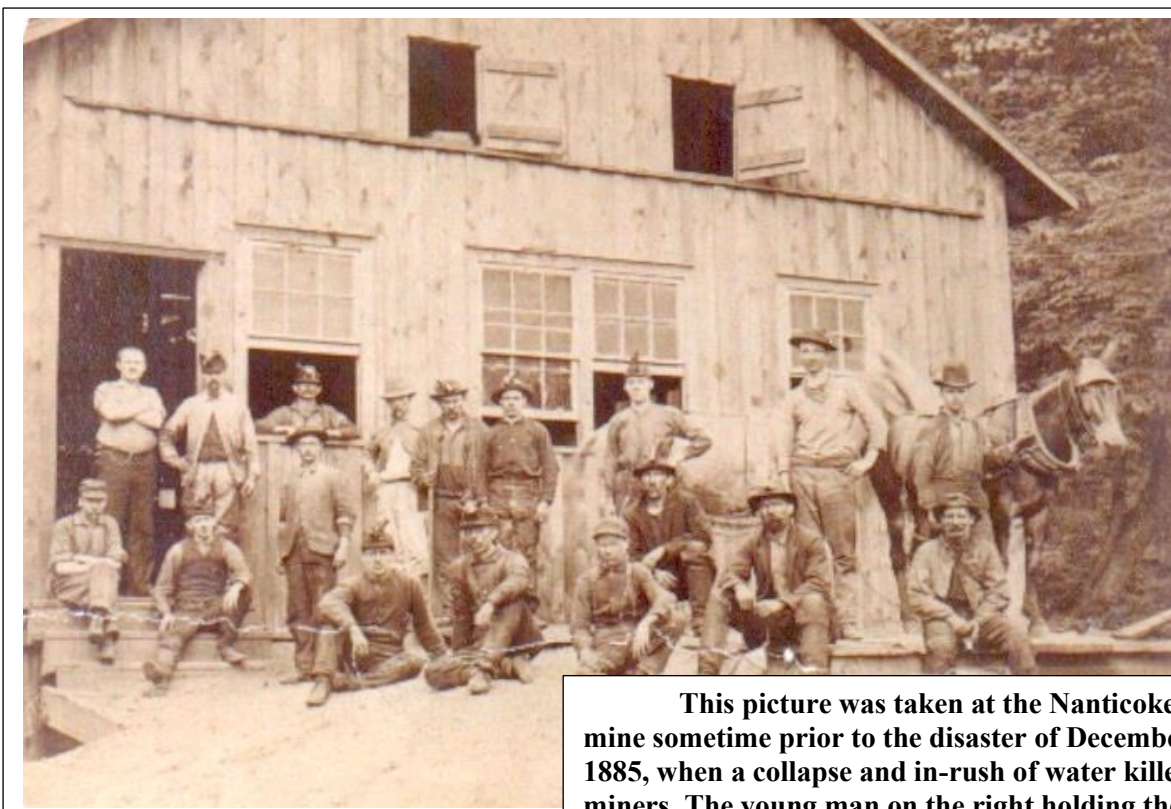




This picture was taken at the Nanticoke No. 1 mine sometime prior to the disaster of December 18, 1885, when a collapse and in-rush of water killed 26 miners. The young man on the right holding the mule is Miles LeRoy Davenport (1869-1932) of Plymouth. He had been injured the day before and was not at the mine the day of the disaster. He never went back to work at the mines, he finished high school and went on to earn a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine at Cornell College.

Buried Alive - The Susquehanna #1 Mining Disaster Of 1885

By Judy Minsavage

Adding to the already staggering amount of miner's deaths and injuries as a whole in 1885, it was 11 days into the final month of the year and already there had been four deaths attributed to Nanticoke mining accidents leaving three widows and 15 children. As mining families prepared for the upcoming Christmas season, though, there would be another 26 names added to the list of those killed, leaving eight widows and 19 children.

Miners at the No. 1 Slope Mine of the Susquehanna Coal Company at Honey Pot reported to work as usual, most looking forward to the coming holiday season when families would be sharing food, attending church services and perhaps even exchanging a few meager presents. However, the occupation in which most of these young men worked would prove deadly and change the lives of so many people.

Unfortunately, it was the nature of the beast as all who entered into the mines daily knew of the risks, but

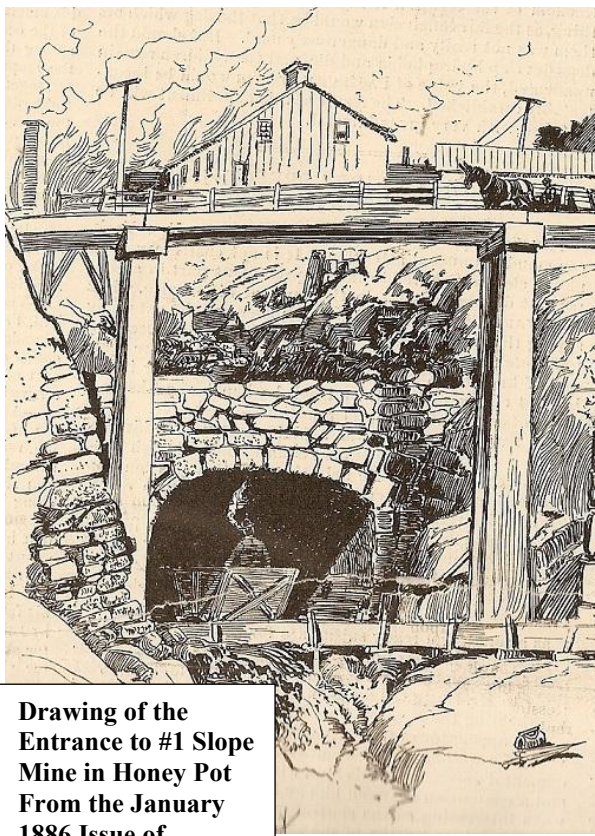
hoped that somehow they would be spared injury or death as they struggled to feed and shelter their families.

On December 18, 1885, miners at No. 1 Slope started their workday. Very soon after, those working in the Ross vein about 1,000 feet away from the exit shaft, found themselves being buried due to a cave-in. Some men working in another part of the mine narrowly escaped but not before the in-rush of a soupy mixture described as quicksand quickly blocked exits leaving the miners scrambling to try to find a way out.

RESCUE OR RECOVERY

In the aftermath, fellow miners quickly gathered their thoughts and began a rescue effort. Workers toiled throughout the night feeling an overwhelming responsibility to make every effort to rescue the men, however as time went on most feared the worst. By 7 a.m. the next morning, rescue efforts looked dim as the once liquid mixture had now begun to harden cementing the openings.

Upon reporting to work the next morning, miners refused to go in to the operating parts of the mine to begin their workday until they knew the fate of their comrades in the Ross vein. Even without knowing when they would see their next pay check, the community started a fund to help the wives and children of those buried below. By December 21, after working in shifts around the clock, rescuers were only 245 feet into the gangway with approximately another 750 feet more to go to reach the chamber where the men were working. Three mules were discovered in a chamber alive; each had marks on their torsos that showed the water had reached their necks, optimism of finding the miners alive heightened.



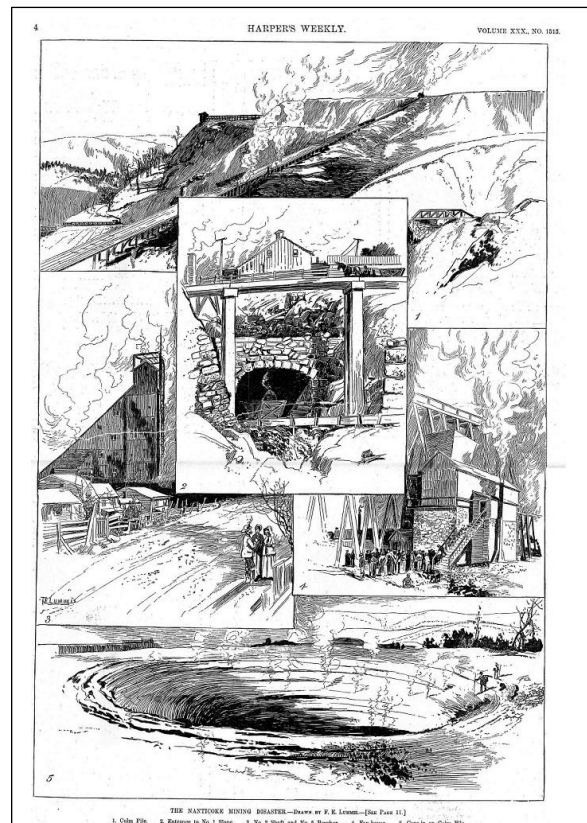
Drawing of the Entrance to #1 Slope Mine in Honey Pot From the January 1886 Issue of Harper's Weekly

Large numbers of family and friends gathered at the rescue site, their hope of seeing their loved ones emerge from the mines still intact. However, at 9 p.m. that evening, optimism turned to despair as another cave-in drove the rescuers to flee for their lives. The gangway filled with sand and culm a distance of 250 feet, 60 feet more than it was when the rescue started 4 days before. With the discovery of the presence of black damp, a mixture of unbreathable gases consisting of

nitrogen, carbon dioxide and water vapor, the superintendent of mines shut down the rescue operation, listing the fact that the men, if not dead from the cave-in, would have most likely succumbed to the deadly gas. At the news, the scene at the mine was described in an article published December 22 in the New York Times as, "Sullen with despair as disheartened and exhausted miners sat around the mouth of the mine, while wails of anguish filled the air. 'The town of Nanticoke is a place of universal mourning and lamentation,'"

FINDING THE CAUSE

It was first believed the cave-in was caused by the collapse of a large culm bank described as piled at least 47 feet high sitting on top of an abandoned portion of the mine. As the roof of the mine caved in under the weight of the massive mound, a pond, also on site, emptied into the mine creating a cement-like mixture that filled the vein and sealed the exits, leaving 26 miners buried alive.



The top portion of this drawing collage from the January 1886 issue of Harper's Weekly, shows the lay of the land surrounding #1 Slope Mine in Honey Pot. The bottom sketch shows the crater that formed on the surface after the cave-in. A close up of the center drawing is pictured on the left.

But a report of the Inspectors of Mines of the Anthracite Coal Regions of Pennsylvania dated 1886, stated that “a large funnel-shaped depression was discovered to have taken place on the culm bank about three thousand feet away from the entrance of the slope. This indicated the point where the cave-in had initially taken place. After a second cave-in on Dec 21, surveyors were tasked with finding exactly where over the mine the cave-in began.

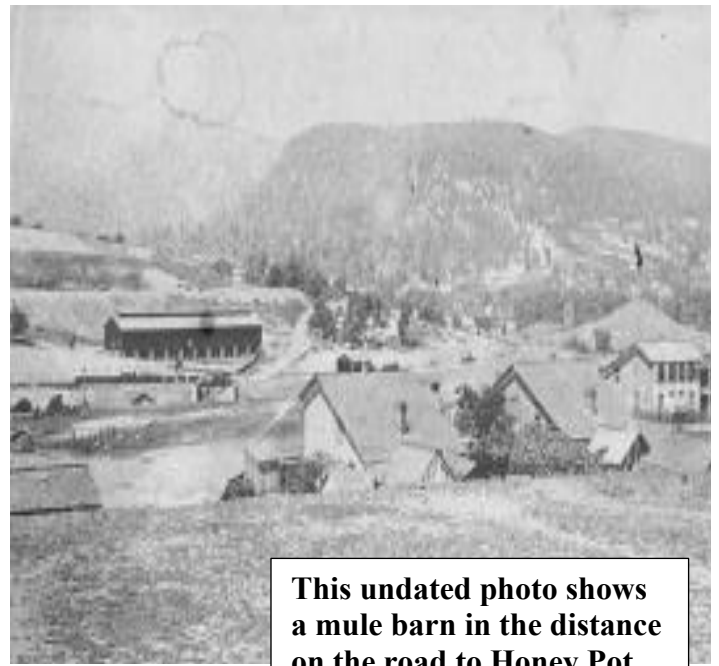
A BURIED VALLEY DISCOVERED

When the survey was completed officials found it was in a different spot than first thought. It was reported that “The disaster occurred at a point several thousands of feet southwest of the gap through which the river passes out of the valley over the edge of the coal measures and seven hundred feet north of the present bed of Newport Creek.” Mr. Charles Ashburner, geologist in charge of the Second Geological Survey of the state, describes what he found in a paper published entitled “The Buried Valley of Newport Creek near Nanticoke with Special Reference to the Mine Accident of Dec. 18, 1885, “From the south end of the Susquehanna Coal Company’s coal separator to the Nanticoke Gap, we have no sufficiently precise data to exactly locate the bottom of the “buried valley,” in the same way that the bore-holes drilled to the southwest of the separator have permitted us to locate the bottom of the valley in that section. We have, however, sufficient facts to enable us to approximately locate it.

Bulletin 494, Bureau of Mines entitled Buried Valley of the Susquehanna River – Anthracite Region of Pennsylvania by S.H. Ash, dated 1950, details the accident at the No. 1 Slope and states in essence that the disaster was unavoidable and was caused by a geologic anomaly. The disaster was listed as an accident due to in-rushes of sand gravel and water into mine workings, because of failures in the rock strata underlying the buried valley. In the report, a buried valley is described as a clay, sand and gravel deposit situated in the Northern field of the Anthracite region near Wilkes-Barre and throughout the Wyoming Valley.

In essence, deposits of water and gravel are trapped in potholes created by glacial action and water erosion. The report goes on to state, “Potholes are present in the area comprising the buried valley; these were formed by swirling currents of water carrying abrasive materials during the advance and retreat of glaciers. They extend below the normal bottom of the buried valley. Some large potholes are visible at the surface of the ground in the Scranton area.” The condition of the water bearing deposits created weaknesses in the strata and were hard to detect.

Sadly this is just one of the many mining accidents that took the lives of a great many men not only in Nanticoke, but all across the Anthracite region and beyond. The Nanticoke Historical Society has many names of local mine workers who were killed leaving their families struggling to find a way to survive all the while mourning their loss. If you are interested in research, please contact the society. 



This undated photo shows a mule barn in the distance on the road to Honey Pot



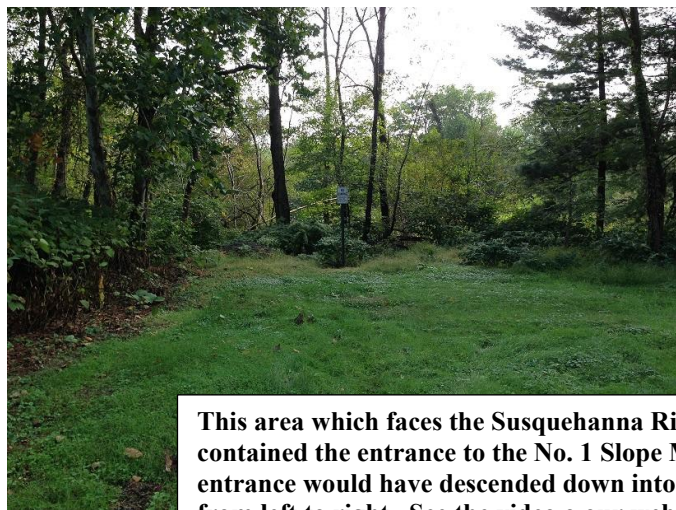
This undated photo represents what the #1 Mine gangway might have looked like.

A MEMORIAL VISIT TO THE SITE **#1 SLOPE MINE – HONEY POT**

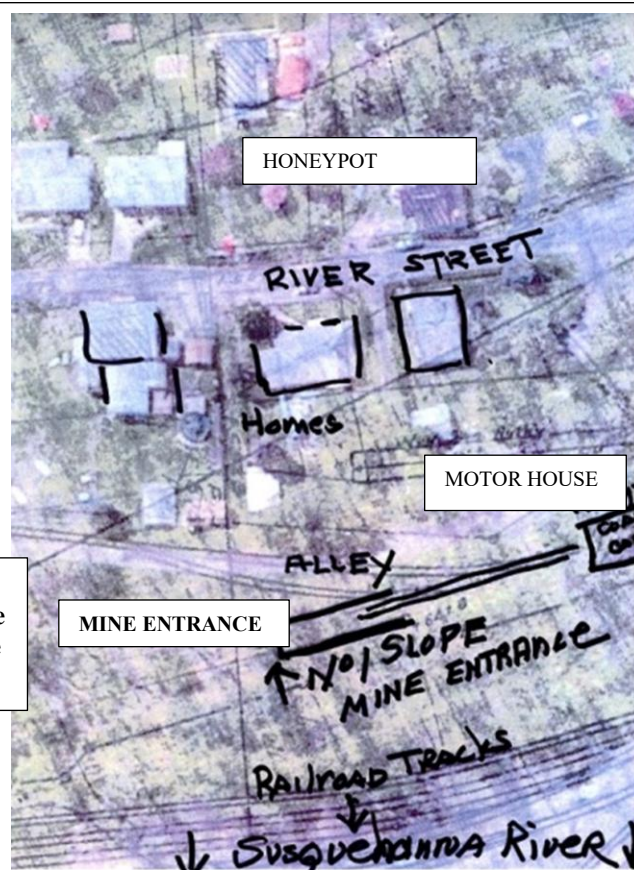
Judy Minsavage, editor

It wasn't a long walk from the beginning of River Street in Honey Pot to an alley that took Mike Stachowiak, John Sherrick and me to what was once the entrance of the Susquehanna #1 Slope Mine, the mine in which 26 men and boys lost their lives and are still buried from a cave-in which dates back to December 18, 1885. As we approached the site, the one thing that stood out for me was the peacefulness. The pleasant sound of birds chirping in the distance and rustle of leaves on the tall trees. Homes of nearby residents lined one side of the path. Likely most of those residents are unaware of the horror that happened just across the street.

A foundation of an old motor house was barely visible through the thick underbrush. Stachowiak explained that the building contained mechanical devices which enabled coal cars to be pulled up from the mines after the #1 stopped using mules. We reached the clearing where the mine's entrance would have been. It's flat and at the back of the clearing showed just a few signs of its history, small pieces of coal heaped in a mound and some large stones that looked to have been excavated possibly to make way for the mine shaft. But what was most apparent was the fact that with time, no one will remember this place or the tragedy that occurred. Families lost sons, brothers, husbands, 26 in all. Forever entombed in this peaceful place. We must continue to remember.



This area which faces the Susquehanna River contained the entrance to the No. 1 Slope Mine. The entrance would have descended down into the mine from left to right. See the video on our website.



This overhead view of Honey Pot shows the location of the #1 Slope Mine entrance, motor house, and general location in relation to the Susquehanna River. It shows the gradual decline from the motor house to the mine entrance.



Small bits of stone and coal remain at the back of the property.

**Nanticoke Mine Disaster – 1885
Names and ages of Deceased as
per Inspectors of Mines Report
dated Dec. 20, 1886.**

**Michael Adamchick, 24 - miner
Thomas Clifford, 14 - doorboy
William Danahey, 15 - driverboy
John Dragno, 35 - miner
William Elkie, 17 - runner
Edward Hargraves, 22 - miner
John Hawk, 26 - laborer
Wadislaw Jelgoshinski, 24 - laborer
Oliver Kivler, 32 - miner
William Kivler, 18 - laborer
Frank Kivler, 30 - miner
Max Longoskie, 16 – driver
Abram Lewis, 35 - miner
Andrew Low, 26
Vincent Luke, 23 - laborer
Edward Matthews, 20 - laborer
August Matule, 45, - miner
Peter Motulwick, 25 - laborer
Joseph McCarty, 25, - miner
John Nowack, 26 - laborer
Adam Rubinskey, 26 - laborer
Isaac Sarver, 26 - miner
John Sarver, 20 - laborer
John Sloff, 27 - laborer
John Shutt, 28 - miner
Thomas Williams, 21 - laborer
One other miner was discovered to be
among the dead, but his name was
unknown.**