

MAHANAY CITY CHRONICLES / Researched by Lorraine Stanton

'Honest John' a remarkable man

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'HONEST JOHN' PARKER was a remarkable man. A very remarkable man.

He might well be called the patriarch of the Schuylkill County Republican Party. As a journalist, he was in the forefront of the county campaign in behalf of the the GOP's first presidential candidate when the party emerged as a national political entity in 1856.

He might equally well be called a prophet of the working man, on par with the immortal John Siney, having been a vigorous voice and militant leader of the early anthracite mine union movement. He was adored by the miners and although not employed in the mines, he served a term as elected president of the granddaddy of all mine unions, John Siney's Workingmen's Benevolent Association (WBA).

Parker was an English immigrant whose deep love for America's brand of freedom set him apart from the ordinary and cast him in the role of a maverick. But he was a respected and trusted maverick, one whom the rank and file miners knew affectionately as "Honest John."

In journalism as in politics, he championed the cause of labor, yet he commanded enough respect from capital to be accepted as an arbiter in thorny labor disputes. He was even admired by the tempestuous Benjamin Bannon whose Pottsville Miners Journal took up pen in opposition to the mine labor movement.

Before he came to America, Parker was involved in an ill-fated crusade to introduce U.S. style democracy to England — an activity that almost got him jailed and/or killed.

His most notable contribution to Mahanoy City was in the field of journalism, having owned one of the newspapers which eventually merged into the town's last major daily, the Record-American.

THE STORY of John Parker began in 1822 in Durham County, England, where he was born in the shadows of the celebrated Durham Cathedral.

As a teenager he was enthused about the democracy flourishing in the United States. A movement for a similar People's Charter government in Britain began to stir in the mid-1830s under the leadership of the London Workingmen's Association. At the age of 15, Parker joined the movement and became one of its leaders, sharing platforms with noted orators such as Fergus O'Connor.

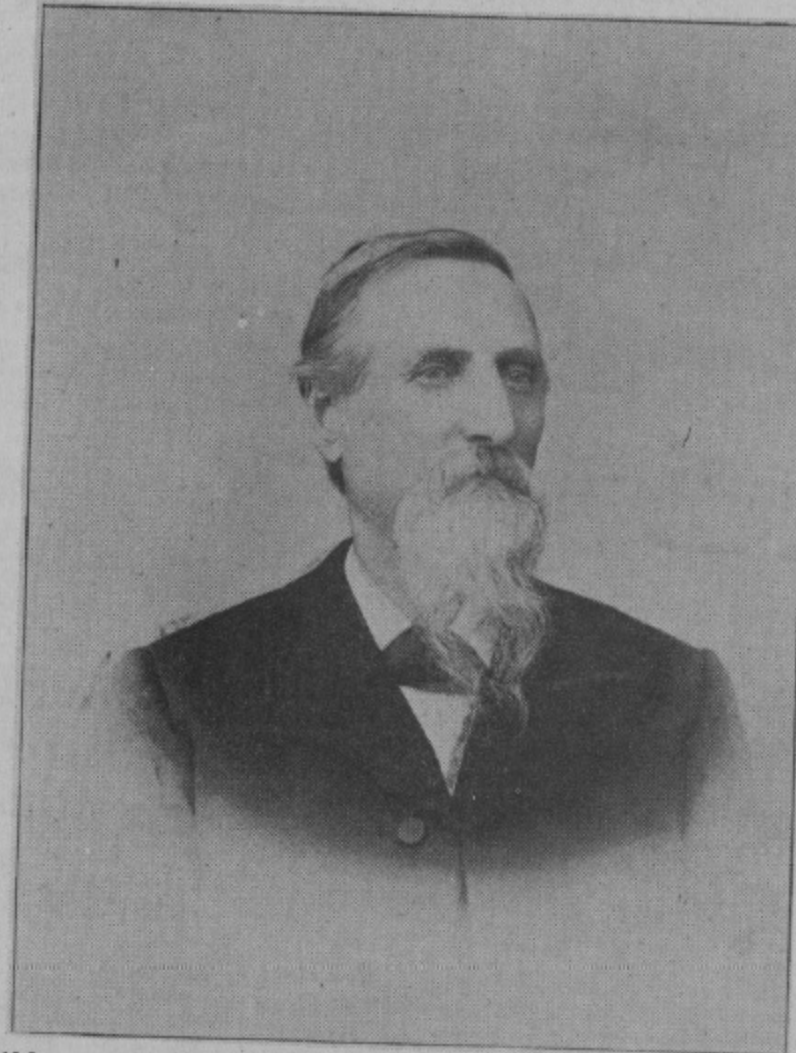
In 1837, the London Workingmen's Association presented a legislative program to parliament, only to see it rejected twice. In frustration, some 3,000 Chartists massed in 1839 and, armed with picks, decided to march. However, the insurrection was short-lived. Informers tipped off the authorities and the marchers were ambushed. Many were killed, many others cast into prisons and some, like John Parker, fled the country.

MAKING HIS his was to Tamaqua, Parker settled in a small mine patch called Buckville (which disappeared long before the turn of the century). He took up blacksmithing, became a citizen and delved into the exercises of democracy.

His fondness for things literary lured him into journalism and he became the editor/co-owner of two newspapers: People in Tamaqua and Sentinel in Saint Clair.

In 1869 he established the Anthracite Monitor as the outspoken organ of the infant mine union, the Miners and Laborers Benevolent Association (later known as the Workingmen's Benevolent Association) which was formed in Saint Clair on March 21, 1868, with John Siney as president. This was near the height of the Molly Maguire labor troubles, which cast him in a leadership role for the miners. As such, he conducted some of the most important union organization meetings of that turbulent era.

Because of Parker's leadership among the mine workers and his close friendship with John Siney, The Monitor became the largest circulation paper in 19th century Schuylkill County.



'Honest John' Parker
Friend of the miner

Writing under the pen name of "The Buckville Blacksmith," Parker became one of the most celebrated poets in the history of the anthracite region, using his talent to broadcast the cause of labor.

WHEN THE REPUBLICAN Party emerged in 1856, Parker assumed the leadership in Schuylkill County in behalf of the first presidential candidate, General John Charles Fremont.

He developed a "Freemont and Freedom" theme for the county campaign and composed a series of songs which became so popular that coal region folks remembered them 30 years later.

Perhaps somewhere in the attic of an old home or in the dusty files of a library or historical society may be found copies of the Parker songs that stirred the

Parker refrained from seeking office during the middle decades of the 19th century. He chose, instead, to involve himself in a militant role with the mineworkers union.

However, in the early 1880s he decided to run for state senate. The result was a victory that shocked the commonwealth.

By this time, Parker was residing in Mahanoy City. He had sold the Anthracite Monitor in 1872 and came to Mahanoy to buy the Mahanoy Valley Record, a comparatively new paper which had been founded in November 1871.

Parker's opponent in the senatorial election was one of the most formidable politicians of the era, Senator William L. Tobert, who was known throughout the state. A well-to-do native of the suburban Philadelphia area, he came to Schuylkill County after purchasing the Stephen Girard lands in the eastern end of the Catawissa (Ringtown) Valley, the area today known as Girard Manor. There he built a large mansion plus dwellings for the hired help, a saw mill, barns and other structures, creating a community known as Torbertsville.

The prominence of Senator Torbert is evident in the fact that he was endorsed by both Democrat and Republican parties, but that didn't faze "Honest John" Parker. Let down by his Republican Party, Parker switched to the Greenback Labor Party and received the back of labor to pull the big upset.

AFTER ONE TERM in the senate, Parker decided to try for a statewide office. He ran for lieutenant governor in 1886 but didn't have enough backing outside the coal region and lost to William T. Davies.

However, the loss was no crushing political blow for The Buckville Blacksmith. Although he was on the Greeback ticket, he had thrown his support in the governor's race behind the successful Republican candidate, James Adams Beaver.

The gesture was duly noted and Governor Beaver offered him a seat in his cabinet, but Parker declined. Instead, he asked the

governor to pardon for a labor leader who had been convicted of an offense which Parker thought to be unfounded. The request was granted, and the working man had still more reason to adore their beloved "Honest John" Parker.

Because of his long friendship with John Siney, Parker was chosen to deliver the address at the dedication of a memorial tablet at Siney's grave on Nov. 1, 1888. Parker's address, a mixture of his poetic and oratorical brilliance, was described this way by Historian Edward Pinkowski in his book "John Siney: The Miners' Martyr":

"Parker's speech of acceptance was the kind of tribute one heard only once in a lifetime. As he stood over the grave with uncovered head, the words from his lips poured into the ears of every man present and into all the crevices of the mountain which rises above the burial ground."

IT'S EASY to sense, from the foregoing, the "Honest John" Parker was one of the most remarkable men every to grave the borough of Mahanoy City by his presence. His home was at 96 S. Main St.

One of the honors bestowed upon him while he lived here was an appointment by Governor Beaver to serve as one of the first trustees at the new hospital being built by the state at Fountain Springs to care for the broken bodies of the men he spent a lifetime helping. The hospital opened in 1883 and was known as "The State Hospital for Injured Persons at Ashland, Pennsylvania." To him it was simply "The Miners Hospital."

"Honest John" Parker was called to his eternal rest on May 6, 1892, at the age of 70 years. Among the many eulogies written about him was this one in the Colliery Engineer of Scranton:

"Mr. Parker was a labor leader but not a demagogue. When his counsel was followed the workingmen always profited, and when at times the policy he advocated was thrown aside for that of demagogues, disastrous results were always the outcome."

What more needs to be said about such a man?