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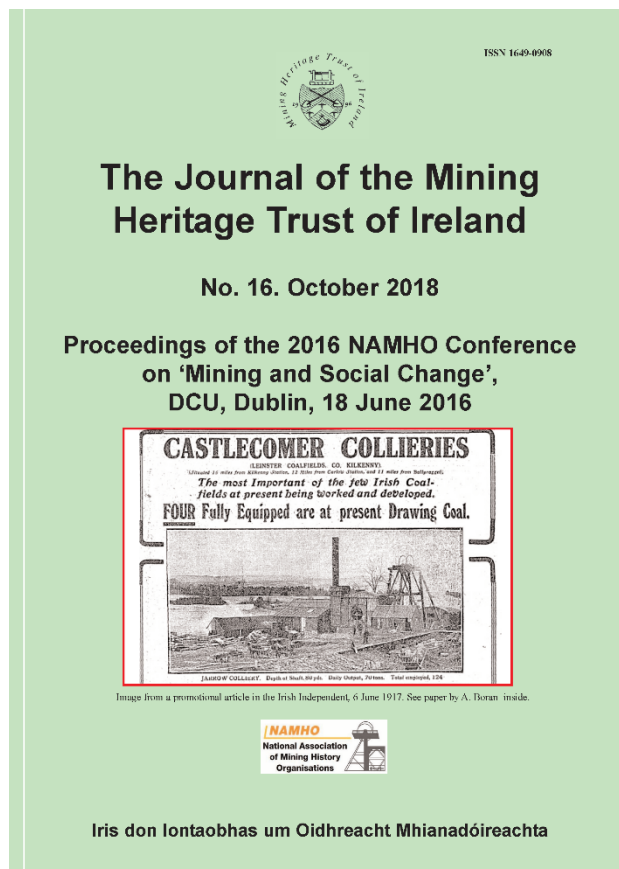
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THE KNOX MINE DISASTER, JANUARY 22, 1959, PORT GRIFFITH, PENNSYLVANIA, USA

by Robert P. Wolensky and Kenneth C. Wolensky

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Abstract: The last of several major mining tragedies in Northeastern Pennsylvania's anthracite coalfields, the Knox Mine Disaster took 12 lives and virtually ended deep mining in the Pittston/Wilkes-Barre area. It occurred when the Susquehanna River broke into the Knox Coal Company's River Slope operation on January 22, 1959, and flooded area mines with billions of gallons of water. The main cause of the calamity was illegal mining under the river by a voracious company with organized crime affiliations. A secondary cause could be found in weak government oversight. Post-disaster investigations exposed widespread corruption within the industry, which led to several indictments and convictions. The disaster is remembered today through annual commemorations as well as books, films, plays, and newspaper stories. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 16, 2018 47-50.

INTRODUCTION

The Knox Coal Company's River Slope mine was located at Port Griffith, Pennsylvania, a small coal town situated midway between the production centers of Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, Pennsylvania within the northern-most of anthracite's four coalfields.¹ The "hard coal" region encompassed a 10-county domain in the northeastern corner of the state, an area about the size of Manhattan Island at 474 square miles (see Figure 1). The territory once contained 95 percent of the Western Hemisphere's highest-grade coal.² Despite its diminutive size, historians have documented anthracite's status as the primary energy source for the American industrial revolution beginning in the 1830s.³ Studies over the past two decades have reinforced the region's importance to American economic and social history.⁴

As one of many so-called lease-holding companies, the Knox firm had a shady beginning in 1943 when it was founded by a

small group of men who had "squeezed out" the prior owners and assumed control of coal leases issued by one of the area's major producers, the Pennsylvania Coal Company.⁵ Among the proprietors was the alleged head of local organized crime gang and two of his associates. The firm quickly gained a reputation for high output, gluttonous mining, lax safety, harsh discipline, and a penchant for taking coal in off-limit areas.

On January 22, 1959, 81 first-shift mineworkers traveled to their underground workplaces at the Knox company's mine in Port Griffith.⁶ Seventy-five went to the May Shaft, the current hub of activity, while another six trekked to the interconnecting River Slope mine. The River Slope's workings were located alongside and underneath the Susquehanna River in the rich Pittston Vein-the Big Vein as it was known-an eight to 12-foot seam containing some of the cleanest (rock-free) and highest quality coal around.

¹ The anthracite measures were situated in four distinct Northeastern Pennsylvania coalfields: the *southern*, headquartered at Pottsville; the *western-middle*, located between Mahanoy City and Shamokin; the *eastern-middle*, centered around Minersville and Hazleton; and the *northern*, positioned in the Wilkes-Barre/Wyoming valley and Scranton/Lackawanna Valley areas (see Figure 1).

² Geologists have classified coal into three categories: lignite, bituminous, and anthracite (with grades in between). As the highest grade, anthracite is almost pure carbon, burns most efficiently, and is nearly smokeless. For a review of Pennsylvania's coal industry see E. Willard Miller (ed.), *A Geography of Pennsylvania*, University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1995.

³ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., "Anthracite Coal and the Beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the United States," *Business History Review*, 46 (Summer 1972), 141-181.

⁴ Edward J. Davies, *The Anthracite Aristocracy: Leadership and Social Change in the Hard Coal Regions of Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1800-1930*, DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985; Grace Palladino, *Another Civil War: Labor, Capital, and the State in the Anthracite Regions of Pennsylvania, 1840-1868*, Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1990; Harold Aurand, *Coalcracker Culture: Work and Values in Pennsylvania Anthracite, 1835-1935*, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press, 2003; Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht, *The Face of Decline*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005; Richard G. Healey, *The Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal Industry, 1860-1902: Economic Cycles, Business Decision-Making and Regional Dynamics*, Scranton, Pennsylvania: University of Scranton Press, 2007; Robert P. Wolensky and William A. Hastie Sr., *Anthracite Labor Wars: Tenancy, Italians, and Organized Crime in the Northern Coalfield of Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1897-1959*, revised edition, Easton, Pennsylvania: Canal History and Technology Press, 2013.

⁵ There were five major anthracite coal companies in the northern field: Glen Alden, Lehigh Valley, Delaware & Hudson, Susquehanna, and Pennsylvania (the latter being the smallest with 12,000 employees working in 12 collieries at its peak in the 1920s).

⁶ The town of Port Griffith derived its name from a location along the North Branch Canal, which paralleled the Susquehanna River and served as the main transportation route for anthracite during the mid-1800s. Long since demolished, the canal bed later became the main track for the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

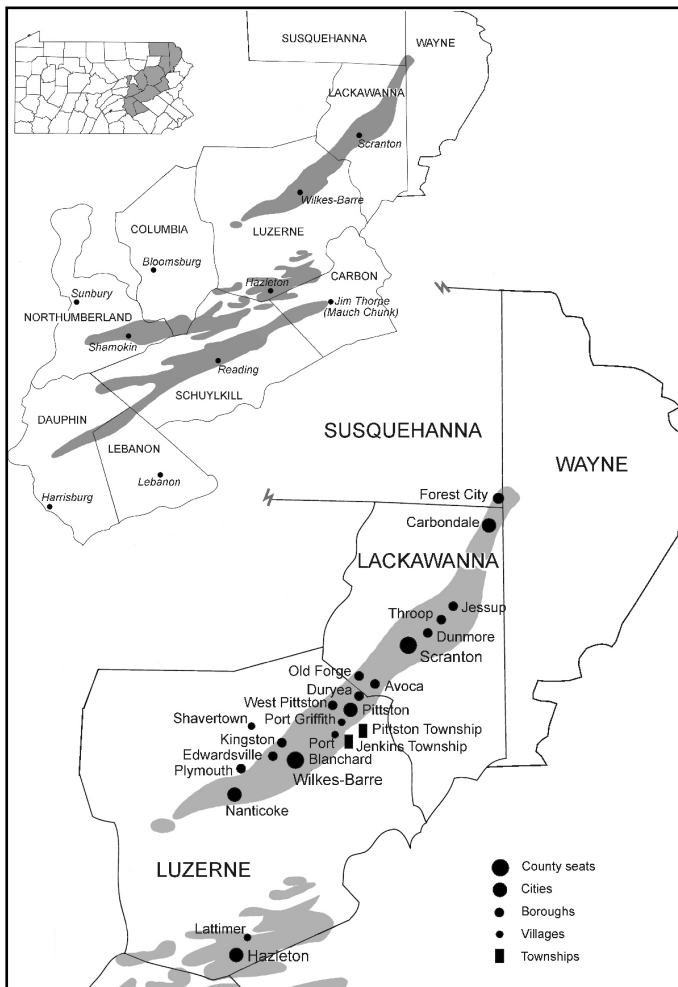


Figure 1. Map of The Anthracite Fields of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

At 11:20 a.m., two laborers heard a sharp "popping" sound in one mined-out chamber. They quickly summoned John "Jock" Williams, a Scottish-born veteran assistant foreman, to examine the situation. "I no more than put my foot in the place and looked up then the roof gave way," he burred to a State investigative committee. "It sounded like thunder. Water poured down like Niagara Falls." The Susquehanna River-whose watershed is the largest East of the Mississippi River-had somehow breached the pit.

GRIM FACTS

Williams and his laborers sprinted up the slope to the surface and saved their lives. He immediately phoned superintendent Robert "Rab" Groves, another Scottish-born mining veteran, who ordered everyone out of the mines. The only others in that section were three rockmen who had been driving a rock-tunnel slope between the River Slope's Pittston Vein and the next measure down, the Marcy Vein. Their location at the very bottom of the passageway, directly beneath the break-in, meant that they were certainly the first to drown.

Millions of gallons began gushing underground through a continually expanding whirlpool in the river's bed (see Figure 2). As the water spread to the interconnected May Shaft and Hoyt Shaft, workers scrambled to find a way out. Some forded a chest-high torrent to board one of the few lifts capable of reaching the exterior. Thirty-three men escaped in this manner.

Another group of seven slogged through the workings for more than two hours under the leadership of Pennsylvania Coal Company inspector Pacifico "Joe" Stella. They eventually climbed to safety through the only available exit, the abandoned Eagle Air Shaft. Myron Thomas, another assistant foreman, directed the largest group of 26 hostages to the same airshaft, but not before they had wandered for seven hours through numerous dangerous pathways. (See Figure 3)

During the first 64 hours of the emergency, some 2.7 million gallons per minute, and 10.37 billion total gallons, coursed into the earth. Crews toiled around the clock for nearly 72 hours in an effort to plug the cavity. They heaved 60 coal hopper cars-50-ton behemoths called gondolas-into the void. When that did not stop the flow, they added 500 smaller mine cars as well as some 25,000 cubic yards of dirt, rock, and boulders. The chasm grew to over 100 feet wide before it stopped drinking, most likely because it had filled with water.

All but 12 employees survived. The victims ranged in age from 33 to 62 years of age. They were primarily of Eastern European heritage. One Scottish-born employee was among the victims, laborer William Sinclair. Together the deceased left 42 dependents. Their bodies were never recovered.⁷

In the weeks following the catastrophe, the Pennsylvania Department of Mines and Mineral Industries conducted an extensive de-watering campaign to save the surrounding pits. A construction team diverted the river, built a cofferdam around



Figure 2. Early Stage, Knox Mine Disaster Whirlpool, Susquehanna River.

⁷ The 12 victims included Samuel Altieri, John Baloga, Benjamin Boyar, Francis Burns, Joseph Gizenski, Charles Featherman, and Dominic Kaveliskie, Frank Orłowski, Eugene Ostrowski, William Sinclair, Daniel Stefanides, and Herman Zelonis. Except for the Scotland-born Sinclair, all were American-born as sons or grandsons of immigrants.



Figure 3. Rescue Leader Pacifico "Joe" Stella Pulled from the Eagle Air Shaft.

the breach, and drained the water from the remaining pool. Meanwhile, other crews placed 40 powerful pumps in nearby shafts that eventually drained as much water as had entered the mine. The next phase involved workers entering the River Slope to construct bulkheads and otherwise prepare the key tunnels to accept a permanent concrete-and-sand seal that was forced down through boreholes from the riverbed. State and federal government agencies spent nearly \$5 million on the cofferdam, the pumping, and the sealing.

CAUSES

Within hours of the episode, miners, the public, as well as federal and state mining officials wanted to know: how could the tragedy have happened? Government investigators discovered the immediate cause in two illegally dug gangways extending under the river 125 feet past the officially, and clearly, designated "Stop Lines." Workers had dug the chambers without regard for proper rock cover (35 feet was the required minimum) and without adequate surveying. Moreover, other miners had followed the Pittston Vein at a sharp upward "anticline," toward the riverbed to a point where the rock cover had dwindled to just a few feet. The thin shell could not withstand the weight of a winter thaw that sent the Susquehanna to near flood-stage levels.

Company greed combined with weak mining laws and ineffectual government inspections provided more general answers. The rewards offered by the thick virgin coal in the Pittston Vein apparently proved irresistible to the company, and the state and federal inspectors clearly missed the illegal mining. Moreover, regarding state regulations, the penalties for such unlawful takings offered only a slight deterrence: \$500 fine and 90-day prison sentence.

Another cause could be found in the criminal collusion between labor and management. Three of the owners were known organized criminals, and the other was the wife of a deceased former owner referred to by the Pennsylvania Crime Commission as the "top boss" of the area's criminal syndicate. In a flagrant violation of American labor law, one of the owners not only had criminal connections but served as the district president of the

union that represented the workers: The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Needless to say, his shares in the company were kept secret until uncovered by the Luzerne County District Attorney's office during the investigations.

Four post-disaster inquests led to indictments against 11 high-ranking officials at the Knox Coal Company, the Pennsylvania Coal Company (who had leased the mine), and the UMWA. The charges ranged from manslaughter, to mining and labor law violations, to conspiracy to hide the company's ownership. Following a long series of trials and appeals, in the final analysis no person was found guilty of any wrongdoing related to the disaster or the deaths. Three company men and three union representatives were found guilty of bribery to insure the cooperation of the union, but the company men had their convictions overturned on appeal. Three of the owners were later convicted of income tax evasion for unreported Knox income. They each served up to two years in federal prison.

The disaster further precipitated over five years of governmental inquisitions into the entire anthracite industry and its "culture of corruption." Authorities issued indictments against 22 mining executives across four coal companies (including Knox). It became clear that Knox was but the tip of the iceberg. The charges involved income tax evasion, payroll padding, mining law infractions, failure to pay overtime, bribery, and violations of the labor-management contract.

AFTERMATH

Despite a steady decline in demand following a major strike in 1925-26, anthracite still commanded a large share of the regional economy during the 1950s. The industry's 1958 production of 7,669,440 tons had a market value of \$76.9 million. With a pre-disaster unemployment rate of 11 percent (over twice the statewide figure) and a median income only 80 percent of Pennsylvania's average, local mineworkers, community leaders, and citizens alike appreciated the value of hard coal's 11,636 local jobs.

One estimate of the disaster's impact put the direct and indirect job loss at 7,500 with a total payroll deprivation of \$32 million. Within a few months, two of the area's largest and oldest coal companies—the Pennsylvania and the Lehigh Valley—announced a withdrawal from the anthracite business. Despite the post-disaster pumping, company officials argued that their mines had been so severely flooded and damaged that even a partial rehabilitation was financially impossible. A significant budgetary loss also jolted the many local governments that relied on coal tax assessments.

Although the immediately surrounding mines ceased functioning, other companies whose workings lay some distance downriver from the break-in point continued to operate on a reduced scale into the early 1970s. However, the "makewater" seeping underground from Knox and numerous other abandoned coalmines continued unabated, requiring ever-higher pumping costs, which cut into the companies' profits. By the early-1960s, anthracite had lost its competitive edge to bituminous coal, fuel oil, and natural gas. Billions of tons of anthracite still lay in the earth to this day but remain unreachable because of flooding as well as hard coal's uncompetitive market status.

REMEMBERING, COMMEMORATING, AND UNDERSTANDING

The Knox Mine Disaster has remained an integral part of the region's public history and social consciousness. The tragedy is remembered by a marble monument placed in front of the former St. Joseph's Catholic Church (now a funeral home) in Port Griffith, which displays the 12 victims' names. The churchyard is also the site of a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker commemorating the event (see Figure 4). Annual January programs at the monument and marker, at the Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton, and at St. John's Catholic Church in nearby Pittston, memorialize the tragedy.

As another lasting tribute, the Knox disaster prompted the annual Anthracite Mining Heritage Month held in January, which has included public history and educational programs conducted in numerous northern field towns. In 2018, the programs included 15 different mining-related events sponsored by local historical, educational, and religious institutions. Four of the programs were related to the Knox disaster.⁸

For how could citizens in this tightly knit community forget the heartrending deaths of 12 mineworkers and the painful losses suffered by their families and friends; or the images of 60 railroad gondolas swallowed like bath toys by a raging river-whirlpool; or the site of rescued men climbing out of the ground, one after the next, as loved ones welcomed each with tears of relief; or the sentry watch conducted by the multitudes along the riverbank in the hope that some of the missing might still be alive?

And how could the citizenry forget the corporate, regulatory, and criminal foundations of the fiasco? Indeed, the historically exploited and aggrieved populace of Northeastern Pennsylvania has fully comprehended the meaning of the Knox Mine Disaster as a breach not only of the Susquehanna River by a dishonest coal company, but a breach of the public's trust in the mining industry, its largest union, government inspectors, and the broader political economy that should have guarded against such abuse.



Figure 4. Knox Disaster Memorial Marker, Port Griffith, Pennsylvania.

About the Authors

The Wolensky brothers wrote *The Knox Mine Disaster* (1999) and *Voices of the Knox Mine Disaster* (2005), in co-authorship with Bob's daughter, Nicole Wolensky-Civettini (Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota-Winona). Both volumes were published by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, are still in print, and are distributed by the Penn State University Press. Robert P. Wolensky and William A. Hastie Sr. authored a separate volume on the anthracite industry that discussed the Knox Mine Disaster, among many other topics: *Anthracite Labor Wars: Tenancy, Italians, and Organized Crime in the Northern Coalfield of Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1897-1959*. Easton, PA: Canal History and Technology Press, 2013, revised edition.

⁸ The full schedule of events during Anthracite Mining Heritage Month 2018 can be found at the Anthracite Heritage Foundation's website: ahfdn.org. Several sessions over the years have been recorded, broadcast statewide, and archived by The Pennsylvania Cable Network.