

# Historic Walking Tour of Sharpsville

## 1. Mahaney Park

The town park was laid out in 1916 and named in 1953 for George Mahaney, clothier, sportsman, and civic leader. Widely known as "Mr. Sharpsville," Mahaney was elected burgess five times and his tireless lobbying was largely responsible for the Shenango Dam's construction.

The ingot mold in the park is a reminder that Sharpsville was once the nation's ingot mold capital. Thomas D. West, founder of the plant which became Valley Mould & Iron, was for many years the nation's pre-eminent foundryman and introduced scientific principles to what had been an inexact art. Valley Mould was once the largest ingot mold foundry in the world, producing two-thirds of the nation's output; later another Sharpsville firm, the Shenango-Penn Mold became one of the leading producers of these large, specialized castings. However, as steel production began to rely more on continuous casters, demand for ingot molds entered a long decline, with the last two decades of production in Sharpsville marked by a series of financial struggles. This particular mold was one of the last cast in Sharpsville in 2001.



*Moving the memorial stone to the Park in 1930*

## 2. Iron Banking Co. Building

This three story Italianate building was built by "General" James Pierce in 1871. The importance of him and his family to the history of Sharpsville is paramount. He stood, moreover,

as a prominent figure in the industrial development of the Shenango Valley as well as in the history of the American iron industry. Pierce had an interest in seven of the nine blast furnaces that once operated in Sharpsville and owned coal mines in Hickory Township as well as the Sharpsville & Oakland Railroad. He founded the first bank in Sharpsville, the Iron Banking Co. It and its successor banks have been continuously housed in this building. The Geddes & Pierce Foundry supplied the cast iron front to the building. Further, Pierce's son Walter started the town's newspaper, *The Sharpsville Advertiser*, which was also located here.



*The building damaged by windstorm, 1888*

The third floor of this building contains the Pierce Opera House. For about 40 years, it hosted operas, operettas, musical concerts, and programs of spoken word; early motion pictures were shown after their introduction.

From the 1890s to about 1920, high school graduation ceremonies were held here, and in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the occasional high school basketball game was played here as well. More recently, this floor had been used by the Order of the Eastern Star. The opera house has been recently restored and once again regularly hosts operas, plays and concerts.

## 3. Jonas Pierce House

This 16-room Second Empire wood frame mansion, was built in 1868 by Jonas Pierce, oldest son of "General" Pierce. Likely designed by Philadelphia architect Isaac Harding Hobbs, this imposing residence was surpassed only by his father's magnificent 30-room Second Empire brick villa across the street, completed in 1874 (and regrettably torn down in

1952). After rising to the rank of captain in the Civil War, Jonas developed the iron interests of his father, and in 1870 formed his own furnace company, building two stacks at Sharpsville. Jonas served as Sharpsville burgess for two terms and president of the school board.

After Pierce's death in 1915, the house was occupied by the Eckles family, and later split into apartments, initially to house officers stationed at Camp Reynolds during World War II. Once again a single family home, it has been extensively renovated. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

## 4. Walter Pierce House

This elegant Queen Anne home was built in 1870 by Frank Pierce, second youngest of the General's five sons. He continued the management of his father's coal and iron interests, headed up the Sharpsville Railroad, and started the town's first newspaper, *The Sharpsville Advertiser*. Active in the community, Walter served as mayor,

councilman, and school director. The dwelling recently underwent an extensive restoration.

## 5. Gemmill House

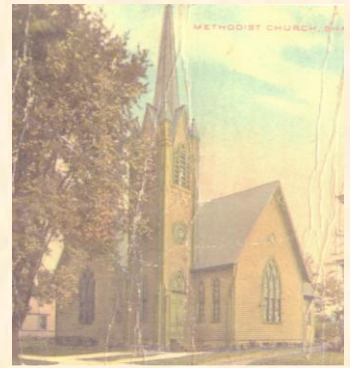
This high-style, brick Queen Anne home was built in 1908 by James and Mary Gemmill and boasts one of the finest collections of leaded and stained glass windows of any home in Mercer County. Matthew Gemmill, father of James, had purchased an interest in the Sharpsville Boiler Works, a firm noted for supplying the first iron tank for Colonel Drake's well at Titusville. Matthew also perfected a

steel buggy for the hauling of coke, ore, and dolomite. James Gemmill eventually took over management of the firm (which later became the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators) before selling to Frank W. King in 1907. James also served as vice-president of the First National Bank of Sharpsville. After the Gemmills, the Lee family occupied this home for many years before selling it in 1975 to the First Methodist Church for use as a parsonage. This splendid home is once again a private residence and is undergoing a very selective period restoration.

## 6. First Methodist Church

ten years, the congregation erected its first church building in 1858, a 30x40 foot frame structure, on Mercer Avenue, just above where the old Sharpsville Railroad ran. (The stone foundation of this building can still be seen on the lower wall of the brick commercial building at 215 N. Mercer Ave.) During 1874-75, the building was remodeled and enlarged, but soon outgrown. The cornerstone for the present structure on Shenango Street was laid August 27, 1886, with the church dedicated in the following year. Old photos show it to be a frame structure with a tall spire atop its west steeple. Surprising, perhaps, is to find that this is the same building we see today. In 1915, the building was raised up four feet and moved back nine feet. A basement was excavated, and the exterior veneered in brick. Further additions and improvements have been made over the years, to accommodate the needs of a living church.

Sharpsville's oldest congregation dates from 1836, when members of the Hays Class at Clarksville began to meet at the home of Andrew Byerly on the West Side. After meeting in the town's school house for about



*The church before it was bricked and repositioned in 1915*

## 7. Kelly Road Bridge

and lower chords being eye bars. The bridge was constructed by the Penn Bridge Company of Beaver Falls, a prolific builder of metal truss bridges, in Western Pennsylvania as well as nationwide. The structure is currently slated for demolition, but with the end trusses and many foundation stones to be saved and re-erected in a new park nearby.

Built in 1897, this bridge is a significant example of an early and complete pin connected, Parker through truss bridge. Of this type, only three 19<sup>th</sup> examples survive in Pennsylvania. This eleven panel, single span 187'-long structure has extensive v-lacing and lattice, with the polygonal upper chords built up box sections, the verticals toe-out channels, and the diagonals

## 8. Raisch Log Cabin

the Mercer County Historical Society was able to restore the cabin and relocate it. It was initially placed on Buhl Farm Park land on Tenth Street. When that section was sold to developers, the log cabin was moved once more to its present location in this park.

In 1977, when a house on E. State Street, Hermitage, near S. Kerrwood Drive was being razed to make way for a new bank building, the remarkable discovery was made that it was built around a log cabin. This log cabin, built before 1810, is one of Mercer County's oldest existing structures. Through the efforts and generosity of Dr. Frederick J. Raisch,

## 9. Canal Lock

at Sharpsville was opened with a section of canal north to Greenville in 1840. At this point canal boats left the slackwater of the Shenango River to enter the canal channel, with the difference in water level seven feet.

A short walk upstream brings you to the only remaining lock of the Erie Extension Canal. Also known as the Beaver & Erie Canal, it was built from 1831 to 1844, extending from the Ohio River to Lake Erie. One of 137 locks on the canal, Lock No. 10

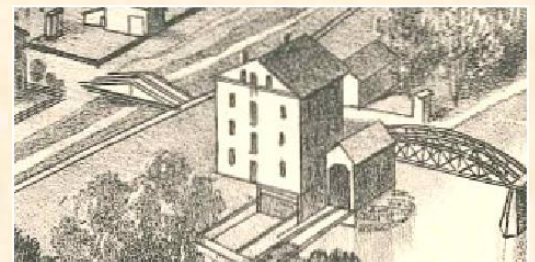


As the canal was completed, towns along its route—such as Sharon, Sharpsville, Clarksville, and the forgotten village of Big Bend—witnessed an economic boom. The canal flourished until the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad was completed along the same route. Unable to compete, the canal company's fortunes ebbed until it was bought out of bankruptcy in 1870 by the Erie & Pittsburgh, which rejected plans to enlarge and improve the waterway. The railroad company operated it for just a year, when the collapse of the Elk Creek aqueduct in Erie County gave them an excuse for abandoning the enterprise, which no doubt was the intention at the time of purchase.

## 10. Feed Mill

forced Sharp to forfeit the mill and leave town, with the mill passing through several hands during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Prior to the arrival of General Pierce and the rise of the iron industry, Sharpsville was little more than a collection of houses surrounding its grist- and saw-mill. After flood destroyed the first mill erected by town's founder, James Sharp, he built a second mill at this site about 1834. In 1846, financial difficulties



*The 1834 mill, with canal on left and millrace and river on right. From 1876 map.*

In the year 1900, John H. Miller erected the present building on the site of the old one. The old millstones were replaced with an up-to-date roller mill, as well as a plan sifter, where horizontal layers of oscillating sieves separated the ground grain into various grades. Its elaborate system of chutes remain inside. Likewise, the stone foundation of James Sharp's 1834 mill can still be seen.

Until the great fire of 1877, the town's commercial district was confined to the two blocks south of the mill. Canal Street was no street—rather, the canal itself, running toward Sharon.



## 11. First School House

buildings, the Methodists and Baptists used the building for church services as well.) Classes were taught here and at a nearby building until 1870, when General Pierce swapped this structure for a parcel uptown as well as donation of \$2,000 toward a new school building. The new building (upon the site now occupied by the Mertz Towers at 52 S. Mercer Ave.), constructed of brick, and expanded twice in 1876 and 1883, was later named the Deeter Building.

Now a residence, this frame building was the first school house, as well as one of the town's oldest surviving structures. It was built in 1847 by the firm of Vincent, Himrod and McClure, the owners of Sharpsville's first iron furnace, the Blanche Furnace. As no system of public education had reached the area at that time, it was built to educate the children of the furnace's employees. (Until they were able to construct their own

## 12. First Universalist Church

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the church serves as a fine model of Ruskinian Gothic design, marked by the lively color patterns of its red pressed brick and Amherst bluestone trim and the black and red roof slates. The steeple, capped with a steeply pitched hipped roof, is likewise representative of this style and its brief era of popularity. Special features to note inside include the lavish woodwork in red oak, black walnut and cherry, as well as the curved pews arranged as an auditorium-style sanctuary. Many of the thirty stained glass windows include an early use of opalescent glass, with pride of place given to the quatrefoil panes of flashed ruby glass. The organ is the oldest in Mercer County. A walk-in baptistry was installed in the 1940s.

Built 1882-84, the construction of this church was funded by Chloe Pierce, widow of the General. It was described in 1888 as "probably second to none in the county", with a cost per square foot far exceeding other brick and stone churches built here at that time.

The architecture also demonstrates a nationally significant early use of the "Akron plan" of church design, whereby adaptable space is created by connecting the Sunday school room and sanctuary by means of the large folding doors.

This building is owned by the Sharpsville Area Historical Society, and is being restored so it can be more fully utilized for public displays of its collection of artifacts as well as cultural performances and other community events. Currently, its collections may be seen from 1:00 to 3:00 on the first and third Saturdays of the month, and other times by appointment.

## 13. John Jackson House

this is an early example of Radford's "Queen Anne cottage".

The dwelling was built by John W. Jackson who came to Sharpsville from New Wilmington in 1872. The Sharpsville of that day was a busy railroad town and Jackson, a tinner by trade, was sought out by the engineers who passed through for the long-spouted oilers he fashioned for them. In time, his experiments yielded a design with an innovative self-closing valve. The famous Jackson oiler, in demand by railroad men across the country, was the born. By 1891, Jackson quit general tinsmith work to take up full time the manufacture of his oiler. The shop stood about a block downhill on Mercer Avenue, near the entrance to present-day shopping plaza. The house was restored in the 1990s.

This 1903 home was constructed by plans purchased from the Radford Ideal Homes Catalogue. Of interest to students of turn-of-the-century catalogue homes because the original blueprints still exist,



## 14. Sharpsville Railroad

Railroad crossed the E&P. (The sloping retaining wall marks the graded bed of the SRR, as it ascended the hill and turned to run between Hofius Lane and Pine Hollow Run.) Both lines entered town near Mercer Avenue, through the "Big Cut," which has since been filled in.

The Trout Island Trail follows the bed of the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad. Close to the western end of the trail, the Sharpsville

Though a line just 17 miles long, the Sharpsville Railroad had a fascinating history. On its north end, stood the blast furnaces at Sharpsville; on its south end (before the line was extended to New Wilmington), lay the valuable block coal mines of Hickory and Bethel. The Erie & Pittsburgh for years had a monopoly on shipping out the pig iron and block coal. Efforts by the SRR to break this monopoly—first by a connection to the New York, Pennsylvania & Ohio on the north end, later by a connection to the New Castle & Oil City road at Wilmington Junction—resulted in a "railroad war" with the E&P. From 1876 to 1884, the struggle for control of the Sharpsville Railroad, pitted brother against brother, involved years of litigation, gained the attention of the national press, and is today studied in modern game theory. Before it was resolved, rails were torn up, two state Supreme Court decisions were handed down, miles of track had sunk into a swamp, offices were burglarized, and the contending parties ended up hurling stones at one another.



*Pennsylvania (E & P) Rail Station with tracks of the Sharpsville Railroad to the right*

After the block coal mines became depleted, the Sharpsville Railroad entered a long somnolence: For 34 years it operated while in receivership, and at the end only serviced local farms and carried students to Westminster College. The "Hoodle Bug", as the Westminster students dubbed it, ceased to run in 1930.

## 15. Elastic Enamel Works

disadvantaged by its remoteness from any other commercial activity in Sharpsville. Business flourished initially, but the firm soon foundered, with local residents, from whom the firm's organizers raised most of the capital, bearing much of the loss. Samuel Hughes, president of the Sharpsville National Bank, was heavily invested in the venture. His losses in the failed plant prompted him to abscond with bank funds, leading to the collapse of that institution. Over the next decade various plans to restart the plant, as well as a series of lawsuits, resulted in only a brief resumption of operations. Just small remnants of the foundation of this factory remain, about 220 yards west of the dam.

Built in 1908 by the Pittsburg Elastic Enamel Co. (back when the "h" was optional in "Pittsburgh"), the factory produced cookware and other enameled metal products. While situated along the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad, it was perhaps



## 16. Shenango Dam

Completed in 1965, the Shenango Dam was built to control the periodic floods of the Shenango River. Sharpsville's topography spared it any significant damage, while Sharon and Wheatland bore the brunt. With great floods recorded back to 1800, the floods of 1913 and 1958-59 were particularly severe. While secondary to flood control, the recreation afforded by the dam's reservoir attracts nearly 600,000 visitors yearly.

This was not the first dam at Sharpsville. The town's founder, James Sharp, built a brush dam, for his saw- and gristmill, which he later replaced with a stone and timber dam upstream. That dam had to be torn out when the State Dam (also known as the Slackwater Dam) was built to regulate water flow into the canal lock. This wooden dam was damaged in 1907 and then washed away in the flood of 1913. Like today's dam, the State Dam also created popular areas for fishing and swimming. The Sandy Beach and Slackwater of years past made Sharpsville the pleasure ground of the Shenango Valley in the 1880s and 90s.



*The Dam under construction*

## 17. Trout Island

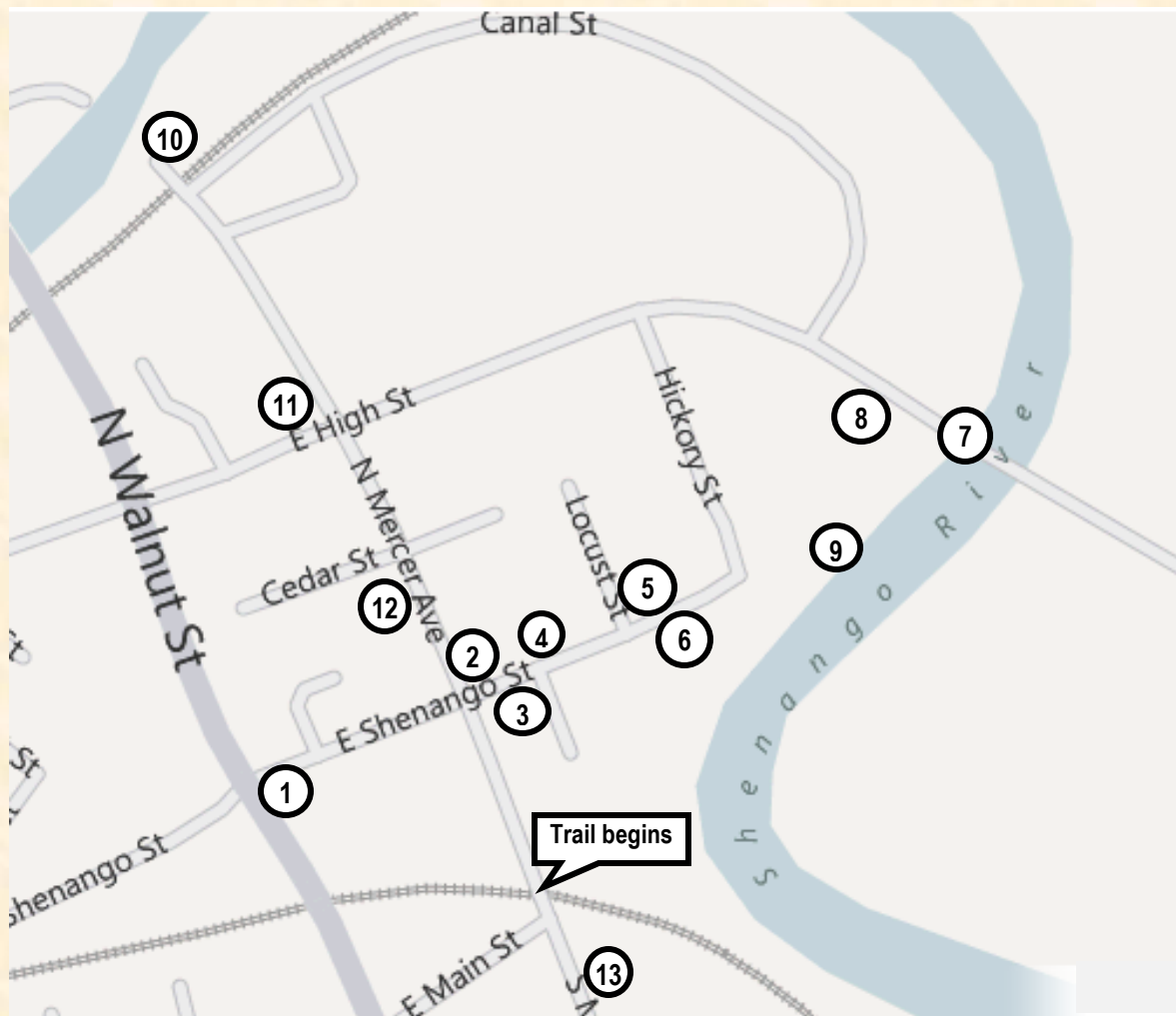
A picnic and pleasure ground once popular for day excursions, is now known in name only. An island situated in the Shenango River, at its southward bend toward Sharpsville, it was covered by the waters of the Shenango River Reservoir upon construction of the dam. Steamers, such as the *Kindosharva* and the *Oneida*, made the trip from town upriver. Picnic areas, a log cabin clubhouse, ball fields, and excellent fishing attracted Shenango Valley residents in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1906, Ephraim Truxall proposed building an amusement park at Trout Island. In a contest to name the park (with the winnings \$10 in gold and one share of stock), "Sans Souci Park" was chosen. Four years later, Truxall envisioned a manufacturing development here—"Truxall City"—with several plants proposed. Both projects went unrealized.

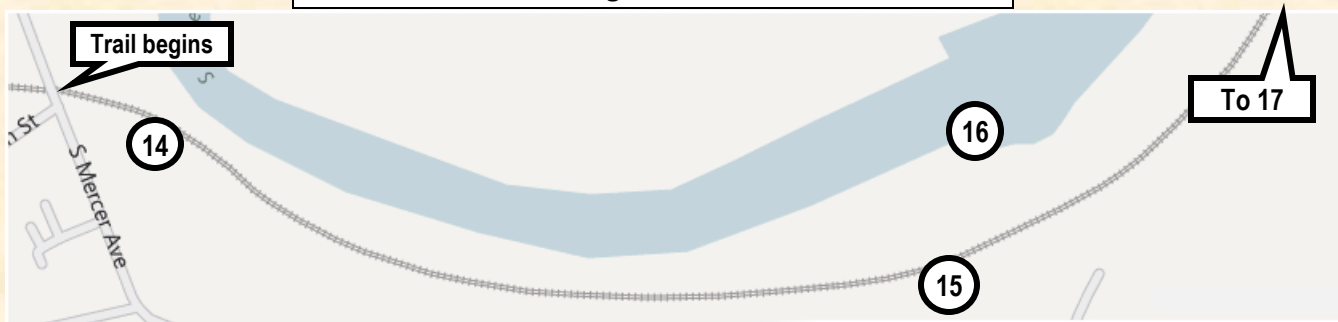


Please respect the privacy of property owners on this tour.





**Continuation of Walking Tour on the Trout Island Trail**



**LEGEND**

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|--|--|--|
| 1. Mahaney Park (SE corner of Shenango & Walnut Streets) | 10. Feed Mill (500 N. Mercer Avenue)                 |  |
| 2. Iron Banking Co. Building (100-106 N. Mercer Avenue)  | 11. First School House (303 N. Mercer Avenue)        |  |
| 3. Jonas Pierce House (60 E. Shenango Street)            | 12. First Universalist Church (131 N. Mercer Avenue) |  |
| 4. Frank Pierce House (137 E. Shenango Street)           | 13. John Jackson House (19 S. Mercer Avenue)         |  |
| 5. Gemmill House (203 E. Shenango Street)                | <i>TROUT ISLAND TRAIL BEGINS</i>                     |  |
| 6. First Methodist Church (148 E. Shenango Street)       | 14. Sharpsville Railroad crossing                    |  |
| 7. Kelly Road Bridge (High Street at Shenango River)     | 15. Elastic Enamel Works                             |  |
| 8. Raisch Log Cabin                                      | 16. Shenango Dam                                     |  |
| 9. Canal Lock  | 17. Trout Island                                     |  |