

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE:
A LOOK AT WYOMING VALLEY HISTORY

CHAPTER THREE
THE SECRETS OF HOME, 1800-1865

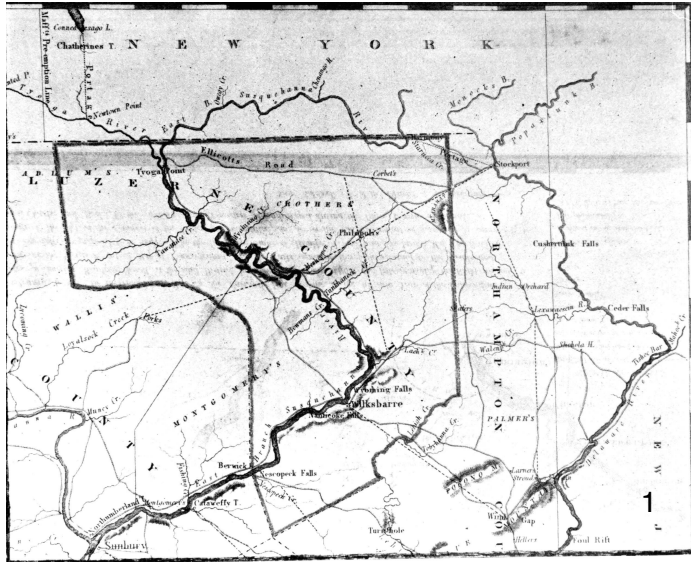
During the 65 years outlined in this chapter, our nation celebrated the exploration of the Louisiana Purchase made by Thomas Jefferson. Fewer than ten years later, we defended ourselves against the British during the War of 1812. Our sense of justice was tweaked and twisted during the Trail of Tears as well as in the war against Mexico in 1846.

Prison reform and better care for the mentally ill kept us busy debating how these issues could be better addressed. The slavery issue, argued since the writing of the Declaration of Independence, plus the contentious ideas of states' rights and secession continually turned us inside out until we finally broke out in civil war in the 1860s. These national events formed the backdrop for what was taking place during the same time in Wyoming Valley.

EARLY DAYS

Once a frontier village, Wilkes-Barre had developed into a bustling borough by the early 1800s. At the time, [Luzerne County](#) (formed in 1786) encompassed most of northeastern Pennsylvania including part of current Bradford and all of the present-day counties of Lackawanna, Susquehanna, and Wyoming. It covered about 5,000 square miles, and nearly 5,000 people lived within its boundaries, according to the 1790 census. By 1800, that number rose to nearly 13,000. The population rose beyond 18,000 by 1810. Clearly, the available agriculture and growing industries in the area were drawing significant attention.

In 1810, Bradford County and Susquehanna County began the process of splitting territory away from Luzerne County (Myers 1835).



A MAP OF LUZERNE COUNTY PUBLISHED IN 1791

Lackawanna County also broke away, but that process did not start until 1878. Luzerne County holdings were eventually reduced to 926 square miles.

In the early days, most of the buildings in Wilkes-Barre were made of logs. The first known brick house was built in 1806 on Public Square

by Joseph Slocum, brother of Frances Slocum.

A second courthouse was built and the Wilkes-Barre Meetinghouse opened becoming Wilkes-Barre's first church. Community organizations such as the Luzerne County Agricultural Society, the Bible Society, a debating society, and the Wilkes-Barre Library Company were all established before 1810.

A MATTER OF FAITH

When early settlers came, they brought their particular ways of worship with them. The Yankees were largely Congregationalists who brought clergy from the Congregationalist Missionary Society of Connecticut. Reverend Jacob Johnson left Groton, Connecticut, and became an itinerant preacher upon his arrival in 1773. Despite his exhortation to his congregants to build a church, there was still no structure for that purpose upon his death in 1798.

By the early 1800s, however, new settlers brought their denominations with them and the need for varied houses of worship grew. The Presbyterians and the Methodists shared a



Forty Fort Meeting House 2

building in the Forty Fort cemetery dedicated in 1808. Originally called Union Chapel since the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists shared it, the [Forty Fort Meetinghouse](#) is considered the third oldest intact structure in Wyoming Valley. It was here that circuit rider Rev. George Peck proposed the idea for Wyoming

Seminary.

The [Wilkes-Barre Meetinghouse](#), finished in 1812 on Public Square, had taken twelve years to build because of a lack of funds. It had the first church bell in the valley. The Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians all contributed to the construction and shared the space. A few years after it was built, an argument



ST. MARY'S CHURCH, CANAL ST., 1845

3

ensued over Christmas decorations. As a result, the Episcopalians decided to buy their own lot and started St. Stephens in 1817 on its present site.

Other church buildings were soon put up. Hanover Green Meeting House, built in 1825, was used by the German Lutheran and Reformed churches.

By 1845, the first Roman Catholic parish was established on South Washington Street as St. Mary's of the Immaculate Conception. The influx of immigrants from Germany and Ireland increased the need for separate houses due to language differences, though each

group had large numbers of Roman Catholics. The Lutherans also built a church on South Washington Street in 1846. In 1863, they built their own school.

In 1837, Martin Long was one of the earliest Jewish settlers in the Wyoming Valley (Levin 19). A native of Pretzfield, Bavaria, Long, like many immigrants of the time, might have come because of the economic hardships he faced. Added to that challenge, however, was the added burden of government rules that allowed for discrimination against Jews (Levin 20).

He and his brothers, Simon and Marx, formed a core of followers that increased over the next few years in Wilkes-Barre. The first synagogue was dedicated in 1849. B’Nai B’rith (sons of the covenant) was financed in part by donations from non-Jewish supporters. The number of synagogues would grow over the next few decades, housing services for Orthodox, Reformed, and Conservative groups.

Other religious parishes such as Lebanese Maronite Rite, Syrian Antiochian, Greek Orthodox, and Russian Orthodox were added during the second wave of immigration in the 1880s.

SCHOOL BELLS RING



Plymouth Academy 4

When the Connecticut Yankees came into the valley, their idea of establishing a public school system came with them. Though it would not get started immediately, the idea had strong roots. By 1781, a public school had been established near Pittston by John Jenkins (Harvey 374). Other schools were in [Plymouth](#), [Nanticoke](#), [Dallas township](#), [Exeter](#), [Newport township](#), and [Larksville](#). Poor children were supposed to be educated at public expense by 1809. Luzerne County appropriated \$3,509 for that purpose between 1824 and 1833 (Harvey 374).

Eventually three strands of education were woven together (Lottick 220). The common school (now called public school) was supported by the taxes of the people. All students were eligible to enroll in the independent school, but payments had to be made by the enrollees. Parochial schools, the third strand, were paid for by a combination of student fees and financial support from the religious institutions.



George Catlin 5

Wilkes-Barre Academy, located in the former courthouse on Public Square, was opened to all male scholars who could pay the tuition. One of the attendees of Wilkes-Barre Academy later became a nationally recognized painter of Native Americans. His name was [George Catlin](#). Though he practiced law for a while in Wilkes-Barre, he moved to Philadelphia to follow his dream of being a painter.

Sally Teller Lottick’s book *Bridging Change* quotes Catlin’s explanation of how he became a painter of Indians:

“A delegation of some ten or fifteen noble and dignified looking Indians, from the wilds of the “Far West” suddenly arrived in Philadelphia arrayed and equipped in all their classic beauty with shield and helmet with tunic and manteau tinted and tasseled off, exactly for the painter’s palette. In silent and stoic dignity, these lords of the forest strutted about the city for a few days, wrapped in their pictured robes, with their brows plumed with quills of the war-eagle, attracting the gaze and admiration of all who beheld them.” (Lottick)



Kee-O-Kuk 6

Long before it was a popular idea, [Catlin](#) suggested that a national park be created to help preserve the disappearing bison. He traveled with his paintings through many cities in Europe, meeting leaders including Queen Victoria of England and King Louis-Philippe of France. Many of his paintings are now in the Smithsonian Institution. He also had the honor of being the first non-French artist to be invited to exhibit his work at the Louvre. That happened, in part, because King Louis of France (when he was the Duke D'Orlean) once visited Wilkes-Barre and stayed at the Arndt Tavern. When Catlin visited France, the royal family was pleased by their shared link to Wilkes-Barre (Brooks interview).



Wilkes-Barre Institute 7

The Wilkes-Barre Female Seminary on River Street opened its doors to girls. They could now get a more advanced education than what they had received on the first floor of the old courthouse on Public Square. Girls had not been permitted to go to the second floor with the boys for a higher level of education. (Lottick 221).

[Wyoming Seminary](#) opened its doors in Kingston in 1844 after a protracted competition between Wilkes-Barre and Kingston over who would get the school to build in their location. Abram Nesbitt, Joseph Lord Butler (who served with the Union navy during the Civil War), and [Henry M. Hoyt](#) (later governor of Pennsylvania) were in Wyoming Seminary's first class, which had fourteen female and seventeen male students. Although the school burned down in 1853, it was rebuilt through the generosity of William Swetland, Payne Pettebone, Isaac Shoemaker, and others.

TRANSPORTATION—FROM HERE TO THERE AND BACK

On an expedition to the Ohio country in 1784, George Washington pointed out that the young nation needed ways to easily travel from one point to the next. That was absolutely correct for the entire country and particularly true for our area. Building a transportation infrastructure was a top priority.

In the early days, a packhorse had been the main way to transport goods across the vast wilderness. Horses followed the Indian trails, which in turn used wild animal paths, for much of their mileage. But the nation and our area were in desperate need of more efficient ways of moving goods and people.

Once the turnpikes were opened, two-horse stagecoach travel was introduced. It would soon be followed by four-horse coach travel for up to twelve passengers. Conrad Teeter advertised in 1811 about his service:



8

*“Stage starts from Wilksbarre every Saturday at 11 A.M. , arriving at Tioga Point on Monday at 12. * * * I have four as good horses as ever travelled, and my stage is new and well-fitted to accommodate*

travelers. I can take twelve passengers. The driving I have the pleasure to assure the publick, will be in the best style, as I drive myself, and am always sober, yet a merry fellow on the road”
(Harvey 1878).

Travelers were eager to share the news of the outside world with the tavern keepers and patrons. The Old Fell Tavern in

Wilkes-Barre was one of the major stopping places in town for food, drink, and the latest news.

Since there were no bridges across the river yet—and wouldn't be until 1819 at Market Street—[Abel Yarrington](#) ran a ferry to carry passengers and goods from the Kingston side to the foot of Northampton Street. Other ferries ran across the river in



Market Street Bridge 9

Nanticoke, Pittston, and Forty Fort. Two turnpikes, the Berwick and the Easton, were soon established; the latter was under the leadership of Wilkes-Barre native Lord Butler.

The opening of the [Market Street Bridge](#) greatly increased the traffic from one side of the river to the other, helping farmers on the west side sell their goods at the market on the Square, which is still done to this day. There was a \$5 fine for moving faster than a walking pace over the bridge. Unfortunately, a windstorm knocked the entire bridge into the river in 1824 and a new one had to be built. That one would last until 1894.

As the roads improved, stagecoach travel went from three times a week to daily line departures to points north and south. From 1824 to 1848, the coaches left Wilkes-Barre at 4 a.m., reaching Easton in the evening and Philadelphia the following day. The fares from Miller, Horton, & Co. were as follows:

“Fare, Owego to Wilkesbarre—\$6.00

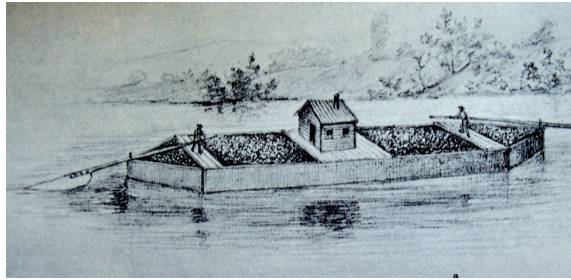
Fare, Wilkesbarre to Bethlehem—\$5.00

Fare, Bethlehem to Philadelphia—\$4.00” (Harvey 1878).

FROM HIGHWAYS TO WATERWAYS

The year 1817 was pivotal for transportation in the United States. The Cumberland Road was underway, the Mississippi River

saw steamboats plying its waters north and south, and the Erie Canal was begun. While the national government never threw its weight behind the canal-building era, states saw the advantages of these water routes.

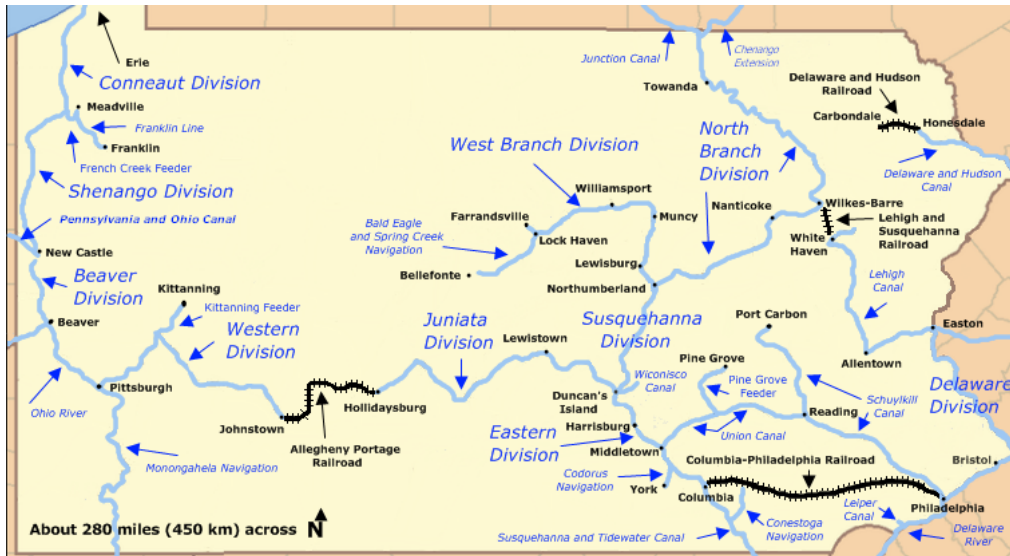


Durham boat 10

Before the advent of canals, however, those who saw the river as a water highway developed flat-bottomed boats to

travel upon it. Durham boats, so called because they were developed in Durham, Pennsylvania, were used before the Revolutionary War. The *“boats were forty feet long, eight feet wide, and two feet deep. They were poled up and down the river by five-man crews, drawing about twenty inches of water when carrying fifteen tons of freight”* (Petrillo 5).

The river ark was anywhere *“from sixty to ninety feet in length, fifteen to twenty feet wide, and three to five feet deep though their draft was just two feet.”* These boats could carry up to fifty tons when fully loaded (Petrillo 5). By 1827, nearly four thousand



Pa Canal System

boats and rafts of various sorts would travel down the Susquehanna River. The amount of product and produce continued to increase until the canal system, the highway, and turnpikes increased trade with New York and Philadelphia.

Those who proposed using **canals** did not have to worry so much about shallow areas, flooding, or transporting around rapids. Pennsylvania built nearly 1,200 miles of waterways that connected various cities and neighboring regions. The people of Luzerne County anxiously waited for their portion of the \$40,000,000 expenditure promised by the state.

Great feats of engineering would be necessary to build the system of locks that would alternately raise and lower the water so the boats could pass through. Problems with the locks, the water supply, and occasional floods were some of the challenges faced and met. The canals would be the link to the outside world for the Wyoming Valley so that its ample supply of anthracite coal could be shipped to new markets.

The **North Branch** Canal started in Northumberland in 1828 and reached West Nanticoke two years later. Its designers chose to

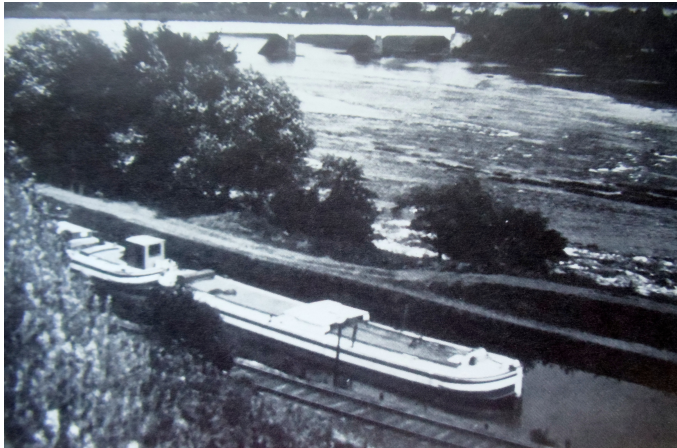


12

move along the east side of the river, since the Lackawanna River emptied into the Susquehanna on that side. Canal boats were poled across the river or, in later years, towed by steam-powered boats.

Once the canal boats reached Wilkes-Barre, they crossed South Main Street and eventually traveled near Pennsylvania Avenue (then called Back Street).

The circuitous route was due to the fact that George Hollenback and his business associates, who lived in grand houses along the River Common, did not want the canal to spoil their view of the river. The arks could load their coal and other goods, such as lumber, at the backside of the city as the Hollenback breaker was located in that vicinity. These boats were seventy-nine feet long, carried twenty-five passengers and thirty tons of freight, and were drawn by two horses.



canal boat, the Wilkes-Barre; Market St. bridge in background, tow path near river, railroad tracks in foreground. 1887

13

The canal then passed to River Street and came out into what was known as Redoubt Basin. The name “redoubt” comes from the adjoining hills where the Connecticut Yankees laid siege to the Pennamite Fort

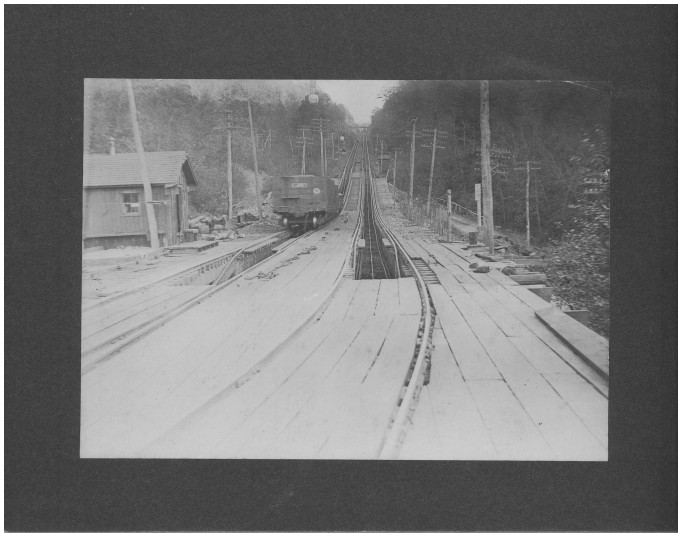
Wyoming, located near the present-day Dorothy Dickson Darte Center on River Street. This basin is now the site of the fourth

Luzerne County Courthouse.

By 1834, Pittston was connected to Wilkes-Barre by canal and, with that, access to our high-carbon anthracite coal expanded greatly. By 1856, 130-ton barges made their way to thousands of customers in Philadelphia and New York. Passengers, too, were able to travel from Wilkes-Barre to Philadelphia by way of

Harrisburg in just forty-eight hours. However, it wouldn't be until 1835 that passengers were assured of a regular schedule of travel on the North Branch (Lottick 111–119 and Petrillo).

Men called “canalers” lived aboard the boats and guided them through the channels. Mules provided the pulling power for most of the journey. Boys of nine or ten, called mulewhackers, kept the animals in line on the towpath.



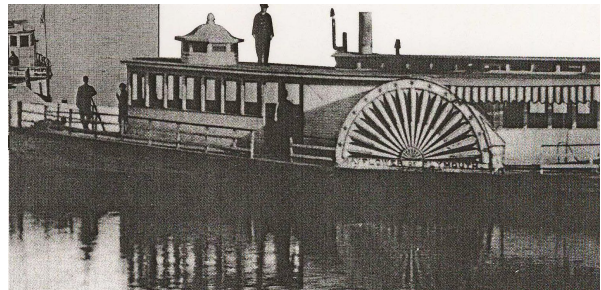
Ashley Planes 14

Coal was not only moved along the canals. It was also pulled up and over the mountains by way of what is known as the [Ashley Planes](#), located in the town of Ashley. This was one of the most unique engineering feats in the country.

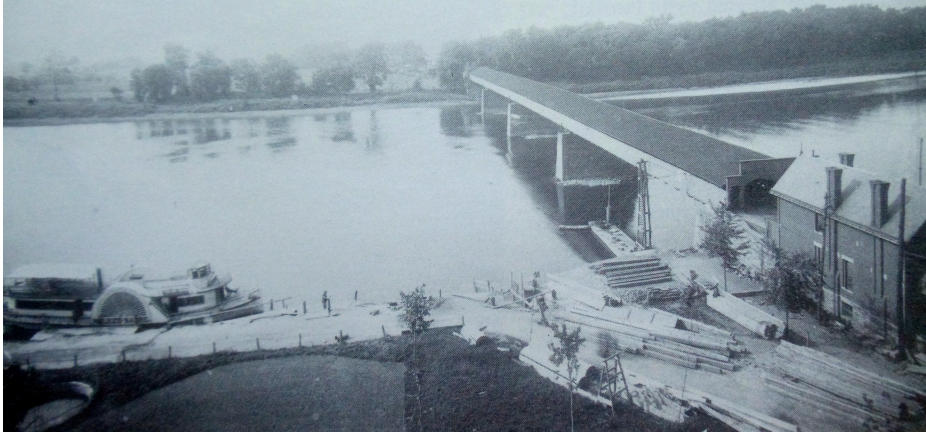
Designed by Lord Nelson Butler, grandson of Col. Zebulon Butler, the Ashley Planes were set up by the

Lehigh and Susquehanna Railroad to get the coal up the nearly 5–15 degree, 1,600-foot slope to Solomon Gap. It operated until 1948, moving thousands of tons of coal and passengers by stationary steam engines located at the top and bottom of the slope.

By 1900, most of the canals were filled in as railroads replaced them. Many of them had been filled in earlier, some by 1872, but for nearly three-quarters of a century, passengers, goods, and anthracite coal were carried up and down along the Susquehanna.



Paddle wheel steamer on the river 15



Market St. bridge with paddle wheel steamer at dock. 16

Steamboats had been built and put on the Susquehanna River, too. The first to steam up the Susquehanna was the *Cordorus* (Petrillo 11). She appears to be the first iron steamboat in history on the Susquehanna. However, she seemed more for show than for any consistent use of moving product and passengers. The *Susquehanna*, *Plymouth*, *Enterprise*, *Mayflower*, and *Wyoming* all tried to navigate against low water, rapids, or ice (Petrillo 23, 40). Though significant time and money were invested in these ships, none produced the kind of trade for which their owners and investors had hoped (Petrillo 19).

FROM WATERWAYS TO RAILWAYS

As far back as 1825, rail lines had been proposed in Pennsylvania instead of canals. While that did not happen then, the first successful rail link in our Commonwealth was established at Mauch Chunk (now Jim Thorpe) in 1827. This connected the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company's operations and its canal along the Lehigh (Harvey 1895).

Other companies saw the advantage of rail, too. The "Stourbridge Lion" was one of two British locomotives brought in by the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company in 1828.

Unfortunately, it was too heavy for the wooden rails and eventually ended up in a scrap heap before being rescued for the Smithsonian Institute (Harvey 1895).

Although coal had been moved by rail from the Baltimore Mine in Wilkes-Barre's East End to the canal as early as 1834, it was only in 1843 that the Lehigh company built the first successful rail line into the Wyoming Valley (Harvey 1895). The Lehigh continued to branch out, connecting the Ashley Planes with Nanticoke, Wanamie, and the Baltimore Mine in Wilkes-Barre. Other companies, like the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western, soon followed, continuing to link Wilkes-Barre with the outside world. The railroad boom made a significant impact in the first half of the 1800s, but would hit its peak after the Civil War (1861–1865).

In 1830, Wilkes-Barre was described in the newspaper *Susquehanna Democrat*:

“We were struck the other day with an impression of a gentleman who had been absent a few years from the Borough.

‘How astonishingly’ said he ‘the place has improved since I left it.’ The remark was a true one. Within two or three years the appearance of the Borough has changed materially.

Improvement has gone steadily forward—not as in some



View of Public Square in 1841, looking north-east from the corner of South Main Street and the Square.

17

places to recede as quickly. It did not receive its start from a phantom that soon vanishes or from some sudden speculation scheme. The bowels of our neighboring hills,

and our fine farms, produce therewith to sustain

improvement in its onward march.

..Business men have come, and are settling from abroad. Sales have been made of coal lands, and farms, and building lots in the Borough, which has made money move plenty, and helped the mechanic and the laborer.

At this time it would be impossible to rent a dwelling house in the Borough of Wilkes-Barre. All are full. Several wealthy gentlemen in Philadelphia have recently made purchases here, and are preparing houses for the reception of their families. New buildings are going up in various directions, and business of every kind is increasing.

The Baltimore Company have got an immense quantity of coal, and much of it has already reached the Baltimore market. It is a lamentable fact that the only means of transportation is by the channel of the Susquehanna and if the coal business is profitable, notwithstanding the difficulties and losses attending the river navigation, what will it be ere long, when the canal is extended?"
(Harvey 1883)

VALLEY VILLAGES AND HAMLETS

Outside of Wilkes-Barre, villages along both sides of the river were enjoying increased development. People were moving into the area to farm the land and take jobs in the fledgling coal industry. Villages within Kingston Township were now being formed. Philip Shaver purchased land from William Trucks in 1813 that eventually became known as [Shavertown](#). Its original name was Bloody Run Creek due to the number of butchers along the main street. William Trucks had come from Connecticut in 1801 and the land he settled upon was named for him: Trucksville.

Formed in 1817, [Dallas](#) Township was named for Alexander Dallas, who died in that year. A Pennsylvanian, he was the Secretary of the Treasury and father of George Dallas, who became President Polk's vice president.

In the lower part of the valley, the canal crossed the river to the east side not far from [Nanticoke](#). A bank, post office, tannery, and ferry also were found here. Coal had been mined and shipped from this point since 1825.

On the east side of the river, [Pittston](#) (originally called “Pittstown” after British leader William Pitt) was one of the five original places settled by the Susquehanna Company in 1768. The Scotch came in the early 1850s to work the mines; the Welsh followed, along with other ethnic groups. The mining and shipping of coal was the main source of employment in this town. Plains, too, was settled early. Two hotels, stores, and eventually a train station, along with coal breakers, had long been established in this area.

Each area from what is now West Pittston to Nanticoke on the west bank of the Susquehanna and from Pittston to [Ashley](#) on the east side saw their growth increase during these years.

BUSINESS, INDUSTRY, AND ENTREPRENEURS

Clearing the land was a necessity for the development of our farming communities. After all, most of the settlers were still farmers growing grains, raising their own food, and eventually supplying their neighbors. In fact, agriculture was the most important industry in these early years. Wheat, flax, rye, oats, buckwheat, corn, and hay grew easily and yielded bountiful crops (Hanlon 46).

While farmers were the backbone of our economy early on, coal, iron, and lumber provided the fuel for the industrial growth of not only this area but that of the United States. The extraction of this fuel and its transportation near and far would open new opportunities for those who would lead the area into a new chapter of history.



Fell Tavern Wilkes-Barre 18

In 1769, brothers [Daniel and Obadiah Gore](#) opened a mine near Plymouth to get the coal they needed to burn in their blacksmith forges. The anthracite type of coal they found burned hotter and cleaner than the bituminous type. While many area blacksmiths followed their example, this coal was not used in private homes because it was difficult to ignite. [Judge Jesse Fell](#) invented a grate that solved that problem in 1808 (Zbiek 34).

It was about this time that [Jacob Cist](#) met and married Sarah, the daughter of [Matthias Hollenback](#), in 1807. Hollenback, owner of more than 48,000 acres of coal land, was considered to be the wealthiest merchant and largest landholder in Pennsylvania's northeastern corner. Cist invested with his father-in-law and other



Jacob Cist 19

area entrepreneurs, such as Jacob Weiss and Charles Miner, in coal mines and the iron trade.

They shipped coal south to Philadelphia, but found no buyers. The grates and furnaces had yet to reach wide appeal. Most of the coal was dumped and the arks were broken up and sold.

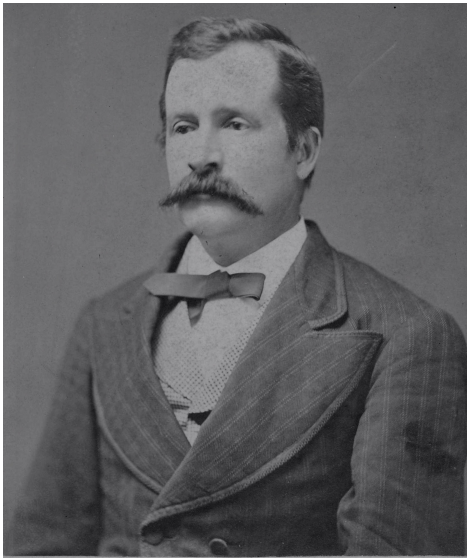
The shortage of wood fuel began to shift the emphasis to an anthracite-based economy. That meant that the valley and its fledging coal industry were in a good position. However, since the canal system had yet to be developed, the challenge was how to get the fuel to those who needed it (Powell 2). Philadelphia would have been a natural market, but the cost of getting the coal across the mountains made it so expensive that it was cheaper to import bituminous coal from England (Zbiek 37).

During the War of 1812, a fuel shortage developed in the country's coastal cities due to the lack of bituminous coal from England and wood. The conflict helped to spur ideas to get our coal to wider markets. It would take several years before canals

would ship coal, but Cist and others began to develop markets for their fuel using the river and horse-drawn wagons.

Without a way to get the coal out of the valley, Wilkes-Barre would not have been worthy of the investment of time and money it soon attracted. People were attracted to the area because of the jobs available in the mines and the ancillary industries like

lumbering that were plentiful in the valley.



Charles Parrish 20

The region needed **entrepreneurs**—those with large visions and the means to see them through to spur our growth. John Lord Butler, a coal operator, was one such man. He was the son of General Lord Butler, head of the Pennsylvania militia, and grandson of Col. Zebulon Butler. He helped to develop the Butler Mines and Coal Company. Many others, such as Charles Parrish, owner of the Lehigh Valley & Wilkes-Barre Coal Company and President of Parrish and Annora Coal

Company, were also influential. Parrish controlled some of the canal route and served as director of several of the railroads out of the valley, such as the North and West Branch Railroad. In addition, he was a director of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company. (Harvey A *History* 270)

Abram Nesbitt was another self-made millionaire in our area. He was one of the organizers of the Wyoming Valley Coal Company and the Spring Brook Water Company. At the time when coal was becoming king



Abram Nesbitt 21

in the area and country, Abram Nesbitt made the decision to also invest in natural gas, helping to create the Consumers Gas Company and the Gas Company of Luzerne County. A visionary, he also invested in the Wilkes-Barre Electric Light Company, the Wilkes-Barre Hotel Company, the Vulcan Ironworks, the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company, and the People's Telephone Company. In 1912, he and his son purchased the Dorrance home in Kingston and turned it into a hospital. Later, the house was torn down, and a new brick structure was erected for the sick and injured through his generosity.

While the mining and shipping of coal was the top priority for many, iron was also a major part of local business. In the late 1700s, when Timothy Pickering was here to help with the Yankee-Pennamite dispute, he saw that the combination of "fuel and ore in the same locality would mean much in the industrial development of the valley" (Harvey 1976).

Iron was mined near Scranton in 1800. Within the confines of our valley, iron ore was brought in from Columbia County to blast furnaces in South Wilkes-Barre and Hunlock's Creek. Those furnaces helped to supply nail factories near Public Square and Toby's Creek. By 1840, a factory for blast furnaces, rolling mills, and cut nails was made under the name of Vulcan Iron Works in Wilkes-Barre.

The Wilkes-Barre area also had a tannery, Isaac Carpenter's hat-making factory, a wagon manufacturer, and a small paper mill. Lumbering was a very important industry as the coal mines needed props, railroads used ties, and the community needed wood for building and fuel. One other industry was the making of powder.

A few years before the Civil War broke out, a fifteen-year-old German immigrant named [Charles Stegmaier](#) came to the area. By the time he was twenty-three years old in 1857, he started the brewing company that bears his name. Eventually, it grew to the third largest in Pennsylvania and twentieth largest in the country, employing thousands of valley residents.



Charles Stegmaier 22

The entrepreneurs who invested in these businesses needed a strong banking system. Without financial support, they would not have been able to fund their enterprises. That explains why Charles Parrish and several others pooled their resources and started the First National Bank of Wilkes-Barre. [Payne Pettebone](#), son-in-law of William Swetland, was another businessman who, among many other pursuits, helped to direct the First National Bank of Pittston, the Wyoming Bank, the Miners Savings Bank of Wilkes-

Barre, and the Wilkes-Barre Savings Bank. Meanwhile, many other prominent men had the vision to combine their pursuit of canals, railroads, banks, and land (Harvey *A History* 270).

LABOR

None of these great industrial accomplishments in coal and iron would have been possible without labor. Many laborers were



Immigrants on Ellis Island

23

recent immigrants. Prior to the Civil War, most were English, Welsh, Irish, and German. Many came to America to escape poverty or, in the case of the Irish, the great potato famine. Others came simply to seek new opportunities and better lives.

According to King's College professor Dr. Paul Zbiek, the Welsh and English had an easier time than many of the other groups blending into the

American culture because of their familiarity with European-American traditions and the Protestant religion (Zbiek 30). The Welsh would ultimately establish nearly forty churches throughout the valley. The Scotch-Irish settled in what is now Hanover Township. While it included some farmers and miners, the German population also included skilled bricklayers and others who worked in construction, a trade sorely needed in the valley. Once they overcame the language barrier, they found it easy to assimilate as their skills were highly valued.

Unlike the Welsh who were overwhelmingly Protestant and the Irish who were overwhelmingly Catholic, the Germans brought three of their main religions: Lutheranism, Judaism, and Catholicism. Lutherans built their first church in 1845. Jews constructed a synagogue a few years later, and Catholics put up St. Nicholas. All of these places of worship existed within one city block, close to South Street.

The Irish were the second largest group in the first wave of immigration to come to our shores before 1880, often called the Old Immigration. Irish immigrants settled in [Wilkes-Barre](#), [Pittston](#), [Plymouth](#) and [Nanticoke](#), bringing their Catholic religion with them. Unfortunately, Catholicism was greatly mistrusted by many, and since the Irish had few skills besides farming, Irish men were often doomed to low-paying jobs in the mines as laborers. Meanwhile, Irish women were typically employed as labor in households or mills. Zbiek writes in *Luzerne County, A History of Its People and Culture* that the Irish were often the last hired and, in bad times, the first fired (32).

The Irish soon comprised the highest number of immigrants. Since they were scattered throughout the valley, it took longer for them to “forge the same kind of political and societal power in the tight knit urban areas. The unskilled Irish made two to three dollars per week compared to the eight dollars that a Welsh or English miner could make.” (Zbiek 44, 45)

THE SLAVERY ISSUE

Even as trains crisscrossed Wyoming Valley, another, harder-to-notice form of railroad was also moving through Wilkes-Barre in the 1800s. This was the so-called Underground Railroad made famous by Harriet Tubman. The issue of slavery had been on the national agenda since Thomas Jefferson had to drop it from the Declaration of Independence. Valley resident [Charles Miner](#), while a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, introduced a bill for the gradual abolition of the practice in the District of Columbia in 1828. According to Emerson Moss in his book *African Americans in the Wyoming Valley*, Miner was told by Daniel Webster: “Mr. Miner, you have lighted a torch that will set fire to the whole country” (Moss 8). Thirty-three years later, that dire premonition came true.

[William Gildersleeve](#), an ardent abolitionist, lived on South Main Street in Wilkes-Barre since the early 1830s. Originally from Georgia, Gildersleeve grew up with firsthand knowledge of slavery and worked hard for its eradication. His message was not always welcome and he endured many threats, taunts, and even home invasions by



William Gildersleeve 24



Phoenix Hotel

25

those who wanted to silence his anti-slavery message in part because free Blacks represented competition for jobs.

Gildersleeve worked with other residents in the area on the Underground Railroad, shepherding runaway enslaved people on their way to freedom

farther north. Some runaways like Lucy Washburn, Jacob Welcome, and Lewis Tucker stayed in Wilkes-Barre to work with Gildersleeve. He was also part of the U.S. Supreme Court case wherein Pennsylvania arrested three federal marshals who had arrested an escaped enslaved man named William Thomas under the Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850. Thomas had been working as a waiter in the Phoenix Hotel in Wilkes-Barre.

From *Bridging Change* we learn more about the arrest of Thomas at the hotel. “After all the boarders had left the dinner table, four men entered and called for dinner... While carving some meat, two sprang at Bill Thomas with handcuffs and succeeded in getting them on one hand. This was a great help to him in fighting. He got away from them but lost a great deal of blood. He ran like a deer and jumped into the river. As the strangers fired, he dodged under the water. One ball [bullet] took a bit of his ear off.” (Lottick 124)

To escape his pursuers, he crawled from the water and lay on the riverbank pretending to be dead. The marshals kicked him and rolled him over and finally left him. A few friends got him safely to a cornfield and spirited him away after dark. The marshals were later arrested themselves. That action would pit the state of Pennsylvania against the federal government and the Fugitive Slave Law.

The famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass said the case would make Wilkes-Barre as famous as Boston was in the fight for freedom during the American Revolution. Historian William Kashatus wrote that the 1853 [Wilkes-Barre Slave Case](#) set a precedent for other fugitive slave cases in that it acknowledged the civil rights of enslaved people on Northern soil by prosecuting those who assaulted them, even if they were federal marshals! (Kashatus *Valley* 123)

Gildersleeve suffered greatly at the hands of townspeople, twice having his home invaded, pictures torn off of walls, plants smashed on his floors, and a mob of several hundred threatening

him and the abolitionist speakers he brought to town. Still, he persevered, harboring runaways and transporting them to points farther north like Montrose, Abington, and Providence (now called Scranton). It cost him greatly to be an abolitionist, but he would not back down. Local lore has it that the Presbyterian church in Nanticoke had tunnels leading to the river to aid the runaways.

Though many who helped runaway slaves escape remain nameless, one other is [Henry Brown](#) a free Black man. At his home on Northampton Street, he would hide runaway slaves beneath a secret door. He is buried in the Wilkes-Barre cemetery.

STATES' RIGHTS OR SETTING OTHER MEN FREE?

In the 1850s and 1860s, the country was being torn apart by the issues of states' rights and slavery. William Gildersleeve lived in the midst of the whole country splitting apart, leading to the Civil War. Alexander Hamilton Bowman was the superintendent of West Point when Fort Sumter in South Carolina was fired upon by Southern forces, sparking the war. Many from the Wyoming Valley area distinguished themselves in the Civil War, including Henry Hoyt (who later became governor of Pennsylvania), Edmund [Dana](#), Samuel Bowman (brother of Alexander), and Eugene [Beaumont](#).



Robert B. Ricketts 26

One of the most famous local heroes was Robert Bruce Ricketts. During the Battle of Gettysburg, in the late afternoon and night of July 2, 1863, then [Captain Ricketts](#) and his artillerymen stood their ground against the onslaught of the infamous Louisiana Tigers and North Carolina troops. The action that started late in the afternoon continued well into the night so that the only way the Southerners' position could be seen was from the flash of their muskets.

Union commander Wainwright wrote: *“The night was heavy, and the smoke lay so thick that you could not see ten yards ahead; seventeen guns vomiting it as fast as they can will make a good deal of smoke.”*

The action by Ricketts’ batteries and the Union infantry saved the entire Union flank from being overrun. That helped to preserve a Union victory in the battle. By war’s end, Ricketts’ unit had participated in 131 engagements. Their gold-embroidered battle flag can be seen at the Luzerne County Historical Society.

[Ezra Hoyt Ripple](#) was a private in the 52nd Pennsylvania. Captured near Charleston, South Carolina, he spent time in two Confederate prisoner-of-war camps: the infamous Andersonville Georgia camp and Libby Prison in Florence, South Carolina.

From his book *Dancing Along the Deadline*, Ripple writes about his experiences in each camp. About Florence he states: *“I have made mention frequently of tents, but there was not a tent in the prison. What I mean by that is the shelters we had to protect us from the sun. These shelters were made from shirts and drawers ripped apart, old bags, and even coats and pants. That was the only protection we had from the rain, the wet and cold. Being scantily clad, we stood and suffered. Nearly every prisoner had scurvy”* (Ripple 40). Ripple would survive, however, and a few years after the war he became mayor of Scranton.

While twenty-seven different regiments recruited from the county, only one—the 143rd Pennsylvania—was made up almost entirely of men from our area. During a cold rain on November 7, 1862, the 143rd left their training camp in Mill Hollow (now the borough of Luzerne) and headed for Camp Curtin in Harrisburg. They traveled most of the way in sleet and snow while in open cattle cars.

One of their leaders was [Edmund Dana](#), a veteran of the Mexican War. He directed the regiment in a number of major engagements including Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, the Wilderness, and Petersburg. During the Wilderness campaign,

Dana had his horse shot out from under him. He was wounded and



then captured. Released in 1864, Colonel Dana eventually became a Brigadier General. Out of 1,491 men who started out in the 143rd, 303 would die in the war.

Many other local people served in a variety of roles during the war. James Rutter and Charles Betterley were bodyguards to President Abraham Lincoln and were present, though not on duty, when Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's Theater.

Entire families contributed to the effort. Three Conyngham brothers, John, Charles, and William, were mustered in 1862 as part of the Union Army. While in the 52nd, John was captured along with Colonel Henry Hoyt and Private Ezra Ripple. Two Butler brothers also fought—though on opposite sides. Joseph Lord Butler served in the Union Navy while his brother Ziba Bennett Butler served in the Confederate 12th Mississippi Regiment. The latter brother had been in the South working as a tutor to a wealthy plantation family when the war broke out. Both

brothers died of disease during the war; Joseph is buried in Hollenback Cemetery.

Blacks from the area joined the Union army, too. From the book *African Americans in the Wyoming Valley*, we learn about Aaron Phoenix; Henry Johnson; and George T. Sharper, who enlisted though he was underage (Moss 131). S.J. Patterson joined the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry and Crowder Pacien (Patience) enlisted in the 103rd Infantry from Pennsylvania. These were just a few of the local African Americans who fought for the North.

THE OTHER SIDE

At times, the allegiance of Wyoming Valley residents to the Union cause was called into question. The North depended on coal as fuel for their trains that transported men and goods throughout the country. Miners, involved in a dangerous occupation with low pay, hoped to use their newly found power to gain better pay and working conditions for themselves and



Miners

28

their families by using strikes. When they stopped working, they were derided as trying to sabotage the war effort, and were characterized as draft resisters. Federal troops broke up their strikes. (Palladino *Another* 101)

Of course, the men and their families saw it differently. It was simple for them. Their struggle reflected the greater tension between the growing power of government and the conditions of labor. For mine laborers, the ability to afford food and pay their bills was more pressing than the war or other national affairs.

After the war, Ira Ransom from Lehman was released from a Confederate prison camp and began the long walk home from Appomattox,



Virginia, to his wife and two children in the valley. On his way, he found a young boy in Virginia who had lost most of his memory due to the shock of the war. Ransom took him home, where the boy lived with the Ransom family. He did regain some of his memory, remembering that his name was Robert. So, he became known as Robert Ransom until his death from scarlet fever eight years later.

29

William Gildersleeve, one of Wyoming

Valley's best-known abolitionists, lived to see the day when those who were in chains were finally freed with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Slavery had been abolished. Unfortunately, civil rights would remain an issue for decades to come.