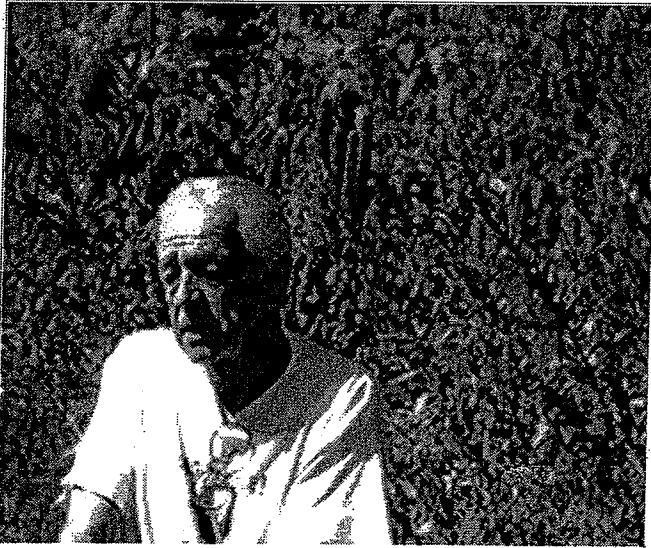


Avondale: Accident or Sabotage?

by Joe Keating and Bob Wolensky



Joe Keating contemplating the Avondale disaster
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"This is a sad calamity! A dreadful catastrophe! The most affecting and solemn scene I have ever witnessed in the whole course of my life."

Coroner's Report, September 14, 1869, Plymouth, Pennsylvania

In 1866, the Steuben Coal Company assumed possession of a colliery named Avondale in Plymouth Township, Luzerne County. Two years later, the Nanticoke Coal and Iron Company, a subsidiary of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad, took control. Numerous stories have emerged from the many tragedies that have struck Pennsylvania's anthracite industry, but none are more heartrending than the disaster that occurred at the Avondale's Stuben Shaft in September of 1869. Ballads were written about the calamity and sung in homes, mines, bar rooms, and by traveling minstrels for many years after.

An Unprecedented Tragedy

On the morning of September 6, 1869, at 10 a.m., a fire broke out in the Avondale mine's wooden-lined shaft that had been sunk to a depth of 237 feet. The blaze spread to the wooden breaker that sat directly on top of the shaft, and then to adjacent buildings. Engineer Alex Weir fled the engine room after merely having time to blow the whistle and fix things secure so that there would be no danger of explosion. As the only entrance and exit to the mine, the shaft became a useless escape route even if the mineworkers could have reached it.

As air flowed to feed the blaze, noxious gasses began traveling deep inside. Realizing what had occurred, foreman Evan Hughes mobilized 67 of his workers to rush further into the mine and construct a barrier to stave off the poisons.

According to Harper's Weekly (September 16-25, 1869), "If the fresh air could be imprisoned and a barrier built against the invading gasses, then, perhaps, the men could live until help could come from above. Resolutely, under the orders of their captain, they fell to work and built the first brattice or barricade. There sat Hughes as he was afterward found, giving instructions to the men and boys. But all in vain. At last, exhausted by their work, and overcome by the deadly enemy that would not be repulsed, they fainted at their posts and died." One hundred three men, five boys, and two would-be rescuers died of asphyxiation from inhaling of carbonic gas. It was anthracite's most deadly disaster.

After several failed attempts to enter the mine rescue crews finally reached the victims. Their dinner pails were full. No messages were found. Some had distorted and bloodied faces but others had a peaceful look. According to the Scranton Republican (September 11, 1869), "John Burch and his son were brought out together, and as found in the chamber of death, the father's arms were clasped around the boy, and both looked as if they slept their lives away." Seventy-two wives became widows and 153 children had lost their fathers.

Causes of the Fire

A coroner's inquest convened on September 11 and 12, 1869. Over two dozen men—engineers, company officials, and mineworkers—testified before an eight-person jury. Their statements produced two likely explanations for the blaze. The first attributed the fire to a spark from the ventilating furnace located 129 feet inside the mine. Like many other mines of the period, Avondale used a coal-burning furnace to bring fresh air into the mine while the shaft served as a flue.

The second explanation contended that the fire began at the mouth of an abandoned tunnel that intersected the shaft about 40 feet below the breaker. However, the tunnel theory presented a very troubling possibility—for a fire originating at this point would most likely have been arson! Someone would have had to crawl through the tunnel, which was laden with fallen debris, and deliberately set the shaft's wooden lining afire. About an equal number of witnesses who

addressed the causes supported each theory. Three men—Daniel Evans, William Thomas, and Lewis Merrifield—were convinced that the blaze commenced with a furnace spark. Thomas E. Davis argued that wind currents could have carried a spark from the furnace to the shaft, but the boards in the shaft were too wet to alight. Therefore, in examining the evidence, he believed that the blaze started at the mouth of the tunnel. George Morgan and Jenkins B. Jones concurred. Henry J. Phillips, a mining engineer for the DL&W argued that the fire was purposely set at the tunnel.

A previous mining company had dug the 1000-foot tunnel into the mountainside hoping, but failing, to find coal. Long out of use but nevertheless accessible from the outside and visible from the inside, the passage served a vital purpose following the disaster as rescuers cleared the debris and used the tunnel to extract the victims from the mine.

Despite the conflicting testimony, the coroner's jury opted for the spark explanation. They found no company officials or mineworkers liable. If the accident had any real cause, they said, it could be found in the extant mining traditions and laws, especially the breaker's location directly over the shaft and the absence of a second escape route. Both defects would be remedied by state legislation passed soon after the catastrophe. The conflicting evidence and the jury's conclusions have received relatively little scrutiny over the years. For many people, including us, two important questions remain unanswered: if the fire did originate near the tunnel and if the cause was arson, why would such a criminal act occur and who would perpetuate it? We believe that a fuller analysis of the tragedy in relation to the industrial and social conditions of the times can suggest one plausible interpretation for the tunnel theory. Labor-Management Conflict in the Anthracite Fields The three anthracite fields of Schuylkill (southern), Lehigh (middle), and Wyoming/Lackawanna (northern) experienced considerable labor unrest during the 1860s. Poor working and safety conditions, low wages amid rising prices, and a difficult life in company-owned patch towns were among the mineworkers' principal grievances. During the Civil War, localized labor organizations, spurred

by a labor shortage, called numerous strikes that were partly successful in raising wages.

Following the war demand slackened, the labor force swelled, and the coal operators had little difficulty crushing upstart unions. In 1865, a series of strikes called by miners in the Wyoming/Lackawanna field were easily defeated by the companies who imposed deep wage cuts. The unwillingness of southern and middle field workers to support their northern brethren during the 1865 shutdowns clearly indicated the territorial rifts evident in anthracite. Similarly, when in 1868 workers from Schuylkill and Lehigh struck over their companies' refusal to conform to the new Pennsylvania 8-hour work law, the Wyoming/Lackawanna miners remembered the 1865 strike and declined to support the action.

Despite the divisions, after much haggling the mineworkers agreed to form the region's first significant industrial union, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, on November 7, 1868. The organization's inaugural date was set for a March 17, 1869 convention of delegates. Led by the charismatic John Siney, an Irish immigrant, the WBA sought collective bargaining, a wage scale tied to the price of coal, and a strong organization to protect members from the power of the companies.

Yet Siney and the WBA could not extinguish anthracite's provincial divergences. Strongest in the Lehigh and Schuylkill areas, the new union did not garner as much support among the Wyoming/Lackawanna men. On May 1, 1869, the WBA called a general strike. When mineworkers from the Hyde Park section of Scranton were reluctant to participate, men from Schuylkill County traveled to Scranton and urged the men to support the WBA and join the strike. On May 22nd, the Hyde Park miners voted to continue working. Two days later "coffin notices" or death threats were found nailed to Lackawanna County mine entrances in a manner similar to those seen in the Schuylkill region. The notices were usually attributed to radical members of the WBA, although some observers noticed their similarity to coffin notices placed by the alleged Molly Maguires in the Schuylkill field.

The Hyde Park men finally gave in to the pressure

and joined the strike. When the General Council of the Miners and Laborers of the Anthracite Coal Fields of Pennsylvania met in Hazleton, they passed a resolution that stated, "We accept the suspension of the men from Hyde Park in good faith, even at the eleventh hour." However, later in the summer, on August 26, 1869, the Hyde Park men voted to return to work, many of them traveling 25 miles away to the Avondale colliery.

Because of the strike, Avondale's operations had remained closed for three and one-half months throughout the summer of 1869. Local workers wanted to keep the colliery idle but, in a blatant attempt to break the strike, management re-started operations on September 3, 1869, just a few days before the disaster. It seems safe to argue that the WBA and its allies did not want the Avondale to resume operating because it would have greatly weakened the union throughout the coal fields. The Avondale had become a test case for the success or failure of the WBA.

Immediately after the tragedy a few newspapers discussed the tunnel theory. Some also published stories on the "coincidence" that most of the Irish workers were not in the mine at the time of the accident either because they refused to work at all, or because could not work that particular day due to a funeral. The newspaper stories included a discussion of the rivalry between the Welsh, who held the higher mining jobs, and the Irish who occupied the lower positions. Indeed, the ethnic tensions were evident within the WBA and could also be seen in some of the sectional rivalries. For example, many of the WBA's strongest backers were Irish immigrants—including John Siney—from Schuylkill, while many of the Scranton Welshmen, as mentioned, were less than convinced about the union. Because Avondale's striking workers, including a large contingent of Irish, were not at their jobs on September 6th, and the DL&W had recruited a new workforce consisting mainly of Welshmen from Hyde Park, only six of the victims were Irish while the vast majority were of Welsh descent.

We presume, further, that the local men would have resented the presence of a workforce that not only took their jobs, but also broke their strike. We can find no evidence of another contemporary mining operation in the northern field where a large group of nearly 100 men traveled such a

long distance (many commuting daily) to take employment as strike breakers. Was it just a coincidence that the Avondale fire started three days after the mine re-opened with a strikebreaking labor crew? Was the fire set in retribution against the men from Hyde Park?

Certainly given the present evidence, no one can know the true cause(s) of anthracite's most fatal calamity. The coroner's jury selected one verdict while knowledgeable men testified to another. We have speculated, using circumstantial evidence, how labor-management unrest could have provided a context for the arson integral to a fire set from the tunnel. A few contemporary observers proffered a third possible explanation: that a stableman who entered the mine with a load of hay shortly before the conflagration (and who perished in the blaze) could have negligently set the fire with his kerosene lantern.

Accident? Arson? Negligence?

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission placed a historical marker at Avondale in 1996. Some of the colliery ruins, including the tunnel, have been recently excavated. The Anthracite Living History group (a group of dedicated volunteers) organized an anniversary ceremony at the site on September 11, 2004, attended by over 100 persons including members of the St. David's (Welsh) Society Choir who commemorated the memorial event with song. Supporters of anthracite preservation in the Wyoming Valley area of Luzerne County hope that the site can become a future stop on the planned Susquehanna River Trail.

It is clear that numerous citizens of northeastern Pennsylvania's hard coal region have not forgotten the catastrophe that occurred at Avondale over 135 years ago. It is also apparent that, in the eyes of many, the case on the causes of the disaster has not been closed.