots, each with 50-foot front and 140-foot depth, stretching for 2.3 miles across the mountain. All were located away from the coal seams and laid out to form a community contiguous to existing New Boston and Morea homes.

The project was designed in three separate areas. The east group was situated east of New Boston and contained 100 lots. The middle group consisted of 325 lots situated between New Boston and Morea, with the Lincoln School in the center. The western group consisted of 309 lots.

Had the dream materialized, we might today be looking at a suburban community of 3,000 or more people.

**THE DREAM THAT** never came to pass six decades ago is today finally on the verge of reality. The New Boston Land Company is gone but the Skytop Coal Company is here, and under its tenure the mountaintop scene is sprouting with new homes each month.

And with the congeneration industry attracting new

development to the vicinity, it's not far-fetched to look 20 years into the future and envision a mountaintop filled with modern dwellings stretching from Delano to Frackville.

**MAHANOY HEIGHTS** never came to be, but a decade later there arose another "Heights" on the ridge north of town. They called it "Castle Heights" and it was the product of a different type of housing problem — the homeless.

It was the midst of the Great Depression and the growing number of homeless people was a growing concern for society. The problem was placed in the hands of the Schuylkill County Unemployment Relief Board, whose representative in Mahanoy City was Joseph Halka, a well-known American Legionnaire and later the proprietor of an insurance agency on West Centre street.

In January 1937 Halka released the findings of a sociological survey which revealed 125 homeless living in local basements, abandoned warehouses, garages, shacks and caves. All were males, or least the reported made no mention of female homeless. He said the

situation was increasing in seriousness because the number of cases were growing.

**HALKA'S** description of the homeless abodes was not flattering. He said the places were "filthy, unsanitary and squalid" and the "growing practice of forming communities could be a serious health menace to the community as well as have a harmful moral effect."

However, he denied the supposition among some people that most of these men were lazy. He pointed out that most had steady jobs until the depression struck, and some were employed on WPA projects and walked many miles daily to their jobs.

What to do about their plight? Halka said the State Emergency Relief Board was hoping to place some of the "more desirable" homeless in private homes (as boarders) but others would need institutional care.

He outlined a five-point strategy: (1) secure suitable quarters with private families; (2) encourage the men to better their own condition; (3) enlist public interest and cooperation; (4) arrange for bathing and washing places; (5) enlist the

help of clergy, public officials and service clubs to make contacts with the homeless.

**OF THE** 125 homeless men in the Mahanoy vicinity, 88 were in that predicament because of economic factors, and most were 55 years and older.

He counted a total of 58 shacks scattered about the area, some of which were adjacent to the borough dump. It was the era when "bum shanty towns" (sometimes called Hoovervilles, a politically derogatory term aimed at the fact that Herbert Hoover was president when the Depression struck) began appearing on the fringes of municipal dumping grounds all around the region.

The cluster of shacks near the Mahanoy City dump was christened "Castle Heights." The dump was located a half mile north of town on the crest of hill just west of the Brandonville highway. The shacks were in the wooded area about 75 yards west of the dump.

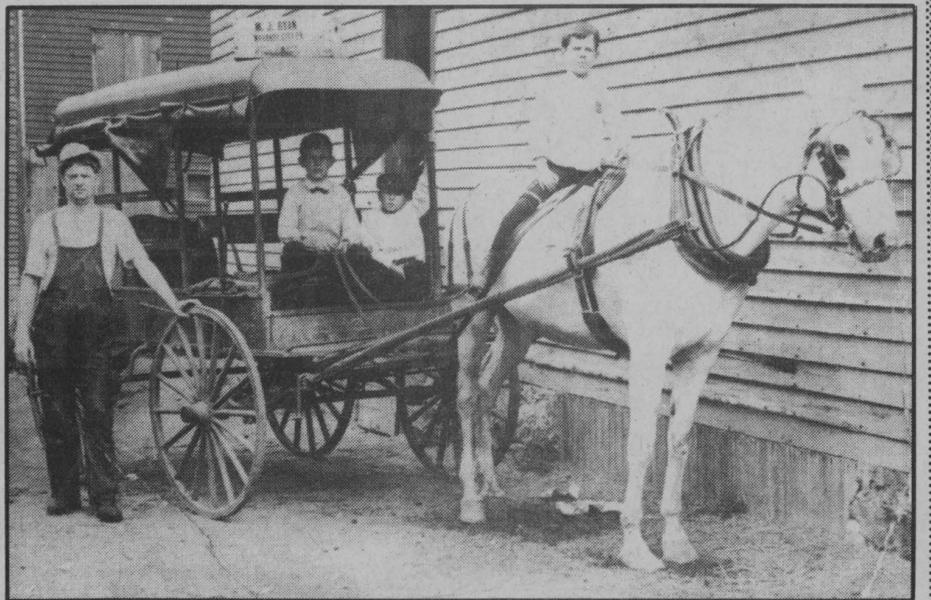
The inhabitants of Castle Heights were well-known around town, with names like Blackie, Schwoddie, Kehoe and Kyran. Some oldtimers today who were

familiar with the situation will tell you that the men of Castle Heights were better off in many respects than some citizens of town. At the dump they were able to forage edible morsels from the partly spoiled produce discarded by local grocery stores, while many a local family had insufficient nourishing food on the table.

The end of Castle Heights was legislated in Harrisburg around the late 1950s when the Commonwealth decreed an end to the old open dumps. A few of the shanties remained intact for several years thereafter, serving as shelters for their aging occupants who refused to let go of the independent life in the great outdoors.

Today the site of Castle Heights is no more, having been obliterated by the Reading Anthracite strip mining. The company's huge 7400 Marion dragline shovel is standing on the spot.

**THE DAYS** of Mahanoy Heights and Castle Heights are long gone, but the memories remain as part of the history in a town marking 125 years of existence.



## Scenes from an old Mahanoy City family album

Shirley Thomas Ryan of Allentown provided these photos from the family album of her Mahanoy City ancestors. LEFT: The Ryan Bottling Works wagon used to deliver beverages during in the early 1920s. The

scene is behind Saint Canicus Church. Dick Ryan is standing beside the wagon, "Bud" holds the reins, Paddy sits on the seat, Johnny straddles the horse. RIGHT: The Methodist

Church baseball team poses on its float for 1913 homecoming parade. Mr. Stokes, a borough plumber, stands at left. The only player identified is William Thomas of Suffolk

Patch, top left on the float, who was the father of Helen Phillips of Suffolk and the grandfather of Shirley Thomas Ryan who provided the photos.