



# SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Newsletter

We are happy to announce the Historical Society's resumption of cultural events, with performances of *Nightfall*, based on the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, on November 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>. The approximately 90-minute dramatic production will be staged at the Historical Society, and feature reenactments of the tales of Poe that especially continue to enthrall: *The Raven*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and *The Tell-Tale Heart*. What better way to usher in the coming November drear than an evening of the uncanny and Poe's tales.

When the by-laws of the Historical Society were revised in 2012, we recognized one of our purposes had been to "sponsor or produce various cultural, educational, and community-building events." This was to recognize events we were sponsoring and producing that were not just fundraisers but would, in their own right, enrich the cultural offerings available to the Shenango Valley. Starting in 2009, with the opera *Don Pasquale*, the Society has helped bring to the area operas, plays, popular, jazz, and classical music concerts, Christmas-themed events, dinner theatre, antiques road shows, and ice cream socials. While other groups have since sprung up to provide live performance opportunities, we take pride that, at that time, few, if any other, organizations were offering such cultural events in the Shenango Valley. This is nothing we do alone, and we are grateful for the other persons and organizations who have co-produced these events. Maria Ackley, who has directed so many entertaining productions both for the Historical Society and her Black Sheep Players, will be directing *Nightfall* for us.



In May of this year, a friend of the Historical Society, the well-known and well-liked Jim Lawton of this town, passed away. He bequeathed to us his large collection of research on the history of Sharpsville. This is one of the largest and most important additions to our archives and supplements the many photos and clippings he gave to us in 2012. The centerpiece of his donation are the nine scrapbooks he compiled, with many focusing on a Sharpsville neighborhood and outlining the successive occupants of the commercial and institutional (and some residential) buildings there. Other scrapbooks are subject-based. Within the scrapbooks are several old photos and documents, any one of which would have been a noteworthy addition to our collections. In addition, Jim's bequest includes many file folders of newspaper clippings that will take some time to review and catalogue. Upcoming newsletters will feature excerpts from Jim's donation.

### Upcoming Events

## *Nightfall*

### TALES OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Friday & Saturday, November 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>

7:30 p.m.

Sharpsville Historical Society

131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpsville

Tickets \$15 available at Mehler Insurance  
or at [www.sharpsvillehistorical.org](http://www.sharpsvillehistorical.org)



### GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Presque Isle Casino Erie, November 10<sup>th</sup>

Call 724-813-9199 for info and  
reservations

Participant are encouraged to have their  
COVID-19 vaccination

### Contact Us

website: [www.sharpsvillehistorical.org](http://www.sharpsvillehistorical.org)

email: [sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com](mailto:sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com)

see our website for officers' phone numbers

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

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

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

## A Look Back

### “Mr. Sharpsville”

For over half a century, the influence of George D. Mahaney—businessman, sportsman, burgess, and “father of the Shenango Dam”—on Sharpsville’s development was unrivalled. Despite this deep connection with the town, he was born in Erie on January 20, 1878. At the age of three, his family moved here, where he attended school. Shortly afterwards, his mother died, with George then making his home with his grandmother, Ann Fitzmaurice.

His youth was marked by a number of jobs, showing ambition certainly, but also a degree of restlessness. At the age of twelve, he was a driver for Boyle and Fitzmaurice’s grocery store in Sharon. The job lasted a year when the store closed. He was then allowed to carry water for the personnel of the local bank, and sweep and scrub the floor. Next was unloading coke at the Spearman Furnace for 50 cents a day. When the streetcar line was under construction, he worked as waterboy for the work gang and greased the tracks. He also delivered the morning editions of three Pittsburgh newspapers. At other times in his youth, he delivered *The Sharon Telegraph* and turned the old hand press of *The Sharpsville Advertiser*. From November 1893 to October 1897, Mahaney was apprenticed in the barber shop of Nick Mehler (who would later become his brother-in-law). At the end of the apprenticeship, having earned the rights of the profession, Mahaney changed direction and sold life insurance for five months. This was followed by a position as a travelling salesman for the John G. Burrows Yeast Co. of Detroit. By 1900, he was working for the New Castle Grocery Company and living in Sharon. Two years later, George went into business with his brother Thomas and purchased a women’s clothing store in Conneaut, Ohio.

Yet Mahaney maintained ties with Sharpsville. On May 6, 1903, he married Kathryn Knapp of this town. Two sons, George F. and John K., were born to the union, as well as a third son, Robert W., who died in infancy. Both young George (he wasn’t really a “Jr.” since he had a different middle name), and John became successful attorneys. Kathryn died in July 30, 1955, with George remarrying Rose Havlak on June 11, 1959.

Six-months after his marriage to Kathryn, George sold his interest in the store to his brother and returned to Sharpsville on January 1, 1904. He was then employed as a salesman for McCarter-Christy wholesale grocery of Cleveland, before returning to his old position with the New Castle Grocery Co. in August.

This succession of jobs came to an end when—as is described in all the biographical profiles—he purchased the Knapp Hotel. This terse description, however, obscures the circumstances and family tragedy behind the sale of the hotel.

Michael Knapp was born in Germany about 1842 and came to America with his family by 1852. He first worked in the coal fields in Hickory Township and enlisted in the 211<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, which saw action mainly in the Richmond-Petersburg Campaign. By 1880, census records list him as a hotel keeper. In 1886, he then built an establishment called the Knapp House, located at the corner of Main and Fourth Streets; it was later known as the Mehler House, and then the Welch House. (The local hotels then were known as much for being drinking spots as places for lodging.) Other references for the Knapp House are found in 1890s.

Knapp then embarked on the grandest commercial building project Sharpsville had seen in a generation. The Knapp Hotel was built as a three-story brick building at the corner of Walnut and Main, with a bar on the first floor, and lodging on the second and third.

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The Knapp Hotel when newly built.



Ann Angel-Eberhardt donated this photo from her father's well-loved banquet hall, Angel's Casino. It shows a 1955 Halloween party there for the kids of the town. Only a few of the costumes appear store-bought and some—with blackface or the sign urging one to smoke Kool cigarettes held by the brand's penguin mascot—are problematic by today's standards.

## Volunteers Needed

Our headquarters building is open for visitors the first and third Saturday of the month from 1:00 to 3:00. One or two volunteers are needed to greet visitors. A script describing the building's architecture is provided. Visitor traffic is steady but light, so you won't be overwhelmed.

If you can help, please call 724-962-2392 to get on the schedule.



In addition, various projects call for a couple hours of work just once, twice, or three times a year. If you want to help the community but are hesitant about making a large time commitment, let us know and we can find a project to match your time and inclination.

## Commemorative Bricks

*Please consider an "In Memory of" or "In Honor of" brick for a loved one.*

4" x 8" bricks with three lines of inscription—\$75  
8" x 8" bricks with six lines of inscription—\$125

The bricks would be placed around the Shenango Furnace Ingot Mould in the town park.

**Stop at Mehler Insurance or call 724-962-2392  
or email [sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com](mailto:sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com)**

## “Mr. Sharpville,” cont’d.

Yet, this shocking account was reported on June 12, 1903:

Michael Knapp, one of the best known residents of this section, committed suicide at his home in Sharpville yesterday morning about 8:30 o'clock, by shooting himself in the right temple. The weapon used was a revolver. He had been despondent for some time past owing to ill health and this is the generally accepted cause for his act. He recently completed a new hotel at Sharpville and had made arrangements to open it tomorrow, Saturday. He was about 65 years of age and leaves a wife and several daughters.

“Despondency owing to ill health” and similar phrasing was common for obituaries of suicides in that era. Whether that was noted merely to lessen the shame the family may have felt, the main factor that weighed on Michael was the crushing debt he incurred in building the hotel, as revealed in a pension application by his widow, Anna. As a widow of a Civil War veteran, she was entitled to survivor’s benefits. The pension, though, was what would be now be called “means-tested,” with the pension examiner necessarily skeptical that a woman who had inherited such a substantial asset would be in need of a pension. Within the many pages of testimony relating to the case is the statement that hotel cost Michael “over the sum of \$25563.00, and the building of the said hotel, so embarrassed him financially, that he worried so much, that on the 11th day of June 1903, in a fit of despondency, he committed suicide.” With the heavy debt burden, running the hotel profitably would have challenged anyone, but for Michael’s widow, Anna, her lack of business sense made it impossible. She testified, “I have no idea how much money I received and expended and inasmuch as I kept no books I can’t tell how much I gained or lost, but I know that I lost some money, because I had nothing but debts.” Her son-in-law, George Mahaney, agreed to take over the hotel, entering into an article of agreement with Anna on December 3, 1904. In exchange for payment of \$30,000, George agreed to assume the entirety of the debt, which, with interest, had accumulated to \$28,937.84. In addition, he loaned her \$2,000 with which to build a new home on one of the vacant lots she had inherited from her husband. That month, the license of the Knapp Hotel was transferred to Mahaney, and on October 5, 1909 the article of agreement was paid off with the deed for the real estate transferred from the estate of Anna (who had since died) to George.

In 1914—perhaps responding to the threat the agitation for a “dry” Mercer County posed to the Hotel—Mahaney, along with Joseph McGowan, purchased the Cohen Brothers’ men’s clothing store in Sharpville. After the Hotel’s liquor license was not renewed on February 11, 1916—no licenses were granted in the County that year—the store was moved to a part of the Knapp building’s first floor in September. The following year, Mahaney took over the store’s management from McGowan. Despite his flurry of youthful occupations, here George stayed, running his haberdashery until shortly before his death.

Mahaney’s involvement with sports was mainly with baseball. He was considered one of the prime movers in the 1897 establishment of Speedway Park, the combination horse race-track and baseball diamond (profiled in the March 2021 edition of this newsletter), and organized and managed the Sharpville Hustlers baseball club. Around 1913, he coached Sharpville’s High School baseball team, “turning out one of the finest squads in the valley.” His baseball reputation, though, was made behind the plate as an umpire. He started umping at the age of 20, was eventually considered the best baseball umpire in Western Pennsylvania, and was even offered a post in the major leagues. This was an era when, “He carried a bat in addition to a mask, for argument at that time meant business and the umpire was given the undisputed right to protect himself.” He often proclaimed that he never made a bad call, though he recognized those calls did not always meet the approval of fans: “I have been called more names than anyone in Mercer County.” In the first decade of the twentieth century, the best ball locally was played by the Sharon team (nicknamed the Steels for two years, and then the Giants) of the Ohio-Pennsylvania League, an independent minor league. Mahaney served as president of the Sharon team and a director of the League. While the O-P had a short and disorganized existence—the epitome of a “bush league”—over four seasons the Sharon club alone included sixteen players who went on to play in the majors. In 1955, the Mercer County Oldtimer’s Baseball Association—predecessor to the Mercer County Hall of Fame—inducted him with their annual award.

Though because of age he never enlisted, Mahaney took a strong interest in supporting the nation’s war efforts. During the First World War, he served as chairman of the Sharpville chapter of the Red Cross and visited local soldiers at various training camps. He was placed in charge of all public eating places in Mercer County to enforce the U.S. Food Administration’s General Orders discouraging wastage and limiting the use of meats, bread, fats, and other foods more

## “Mr. Sharpsville,” cont’d.

urgently needed for the troops. When the local doughboys returned home from France, he organized the official welcome ceremony. In appreciation for his efforts throughout their deployment., the troops presented him with a gold Hamilton watch, which he kept as a cherished memento through his life. The presentation was accompanied by a card that read:

American Expeditionary Forces, World War  
To GEORGE MAHANEY  
Who has always been a friend of “The Boys”

We, the boys, feel that in you we have had more than a friend and wish, by this small token, to express our appreciation for what you have done for us. This can repay only in a small part your efforts in our behalf, but we hope that as the HOURS go by, you will have TIME to realize how grateful the Boys are for your many efforts to make Army life easier for them.

Wishing you and yours a Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year, we are The Boys Dec. 25, 1919”

During the Second World War, he served on the Selective Service, for which he received a medal.

Mahaney’s stamp on Sharpsville was perhaps most evident by his election as Burgess for five terms: 1930-1933, 1938-1941, 1942-1945, 1950-1953, and 1958-1961. (Burgess was the old name for the presiding officer of a Pennsylvania borough; starting in 1961, they were styled as mayors.) A lifelong Republican, he was often the only member of that party to win election in traditionally Democratic Sharpsville. His political aspirations included an unsuccessful run for state senator.

Even by mid-life, in 1924, it was said that Mahaney “probably served on more committees than any man in this locality. When a country-wide drive is on George Mahaney is usually named to represent Sharpsville.” He was an active member of the Sharpsville Improvement Association and a director of the local Automobile Club chapter. George was a member of Sharpsville’s 1924 Golden Anniversary Committee and was largely credited with the success of the celebration.

Other organization memberships include the Sharpsville Volunteer Fire Department (which he helped found), Sharpsville Service Club, and the Sharpsville Businessmen’s Association. He served as mercantile appraiser in 1936, on the board of the Mercer County Housing Authority in 1946, and helped begin the Shenango Valley Community Chest. A devout Catholic, Mahaney was a member of St. Bartholomew’s Church and its Holy Name Society, as well as the Knights of Columbus.

The Shenango Dam remains an enduring monument to Mahaney’s public-spiritedness, and represents the culmination of almost a lifetime of effort. Beginning in 1909, he was part of a push to rebuild the old Slackwater Dam, which had partially washed away in a flood five years prior. The great flood of 1913 brought an initial appropriation for the Pymatuning Dam much further upstream. Though full funding would be several years away and construction of that dam not started until 1931, that project sapped interest in a dam closer to Sharpsville. Nonetheless, Mahaney persisted. Along with the Sharpsville Improvement Association (akin to a town chamber of commerce), he continued through the 1920s to press for a new dam and

reservoir near Sharpsville—mainly to provide a reliable water source for Shenango Valley Industry. In the 1930s, Mahaney appealed to Pennsylvania Senator James J. Davis for construction of the dam. Davis, who grew up in Sharon, invited



Mahaney showing an antique lantern and top hat that were displayed for Sharpsville’s 1949 Jubilee

## “Mr. Sharpsville,” cont’d.

Mahaney to appear before the Senate commerce committee. The committee agreed with Mahaney’s testimony that a dam here would be important for flood control. In 1938, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers concurred in this assessment and listed a dam on the Shenango for future flood-control projects. Mahaney took his cause to the Mississippi Valley Improvement Association meetings in St. Louis and the Ohio Valley Improvement Association meetings in Cincinnati, where he won support. Locally, however, Sharon officials were reluctant to boost the project; they saw it as “getting something for Sharpsville,” though Sharpsville was largely immune from the floods that imperiled downstream Sharon. Support by the local Steelworkers Unions, and later by the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce, were important steps in moving the project forward. Despite Mahaney’s constant push, crisis was necessary to break the institutional inertia. In 1959, Sharon saw catastrophic flooding, on a scale not seen since 1913. The Corps of Engineers prioritized the project, across the state line, Representative Michael Kirwan of Youngstown gave his support, and Mahaney was able to get Pennsylvania Senator Joseph Clark to tour the prospective dam site. Mahaney’s major ally in Congress, though, was Carroll Kearns, representative for the district encompassing the Shenango Valley. During his terms, the funds were appropriated and construction began on the Shenango Dam. George Mahaney, of course, was present at its 1960 ground-breaking, digging the first shovelful of dirt, and was honored as “Father of the Dam” at its 1965 dedication.



Mahaney lobbying Congressman Kearns for funds for the Dam

While he enjoyed a long life, George’s death still came as a shock to the town where he was such an integral part for well over half a century. In a banner headline, the January 26, 1966 edition of *The Sharon Herald* announced: “Geo. Mahaney Dies; ‘Father’ of Reservoir: stricken at 88 After Listening To Ball Game” The article’s lede highlighted his importance to the area: “George Mahaney, the father of Shenango River Reservoir is dead. His unexpected death came as a blow to the entire valley and has shaken the Borough of Sharpsville where he was known as ‘Mr. Sharpsville.’” Fittingly, the avid sportsman’s death came from a heart attack he suffered after listening to the Sharon-Farrell basketball game on the radio.

One signal of Mahaney’s importance here was that, upon his death, Sharpsville Mayor (and Mahaney’s political rival) Pete Joyce ordered that the Borough’s flag flown at half-staff. Yet, even in the decade beforehand, he was showered with honors. The town park, at the corner of Shenango and Walnut Streets, was officially named Mahaney Park in 1953. The Shenango Valley Junior Chamber of Commerce gave him their Distinguished Service Award in 1955. Four years later the Shenango Valley Chamber honored him for his work with the Reservoir. Since the dam and reservoir represented so much of George Mahaney’s personal and often singular efforts, there were several proposals, including a bill in Congress (H.R. 12291), to give the reservoir his name, though he spurned them with a “No thanks, I’m not dead yet..” The naming of the recreational site at the dam for him, though, was announced by the Army Corps of Engineers at a Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce breakfast on September 29, 1964. (A matter of pronunciation: While the recreation area is usually said as Ma-Hay-Nee, with the accent on the second syllable, the family’s name—in town at least—was said Ma-Huh-Nee, with the accent on the first syllable and “Ma” as in “mat”.)

A testimonial dinner was held in his honor in 1962 at the Sharpsville V.F.W. There he was fêted for a lifetime of achievements and devotion to the town and presented with a plaque from the V.F.W. inscribed: “His good works, beyond number, are a lasting monument to a life dedicated to making his community a better place in which to live, work and play.” But perhaps his greatest honor was an informal one, the moniker he earned—“Mr. Sharpsville.”