



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

An article by Lara Forsythe, “Out on the Porch: The Life and Death of an American Architectural Icon,” discusses the importance and surprisingly short-lived popularity of the front porch in America. The image of a place where neighbors greet neighbors, the epitome of neighborhood commonality, remains so strong, you may briefly forget that your house doesn’t even have a front porch. Or, if you do, it is a place rarely used.

Yet, from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the First World War, the front porch held a dominant place in American domestic architecture and home life. Popularized by architects Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis, the feature became an icon of small-town America. Its essential feature was to offer a space in-between the private rooms of the home and the public space of the sidewalk. Close friends or family are normally welcome inside the home. Any passerby, however, could receive at least a wave or a quick exchange of pleasantries from the occupant of the porch. The acquaintance might just as easily be invited up to “sit a spell.” The literature of the American South shows the front porch there took an outsized importance where these interactions were not hampered by the cold months.

As outlined by Marc Dunkelman in his book *The Vanishing Neighbor* (discussed in the September 2014 edition of this newsletter), it was this “middle ring” of relationships that was so vital to the sense of community that increasingly appears to have been lost. The middle ring consists of those you regularly cross paths with but who aren’t quite close—it would be odd to invite them inside, but exactly the people you would invite on your front porch for a chat. Such interactions—since they often mix people of different backgrounds or viewpoints—help to maintain a sense of social cohesiveness. Today, on the other hand, many of us self-segregate based on income or politics.

Why did the front porch since disappear, or when built, it was only a mere vestige? Basically, it was the automobile. The popularity of the auto coincides with the disappearance of the front porch—the 1920s. After all, even while driving on a 25 mph street, the most you can manage is a wave. Since then, residential construction increasingly focused on the back-yard and the privacy of the patio.

More than mere architectural history, as Forsythe points out, the life and death of the American front porch is both a reflection and itself a shaper of domestic and community life, or as Churchill put it: “our buildings shape us.”

Today’s reality is you will pass the old front porches on Main or Ridge not while walking back from the corner store but in a car, and far more time is spent in the living room TV-watching than on the porch people-watching. Yet, our town is strengthened by our daily interactions with neighbors and casual connections. Whether it is in the school parking lot, or Buhl Park, or a shop in town, lingering that extra minute to chat about common interests helps to develop a stronger sense of community here. There are still a lot of opportunities to meet someone on a “front porch.”

Upcoming Events

COVID-19 UPDATE:

Starting July 13th, the Historical Society will re-open on the first and third Saturday of the month.

1:00pm to 3:00pm

Come inside and see the unique Victorian interior of our building as well as our growing display of Sharpville memorabilia.



Monthly Meetings of the Historical Society have been resumed. First Monday of the Month, 7:00 pm. Face-masks are encouraged and social distancing is facilitated.



However, our Annual Ice Cream Social has been cancelled for 2020.



The following events remain postponed until further notice:

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

ANNUAL QUILT SHOW

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com

see our website for officers’ phone numbers

Headquarters: 131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpville, Pa.

Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane, Sharpville, Pa. 16150

Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm at our headquarters

A Look Back

Sharpsville's Second Railroad War

Our town was the scene of not one, but two, wars: what were termed “railroad wars.” While the violence was confined to tearing up tracks and throwing rocks, the acrimony—both physical and litigious—was one of many such instances across 19th century America. Our January 2020 Newsletter described Sharpsville's First Railroad War.

Since 1879, three years of calm had elapsed after an uneasy truce between the men of the Sharpsville Railroad and those of the Erie & Pittsburgh, and its lessee, the giant Pennsylvania Railroad.

A large portion of the valuable Mercer County block coal was transported on the Sharpsville Railroad (SRR) from the mines in Hickory Township to Sharpsville for use in the town's blast furnaces. The coal that was intended to be shipped out to the wider world was initially subject to the monopoly power of the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad (E&P), controlled by Erie capitalist William L. Scott. While his railroad had been leased to the sprawling Pennsylvania system in 1870, the terms of the lease were based on traffic being maintained on the route. Any diversion of freight from the E&P tracks would, moreover, result in Scott's docks at Erie losing the coal destined for Lake Erie shipping.

The First Railroad War, described in the earlier newsletter, involved a connection in Sharpsville between the SRR and the Sharon Railway, which broke the E&P's monopoly. After protracted litigation and blockades, a state Supreme Court decision allowed the connection which provided an outlet to Ashtabula. Since that initial connection, the Sharon Railway was absorbed by the Atlantic & Great Western, which was later reconstituted as the New York, Ohio & Pennsylvania (NYPANO). The Sharpsville Railroad, however, would soon seek a second connection. The reason—whether it was difficulties with the NYPANO, or the habit of its tracks sinking into a swamp (as described in our May 2012 newsletter)—is not, though, recorded. With the original plan to build a second railroad, the Sharpsville & Lake Shore, connecting to the north never realized, a southern connection was then sought.

The groundwork for a second phase of the war was thus laid in June 1881, when the Sharpsville Railroad announced that contracts would be bid immediately on a seven mile extension from the present southern terminus of Bethel to Wilmington Station. Here they connected in May 1882 with the Buffalo, Pittsburgh & Western Railroad; Sharpsville pig iron could now be sent to Pittsburgh and local coal and limestone could now use an alternate route to reach Ashtabula and even Chicago.

William L. Scott had to act; however, with the offending connection seventeen miles away, a repeat of the blockade of '79 would be useless. Scott's only option would be to gain control of the Sharpsville Railroad.

Influenced certainly by the newspaper's ownership by Walter Pierce, a report in *The Sharpsville Advertiser*, reads: “Since the evening of December 11th, 1882, there has been a lively fight going on over the Sharpsville Railroad, owing to the discovery by the present management of a deep-laid scheme by W.L. Scott, of Erie, aided by J.J. Pierce, of this place, to gobble the road. The discovery came to the knowledge of the present managers of the road by the merest chance, and the attempt to change the control and future policy of the road was wholly unexpected by the parties mostly interested and by the public generally.” Scott's scheme required the enlistment of the eldest Pierce brother, Jonas, in order to obtain options on the railroad's stock held by others.

A crucial question is why Jonas parted from his brothers and aligned with Scott. The answer may lie in a dispute over inheritance. Despite his large and complex holdings, General Pierce died in 1874 without a will. His widow and five sons mutually agreed that the estate “should be neither sold nor divided, and that each son should take charge of some portion of the estate and manage it for the common benefit.” When a division of the estate among the heirs was ultimately being negotiated in 1880, a dispute arose out of the iron ore holdings in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Jonas was responsible for the management of the estate's Cheshire mine. In 1879, he proposed leasing an adjoining property with the potential of containing a rich vein of ore. The lease on this mine, the North Cheshire (later called the Swanzy), was made in Jonas' name, since the estate could not enter into a new lease in its name. In dividing up the estate, Jonas proposed that he receive the Upper Peninsula property for \$10,000, though he considered the ore exhausted and the land only good for timbering. Further investigation by the younger brothers, however, found that the Cheshire mine was more profitable than Jonas had represented. In April 1881, Jonas agreed that the Cheshire should be split among them all equally. The question of the new mine, the Swanzy, was then raised. The younger brothers considered it part of their common interest in the old mine with the accounts of both mines co-mingled up to now. Jonas, however,

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insisted that the Swanzey mine was entirely his. Litigation later ensued, with the case going to the Michigan Supreme Court in 1885. The justices decided 2-1 in Jonas' favor.

Against this background of distrust, the Pierce brothers, now aware of the scheme by Jonas and William L. Scott, were likewise able to increase their holdings by buying stock from shareholders in Greenville, Cleveland, and Sharpsville. Sufficient shares were obtained to give the Pierce faction a majority; however, Scott regained the advantage when those shares obtained within 60 days of the annual board meeting were not allowed to be voted. Scott, however, was not able to press this latest advantage, by the way the shares were voted.

Out of the 6,433 total votable shares, the Scott party held a total of 3,396 shares for each of the six nominations for director (20,376 votes in total). The Pierce party controlled 3,037 shares (with 18,222 votes in total). With a majority of the shares, it seemed obvious that the Scott faction would prevail; they voted their 3,396 for each of the six directorships. The Pierces, instead, apportioned their votes at: 4,557, 4,556, 4,555, 4,552, 0, and 0. In this way—termed cumulative voting—they were able to prevail and elect a majority of the directors to the board, despite owning fewer shares.

This strategy of cumulative voting is studied in Game Theory and law review articles, with the Sharpsville Railroad case cited as an early instance of its application.

Though the Scott faction was clearly outfoxed, its nominees were somehow allowed to assume the directorships. Even though the Pennsylvania constitution, when rewritten in 1873, specifically permitted cumulated votes, the judges of election, or tellers, through Scott's undue influence, disallowed them. Or, as *The New York Times* put it: "The Scott men never dreamed of this little game and cast a straight ballot. The Pierce men, with their cumulative pole, knocked the persimmon, but the tellers were men who wore the Scott badge, and they decided that the cumulative plan was not legal." The Pierces, though, enjoyed the loyalty of the employees and the backing of the Sharpsville community.

The next day, the Pierces filed suit to install their nominees as duly elected directors. Scott responded with an initial claim that some of the shares voted by Walter Pierce were improperly transferred to him by the First National Bank of West Greenville (the original name of today's First National Bank of Pennsylvania). While these late-obtained shares were disallowed from the voting, if the Scott party were to obtain them, not only would the Pierce bloc of shares be reduced, but a new election of directors could be forced, at which point Scott would be able to apportion his votes more strategically.

The day following a hearing in Mercer on January 17, 1883, the court lifted the injunction against Walter Pierce voting the shares that had been held by the bank. Two days later a separate injunction that restrained the Pierce's from operating the railroad was dissolved. The following month, another hearing was held at Mercer, with the opinion favorable to the Pierce's arguments and which directed Scott's directors to show within ten days the validity of their claim of authority.

Seeing little sympathy to their side in Judge McDermitt's decision, and citing prejudice of public opinion, the Scott faction sought to have the case tried in Lawrence County. This move was rejected, though they did succeed in having the venue for the rehearing moved to Venango County. There, Judge Taylor ruled again in favor of the Pierce party. The State Supreme Court then heard the appeal, just as it had done for the litigation arising out of Sharpsville's First Railroad War. The thin reeds at which the Scott faction grasped were that: 1) a railroad was a quasi-public, and not a private, corporation; cumulative voting, as permitted by the state constitution, applied only to private corporations, and 2) the Pierce faction's concealment of their plan to vote cumulatively constituted fraud. Pennsylvania's Supreme Court rejected these arguments and upheld Judge Taylor's ruling in favor of the Pierces. This was characterized as one of the most important decisions in years.

Having lost on the question of cumulative voting, William Scott and Jonas Pierce tried to resurrect their old claim that some of the shares held by Walter Pierce were improperly transferred to him by the First National Bank of West Greenville. Even ignoring the disputed shares, the Pierce faction had obtained a majority of the stock since the last election of officers: 3,302 to 3,284. Now it would be necessary to show that not only was Walter not entitled to the 414 disputed shares, but that Jonas had the rightful option to purchase them. Scott claimed that the bank had no right to sell the shares since they were held as collateral to secure payment on a note by the old Greenville Iron

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Company. The bank countered that the note was never paid and they were thus entitled to possess the collateral. Bredin, hearing the case in Butler County, was not swayed and denied the Scott party's request for an injunction.

After an unsuccessful attempt to appeal the case to the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court, the Scott party made a final appeal to the U.S. Circuit Court in New York on January 11, 1884; the appeal was rejected the next day.

With control over the ownership of the Sharpsville Railroad and its connections to other lines apparently settled, the Second Railroad War would seem to draw to a conclusion. Yet a second front would soon open up. In addition to routes to the block coal fields in Hickory Township, the road controlled short yet critical links within Sharpsville. In the tangle of tracks that lay across the town in the 19th century, the E&P owned the switch to the Mable Furnace, while the SRR owned the track to the Douglas Furnaces. The mutual access each railroad had given the other to these furnaces was broken in February 1884. The third rail-line running through town, the NYPANO, took advantage of the situation, and began to build its own quarter-mile passage to the Douglas Furnace. In retaliation, the SRR, which had charged 75¢ per car for the short run, increased the rate to \$2.00 per car. Acrimony, though, likely existed between the two lines beforehand. The prior May, the SRR announced plans to extend its line along the narrow strip along the river between Sharpsville and Sharon. This paralleled the NYPANO's existing route, and at some point encroached on their right of way. Litigation between the two railroads would later result, with yet another appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, in 1888.

As required by their contract, the rate increase would not take effect for ninety days; it would, moreover, take some time for the rail link to be built. In the meantime, the court at Mercer was asked again to intervene, with the Sharpsville Railroad winning a temporary injunction to stop the NYPANO from building their track. By early March 1884, however, "when the new builders were warned to desist from work, matters grew so warm that pistols were drawn."

Events quickly escalated with the Pennsylvania Railroad now entering the fray. While Scott could deploy a phalanx of lawyers, as the mere lessor of the rail line, he did not have a battalion of railroad workers available for the hand-to-hand struggle that would soon take place.

Newspaper editors eagerly recounted the tumult which took place here in March 1884. A short time before the latest trouble brewed, the SRR tore out the Pennsylvania R.R.'s switch to the Douglas Furnace. (Wallace Pierce, Walter's twin, was a 20% owner of the Douglas and sought to protect his family's side in the fight. His partners in the furnace, however, had welcomed the prospect of a competing rail connection.) On the 13th of March 1884 the PRR assembled a large force of men in an attempt to lay their own track to the Douglas. Within an hour, the Sharpsville Railroad responded with their own brigade. They drove the PRR men back, tore up their track and threw cars off the rails to obstruct the work. Conveniently, a supply of deputies sympathetic to the SRR's cause was found and sworn in. They proceeded to arrest the Pennsy workmen, with a magistrate's office improvised out of an old caboose. But the PRR men would not be discouraged. In a scene seemingly out of a Keystone Kops short, as fast as the officers took a squad in one door of the caboose, another which had had been previously arrested walked out the back door and resumed work. Andy Paisley was arrested fourteen times. Despite the many threats and menaces on both sides, violence was confined to doing and undoing work, with the exception of Wallace Pierce who was knocked down and trampled.

By the first of May, the NYPANO forces were continuing their advance as their new trackage neared completion. The Pennsylvania Railroad would now also have access to the furnaces on the new trackage "without paying tribute to" the SRR. Two weeks later, the Sharpsville Railroad forces made a last desperate counter-attack. As the NYPANO employees, with Jonas Pierce in the vanguard, laid their tracks in the "disputed territory," they were set upon by the Sharpsville men, led by Wallace Pierce. After Wallace struck Jonas in the face, a general melee ensued. Jonas' son James then threw a stone which laid-out his uncle Wallace. "Timely interference by officers prevented further bloodshed." This defeat on the field of battle was followed by one in the courts. On May 22nd, Judge Mehard at Mercer enjoined the SRR from interfering with the NYPANO's connection to the Douglas furnace.

Additional litigation on yet another front opened up in May 1884 between the Pierce brothers and Scott. The Mount Hickory Furnaces (later the Claire Furnace) were built in Sharpsville in 1868-69 by Jonas Pierce and William L. Scott. In 1879, they would become part of the Mount Hickory Iron Company, consisting of the furnaces here and a rolling mill Erie, with Scott owning seventh-eighths of the stock and a minority share for Frank and James B. Pierce.

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When the Erie rolling mill burned down on December 9, 1883, the estimated loss ranged from \$200,000 to \$600,000, but with only \$90,000 of insurance carried. In May 1884, the Pierces objected to the rebuilding of the rolling mill since Scott's proposal would have relocated the blast furnaces to Erie. An injunction was sought but was refused, as was a motion to dissolve the partnership and appoint a receiver. Bankruptcy was declared, with the assets at both Sharpsville and Erie purchased by P.L. Kimberly of Sharon, supposedly acting as a front for Scott. The \$27,500 paid for the Sharpsville property was reported to represent just one-fourth of the furnaces' value.

In one last skirmish, on June 18, 1884, William L. Scott sent a blacksmith, a lawyer, and a watchman to break open a vault in Erie in which the Pierce brothers kept account books and which Scott believed were illegally detained. They were caught and the Pierces had the party arrested for burglary.

Yet these months of seemingly endless drama appear to have ended suddenly, with no further incidents reported. In the two wars over a nine-year period, the little 17-mile Sharpsville Railroad fought against the nation's largest railroad and its aligned interests, and held fast. It is thus startling to see that in October of 1884, the Pierce brothers relinquished its management and sold a controlling interest to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The record does not show the reason for this apparent surrender. While Frank Pierce and the Agnews were kept on for a year as secretary, treasurer, and assistant general manager, the other officers and directors were swept away in favor of B&O men as well as William L. Scott and Jonas Pierce. Were the financial resources of the company sapped by the protracted legal battles? Or did the loss of monopolies on in-town links to the furnaces as well as the gloomy prospects of freight from the quickly depleting block coal mines darken the outlook for the railroad? Or did the emotional toll of the railroad wars, especially with his brother in the enemy camp, weigh too heavily on Walter Pierce? That last element may indeed have played a part, especially when we consider that Walter's wife died October 11, 1884. Her death was at "Stanley's Ranch" in Golden, Colorado. Since the bright sunshine and the thin, fresh air of Colorado's mountains was then famed as a cure for tuberculosis, a likely presumption is that she was sent there to treat a lingering illness.

The Sharpsville Railroad would continue to operate until 1931, though in later years it was known more for its outdated equipment and an indifference toward prompt arrival, when it transported mainly Westminster College students and farm supplies to New Wilmington.



Courtesy of the collection at Sharpsville Floral, we see here the Young Men's Italian Association Football Team from 1922. In an era when Italian-Americans were viewed with suspicion and broadly excluded from establishment civic life, formation of clubs like the YMIA—in apparent contrast to the YMCA—was a necessity. Mutual aid associations like the Italian Home in Sharpsville as well as the numerous ethnic clubs that once populated Farrell (though a few remain) were important ways to help immigrants transition to living here.

Sharpsville boys in the photo include "Se" and Joseph Nerone, Tony Barca and Frank and "Spang" Stigliano.

We're not sure of the building they were posing in front of. It doesn't look to be in Sharpsville, nor in front of the Farrell Italian Home. Any identifications of the other members would be appreciated.