

# Giving a New Shine to an Old Boot and Shoe Factory

Bonnie Wilkinson Mark

**N**amed for Tahkamochk (or Tama-kwah), a Tuscarora Indian chief of the Turkey Clan, Tamaqua, in northeastern Pennsylvania's Schuylkill County, was known as the "the land where the beaver dwells in the water" and "the valley among four mountains." It began as an anthracite (hard coal) mining town with related manufacturing interests. Tamaqua's first settler, Burkhart Moser, is credited with discovering coal in 1817 as he dug the foundation for a building. The coal vein was later mined and processed by the Greenwood Coal Breaker, which operated for nearly sixty years, before being burned to the ground in 1874 by the Molly Maguires, an alleged secret society of miners, largely of Irish decent, who retaliated against mine owners and bosses who, they believed, treated and paid them unfairly.

Incorporated in 1832, Tamaqua gained importance as a mining center and a regional transportation hub. As speculators and investors developed and expanded mining operations, they needed an economical way to transport the commodity to market. This, in turn, led to the advent and growth of canals and railroads, but it was the railroad that triumphed in moving anthracite to Philadelphia.

Northeastern Pennsylvania's burgeoning anthracite industry and the expanding railroad system brought tremendous wealth to mine owners. It was during this period, roughly from 1860 to 1875, that labor unrest marred the otherwise successful coal trade.

Outbreaks of violence in the region—a fifteen-year reign of terror marked by arsons, break-ins, assaults, and homicides—were attributed to the Molly Maguires. Benjamin F. Yost, a Tamaqua police officer, was reputedly shot and killed by members of the Molly Maguires in July 1875 as he extinguished a gas lamp at the corner of West Broad and Lehigh Streets. For their purported crimes, ten convicted Molliques were hanged from the gallows at the Schuylkill County Prison in Pottsville two years later; others met the same fate at the Carbon County Prison in Mauch Chunk (renamed Jim Thorpe in 1954).

In spite of seemingly insurmountable labor struggles, coal's popularity swelled, fueling the Industrial Revolution, but prosperity appeared once again to be doomed. The Anthracite Strike of 1902 severely crippled the region and required the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt, whose creation of a fact-finding commission ultimately suspended the work stoppage. Five years after the strike, in 1907, a new Greenwood Breaker opened just east of Tamaqua in Rahn Township. Mining peaked during World War I. With the stock market crash in 1929, many collieries and related industries curtailed operations. By 1931, the anthracite industry suffered a 14 percent drop in production, followed by an additional 20 percent drop in 1932. After World War II, even more deep and strip mines throughout the region shut down. The resulting unemployment affected communities large and small, and Tamaqua was not immune from the economic downturn.

By the 1970s, few retail stores along the borough's main thoroughfare, Broad Street (Route 209) remained, but a glimmer of hope flickered on the horizon. The Tamaqua Historical Society was founded in 1971 and incorporated two years later, and the Reading Railroad Passenger Station, built in 1874, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. "The 1980s were not a good time in Tamaqua," says Linda J. Yulanavage, executive director of the Tamaqua Chamber of Commerce and the community's Main Street manager. "Buildings were run down and shabby." Yulanavage explains that a letter published by a local newspaper in 1986 criticized Tamaqua as dirty and

Restoration of Tamaqua founder Burkhart Moser's 1801 log house was an early project of the Tamaqua Historical Society.



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In service from 1874 until 1963, the rehabilitated Reading Railroad Passenger Station now houses retail shops and a restaurant.

ugly and asked how anyone could live there. Not long afterward, residents organized a beautification committee, and new entrance signs were installed at gateways to the borough.

The next twenty years brought dramatic change. One goal, to develop a vision for the future, was facilitated in 1994 by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Citizens deeply concerned about the community's future established the Tamaqua Area 2004 Partnership, which received state funding because of the support of Representative David G. Argall (who is now serving in the state senate). The partnership recruited diverse individuals for the good of the municipality through historic preservation and economic development.

Tamaqua's ongoing resurgence led to the rehabilitation of key industrial buildings. Although several of these buildings are not visible from main thoroughfares, they do contribute to the community's historic character. One of the buildings is a late nineteenth-century boot and shoe factory.

In 1874, the Tamaqua Shoe Factory was located at the intersection of Broad

and Center (Route 309) Streets. After enjoying a brisk business in 1875, the factory relocated several blocks east, on Lansford Road (later renamed Hazle Street), where a large, three-story brick building was constructed at a cost of \$12,000. Two years later, however, business idled and the factory remained vacant for eleven years until Henry A. Weldy, a prosperous powder mill owner, reopened it as the Tamaqua Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Company in 1888, employing 45 workers. His son, Clarence S. Weldy, managed the company which, in 1893, produced goods valued at \$50,000, the equivalent of \$1,178,703 today.

The building later housed the Eureka Signal Factory serving the trolley and railroad industries. In July 1914, Solomon Billman and Clayton Stegmaier took over part of the building for use as a dairy. Their business expanded and the partners eventually occupied the entire structure, to which concrete additions were constructed at the rear and side. Today, the complex is a series of three rectangular buildings that form a J shape. The original factory building is a two-story, red

Another coal region jewel: Tamaqua's Flat Iron Building, built circa 1900 in the Colonial Revival style, at the intersection of East Broad and Mauch Chunk Sts.



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COURTESY DALE W. FREUDENBERGER

Façade of the Tamaqua Boot and Shoe Factory, circa mid-to late 1880s.



COURTESY RALPH J. MELONE, AIA

Before: Building one, photographed in June 2006, prior to project work.

brick masonry building. The ten-bay long by two-bay deep building with a mortared stone foundation fronts Hazle Street. The interior has a mixture of structural systems with a concrete floor and beam system on the first

floor, and wooden post and beam on the second floor. Building two, constructed between 1923 and 1946, behind the front building, is a two-story, five-bay long by one-bay deep rectangular concrete block building with painted metal panels and concrete beams. Building three, also built during the same period, connects buildings one and two. This concrete structure is two-story, single-bay wide, and sided with wood.

The three buildings, totaling 18,415 square feet, were rehabilitated using the federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit (RITC) program, administered for the Commonwealth by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's Bureau for Historic Preservation, and the Low Income Tax Credit (LITC) program

to provide fourteen affordably priced housing units. The complex is attractive because of its "visitability": all first floors are handicap accessible. The rehabilitation involved reintroducing the building's historic fenestration by reopening windows based on a historic photograph. Workers stripped paint and repointed brick masonry. Aluminum was removed from the fascia and the existing trim repainted. Asbestos and brick siding were removed on building two and replaced with new vertical siding. On building three, the awnings, shed, and paint were removed, and the concrete repaired and repainted. Ralph J. Melone, AIA, served as architect for the project and Graysha Harris, a housing development specialist, assisted with securing funding.

The Alliance for Building Communities (ABC), responsible for rehabilitating the former factory, which has been renamed the Hazle Street Apartments, won the 2010 PNC Bank Leading the Way Award. The award highlights affordable and special needs housing projects and community and economic development initiatives that positively impact lower income communities. Founded in 1975 and headquartered in Allentown, ABC is a not-for-profit agency dedicated to revitalizing neighborhoods by developing safe and affordable housing that fosters independent living and enhances the quality of life for seniors and families with modest incomes.

The Tamaqua Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Company's factory was not the first project undertaken on Hazle Street. As part of Tamaqua's renaissance, the Schuylkill Community Action Committee was given a vacant lot on which it constructed a single-family dwelling to return the property to the tax rolls. Only one house has been built in the community to date, but more are planned.

In 2004, Tamaqua residents revisited their community vision and charted another ten years as the Tamaqua Area Community Partnership. In 2005, as part of this phase, the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh named Tamaqua one of twenty-two Blueprint Communities, a designation that assists communities by providing training, technical assistance, and capacity building.

Tamaquans galvanized and worked together on an array of projects to enhance their community. With support from Representative Argall and

After: Façade of building one, photographed in May 2009 from the corner of Hazle and Patterson Sts., following rehabilitation.



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PHOTO BY BONNIE WILKINSON MARK

borough officials, a historic district was established; a Keystone Opportunity Zone was designated to encourage development; the Pennsylvania Department of Economic and Community Development awarded Main Street and Elm Street Programs to the borough, which gave it access to funding; a streetscape program was undertaken and financed primarily through Pennsylvania's Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program; and the railroad station was rehabilitated for retail space and a restaurant. Tamaqua's resurgence has not been solely limited to bricks and mortar projects, however.

The John E. Morgan Foundation, established by a successful local textile manufacturer, offered paid tuition to qualified Tamaqua Area High School graduates to complete a two-year degree at the Tamaqua satellite of the Lehigh County Community College (LCCC). The Roberta and Ernest Scheller Jr. Family Foundation, established by the owners of the nearby Silberline Manufacturing Company, provides scholarships which augment the Morgan Foundation's financial assistance by offering graduates with a two-year degree from LCCC the opportunity to continue their third and fourth years at one of several nearby universities. The foundations essentially enable local high school graduates to obtain a college education at no cost.

In 2009, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, dedicated to supporting nonprofit community development organizations and residents transform distressed neighborhoods into economically viable areas of choice and opportunity, designated Tamaqua one

of only two rural Sustainable Communities in the nation. The five pillars of a sustainable community are expanding investment in housing and other real estate; increasing family income and wealth; stimulating economic development; improving access to quality education; and supporting healthy environments and lifestyles.

The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency recently announced it is allocating LITC to Tamaqua, and with additional incentives provided by the RITC, would provide additional housing in the community.

Tamaqua is an optimistic, forward-looking community that is embracing and nurturing renewal and revitalization, but this renaissance is not due to only one individual or organization. Its success is largely the result of a number of dedicated individuals and organizations which forged mutually rewarding partnerships, including the Borough of Tamaqua, the Tamaqua Area Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Tamaqua, Tamaqua Historical Society, Tamaqua Save Our Station, Tamaqua Industrial Development Enterprises, and the Eastern Schuylkill Recreation Commission.

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The complex's courtyard (left) offers attractive outdoor recreational areas for residents and their families, while the Hazle Street façade (below) provides a handicap ramp and a walkway that connects the fronts of the units for "visitability" or on-grade access for tenants and guests.



PHOTO BY BONNIE WILKINSON MARK

*Museum Commission's Bureau for Historic Preservation. She graduated with a B.A. in architecture in 1982 from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and earned an M.A. in historic preservation planning from Cornell University in 1985.*

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*Investing in Our Past demonstrates the economic value of preserving and reusing older and historic buildings and structures. To learn more about historic preservation in Pennsylvania, visit [www.phmc.state.pa.us](http://www.phmc.state.pa.us).*