

## MAHANOEY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

# Silliman was foremost citizen



**Edward S. Silliman**  
Foremost citizen

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**YOU COULD** spell it Silliman, you could spell it Sillyman, you could spell it Selliman, but no matter how you spelled the last name of Edward S. Silliman, it identified the No. 1 citizen in the early history of Mahanoy City.

The 1916 J. H. Beers biographical book of Schuylkill County said it all:

"Edward S. Silliman is without question the foremost citizen of Mahanoy City. He has been prominent in every avenue of local progress, but it is as chief promoter of important public utilities in the borough that he has been most helpful to his fellow citizens."

How did he help his town? Count the ways:

—He was the first to open a coal mine (North Mahanoy) in the vicinity, sinking his shaft in 1861, erected the first breaker and was the first to ship coal to market, on Jan. 14, 1862. At that time, there wasn't another colliery within eight miles.

—He was the first to provide company homes for his employees, including houses in the vicinity of the colliery and others at the west end of Spruce street, known as Stony Point.

—He was a signer of the petition drafted by local freeholders for incorporation of Mahanoy City Borough.

—He was inspector for town's

first councilmanic election on Feb. 23, 1864.

—He became a member of the borough council in 1865 and headed the finance committee.

—He gave the town its first financial institution, the First National Bank, organized on Sept. 27, 1864, and served as its third president.

—He was a founder of the first fire company, the Humane, on June 18, 1868.

—He brought the town out of the dark by introducing illuminating gas for street lights and buildings with the establishment of the Mahanoy City Gas Company on Feb. 21, 1874.

—He brought law and order to a turbulent town by bankrolling the formation of a local military unit on March 13, 1875. The unit was named Silliman Guards in his honor and became a member of the Pennsylvania National Guard.

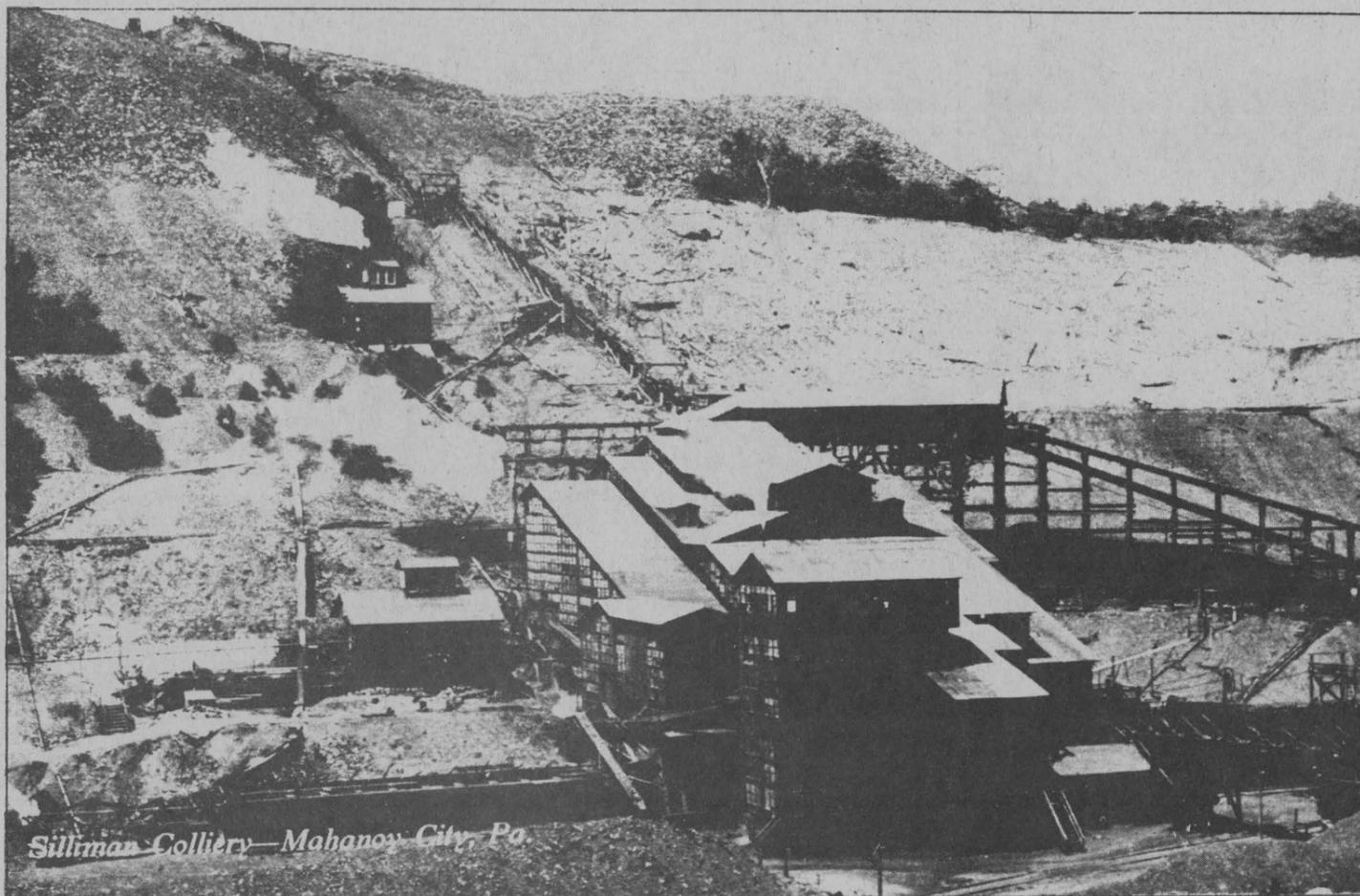
—He gave the town its first water distribution system as organizer and president of the Mahanoy City Water Company in February 1886.

—He introduced electricity in 1887 by organizing the Mahanoy City Light, Heat and Power Company which he served as president.

**EDWARD SILLIMAN'S** grandfather, James Sillyman (sometimes spelled Selliman) was the first of the family lineage to arrive in America. He settled in the Hamburg area of Berks County, married Susannah Hughes of Bucks County and had a family of five sons and three daughters.

One of the sons, Alexander, served in the War of 1812. The other four were early settlers in Pottsville where they became prominent residents: Samuel and John were involved in the timber and mining business; Thomas was Pottsville's first postmaster (1825) and owned most of the land where the community of Cressona now stands (one of that borough's streets still bears his name); James conducted a store and was involved in the coal business but later returned to Berks County where he served as sheriff and raised a family of nine, one of whom was James, the father of Mahanoy City's pioneer leader, Edward.

**EDWARD WAS** born near Hamburg on June 20, 1820, and came north to Pottsville around 1840, a time when anthracite mining was beginning to prosper. His study of the county's



**FIRST COLLIERY** North Mahanoy Colliery, pictured here before the turn of the century, was founded by Edward S. Silliman Sr. in 1861, the first mining operation in the

geological formations led him to conclude that underlying the wilderness of Mahanoy Valley lay rich deposits of anthracite. Accordingly, he negotiated a lease with the Philadelphia landholding firm of Biddle, Troutman & Dundas for a tract in the eastern nook of Mahanoy Valley, just in time to take advantage of the coal boom that began with the outbreak of the Civil War. The slope he sank in 1861 was the start of a colliery that continued to operate as one of the prime producers of anthracite to the end of the deep mine era 95 years later.

Although he owned the operation for only eight years, it continued to be known as Silliman's Colliery through a succession of owners, even in the 20th century when it was better known as North Mahanoy Colliery and one of the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company's key operations.

After selling his colliery to the Crane Iron Company of Catasauqua in 1869, Mr. Silliman

used his accumulated capital to finance the many above-mentioned enterprises which contributed so greatly to the development of Mahanoy City.

In the meantime, he continued scouting for anthracite and discovered a rich basin in the Sheppton-Oneida area where he acquired the rights to 1,600 acres of the prime coal land.

**THE SILLIMAN** family made their home at 44 N. Main St. It was there that Edward and his wife, Siraha Keller of Berks County, to whom he was married in 1858, raised their six children and spent the remainder of their lives.

Their children were Ellen, wife of George Jackson of Philadelphia; Edward S., James, Charles, and two who died in infancy: Howard and Emily.

Son Edward was born here on Feb. 4, 1864, and took his father's place as president of key local enterprises including the bank, gas works, light company and water system. However, the list

vicinity of Mahanoy City. Silliman sold the operation in 1869 just in time to avoid a strike during which the original breaker burned down.

of fraternal affiliations in his 1916 biography indicate that he was drawn more to Pottsville than Mahanoy City. His wife was Mabel Beck of Beckville, north of Cressona. They had four children: Mary, Edward II, Sarah and Jane.

**EDWARD'S BROTHER** James was born March 29, 1869, and began working after high school graduation as a clerk in his father's First National Bank. After nine years he became a teller but his eyesight began to fail and forced him to retire on Aug. 1, 1903. He was a board member at the bank and the water company. At his death in 1914 he left his wife, Catherine (Morscher), and three children: Florence, Edward and Catherine.

**EDWARD SILLIMAN SR.** died on May 1, 1904, seven weeks short of his 84th birthday and 10 years after the death of his wife. Their graves are in Pottsville's Charles Baber Cemetery.

His name and his contributions

are unknown to most of today's residents of the town he did so much to build. The stately Silliman homestead on North Main street, once one of the grandest in town, stands vacant and in a state of disrepair. His colliery, his bank, his light company, his gas company are but memories.

But there are a few remaining monuments to his presence here. Next time you see a local fire truck pass on the street, remember that Edward S. Silliman was one of the handful of men who had the foresight to organize the first fire company back in 1868. And next time you draw water from a faucet in town, remember that it was Edward S. Silliman Sr. who made it possible back in 1886 for townfolk to be relieved of the chore of carrying water in buckets from the nearest well.

Mahanoy City has seen a great many people come and go in its 125 years, but none who did more for the town than Edward S. Silliman.