

Transportation

Canals

Located at the confluence of the North and West Branches of the Susquehanna River, Northumberland was well-positioned to become a major transportation hub for the county. Its potential importance to transportation in the region was recognized fairly early when, in 1809, the Northumberland Bridge Company was created “to incorporate a company for the purpose of making and erecting a bridge and road over the Northeast Branch of the river Susquehanna in the county of Northumberland, from the public highway opposite the plantation of Thomas Grant to Shamokin Island, through the public highway of Shamokin Island to the shore opposite Northumberland, and from thence to the town of Northumberland” (Bell 1891:528).

As the nineteenth century progressed Northumberland became an important node in Pennsylvania’s system of canals. Between 1826 and 1856 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania began construction on a 1,200-mile long canal system to connect Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Lake Erie, and other parts of the state. Northumberland’s prime location made it a logical connection between three of Pennsylvania’s canals: the Susquehanna Division, the North Branch Canal, and the West Branch Canal. The Susquehanna Division ran from Northumberland south to Clarks Ferry (near Harrisburg), a total of 41 miles. The North Branch Canal was constructed between 1828 with an extension completed by 1856, beginning in the canal basin at Northumberland and running east. The West Branch Canal ran east from Bellefonte before turning south near Muncy and ending at the Northumberland canal basin. Goods that traveled through these canals included dry goods from Philadelphia, timber from the Towanda region, hardware and cutlery from Williamsport, and iron from the Juniata Valley, along with groceries, salt, bacon, fruit and agricultural machinery from farms along the canals (Cummings 1954:268). A person from 1911 fondly remembers the influence the canal had on Northumberland, stating: “Less than a century ago, before the railroads, Northumberland was one of the most active communities in

Pennsylvania... People from Lycoming, Bradford, Tioga and many other counties bordering the New York state line came to Northumberland with their products to exchange for commodities brought from New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore by the raging canal on packet boat” (*Public Press* 1911:1).

One measure of the importance of these canals in Northumberland can be seen from the tolls collected, amounting to several hundred thousand dollars during the height of the canal trade. A local historian noted, “For Northumberland wore in canal years the proud look which has been worn ‘at the Point’ in the Revolutionary times, and which it wears today” (Cummings 1954:268). These canals can be seen on the map of Northumberland from 1858. The West Branch Canal is depicted running parallel to the West Branch Susquehanna River, and is located between the river and Northumberland (FIGURE 1). The North Branch Canal is also depicted on the map, bordering Northumberland to the north and the North Branch Susquehanna River to the south (FIGURE 1).

Along with the trade in goods from throughout Pennsylvania, the canal encouraged a robust boatbuilding industry in Northumberland. The first boatbuilder in the area was Charles Sharer, who in the early nineteenth century set up his shop on Priestley Avenue between Orange and King streets. In the 1850s, another boatbuilder, Robert Leshar, also operated an extensive boatyard in the town. All told, there were approximately eight boatbuilding businesses in Northumberland during the height of the canal trade. A newspaper article notes that; “Great oak square timber, 60 to some 80 feet, were raised by rope and pulley on great supports, and every plank was sawed out by hand with enormous jig saws, operated by two men, one on top of the log and the other on the ground” (*Public Press* 1911:1). Completed boats were noted as being worth \$1,500, which equates to \$49,000 in 2020. Every aspect of these boats, including the keelson, deck, cabin, hatches, bunks, and lockers, were crafted by hand in Northumberland. The

canals and boatbuilding industry were a point of pride for the borough. When a notable boat was launched for the first time nearly the entire town would show up to watch (*Public Press* 1911:1).

The canal trade would not last beyond the coming of the railroads, which could transport more goods and raw materials at a much faster rate, and which could operate in all seasons, unlike the canals, which often froze in the winter. Thus, only twenty years after the canal system was completed, a majority of the canals were abandoned. By 1911, only a few boatbuilders were still in the Northumberland area (*Public Press* 1911:1).

Railroads

Railroads would play a major role in developing Northumberland. In September 1855 the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad, originally called the Sunbury & Erie Railroad Company and a part of the great Pennsylvania Railroad system, was opened for passenger travel between Northumberland and Williamsport. The following autumn the Susquehanna River bridge was constructed, and the first train passed over it on January 7, 1856 (Bell 1891:532). While the railroad provided passenger service, most of its money came from hauling freight. Hundreds of thousands of kegs of skelp iron, muck-bar, and iron and steel nails produced in Northumberland were exported to other parts of the state. In 1907, the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad formally merged with the Pennsylvania Railroad (Bell 1891:328).

The Lackawanna and Bloomsburg railroad, which followed the North Branch Susquehanna River, and connected Northumberland to Scranton, Pennsylvania, was opened to passenger travel on May 31, 1860. Running 80 miles, this railroad allowed for greater access to the coal fields in the Wyoming Valley as well as a direct connection to the Pennsylvania Railroad at Northumberland. The railroad was taken over by the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad (DL&W) in 1873. During this period the New York, Ontario, and Western Railway also operated trains on the DL&W

line (Bell 1891:328). The railroad line became part of the Erie Railroad in 1960 and then the Consolidated Rail Corporation (better known as Conrail) in 1976. By 1984, Conrail had abandoned the former DL&W line. The most western portion of the line, which connects Northumberland to Beach Haven, remains active and has been renamed “The North Shore Railroad”.

The early 1900s saw further transportation developments in Northumberland. The Pennsylvania Railroad and its subsidiary, the Northern Central Railway, found that their classification yards located in Sunbury were cramped and inadequate, with little to no room for enlargement. Sunbury’s two separate classification yards saw upwards of 4,000 cars a day. To address the inadequacy of the yards, three options were considered. The first was to extend the yard at the southern end of Sunbury. The second option was to construct a yard at Augusta. The third option and the one that was chosen was to construct a new classification yard in Northumberland, which was picked due to its ability to handle a high volume of traffic and because it was directly connected to Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, and other important towns and cities throughout the state (*Public Press* 1911:1). As a result, in 1907 the Pennsylvania Railroad took steps to build a new classification yard in Northumberland. The yard was to be located on the banks of the West Branch Susquehanna River. A sketch of the yard appeared in the local newspaper in 1911 (Figure 2). The image depicts the sheer size of the yard, which contained 700 acres of land and was estimated to cost up to \$4,000,000, which equates to \$109,103,829 in 2020. A newspaper article noted that the new classification yard required “...about 3,000,000 cubic yards of grading, 18,000 cubic yards of bridge and culvert masonry, seventy miles of new track, a change in location of a public road one and one half miles long, a thirty-six stall roundhouse, power house, machine shop, transfer shed, and some smaller buildings” (*The Miltonian* 1909:3). Once completed the yard included storage for 100 locomotives, standing capacity for 5,500 cars, and a coaling station with the ability to store over 1,000 tons of coal a day (*The Miltonian* 1909:1; Figure 3). It also included

a large roundhouse that served steam locomotives, facilities to repair railcars, a small yard for the storage of cabooses, and a yard specifically for cars carrying animals (*The Daily Item* 2013:G2). The roundhouse was located on the east side of Water Street, south of Queen Street. Work on the yard began in July of 1909 and was completed by the end of 1910. An aerial photograph from 1939 shows the three-mile-long yard, beginning near Water Street and stretching northwest, running parallel to the West Branch Susquehanna River (FIGURE 4; USDA 1939). A significant amount of small-scale development is located near the yard.

The expectation was that the addition of the classification yard would turn Northumberland into a transportation hub and thus, a large city. This was not to be the case, however. The Northumberland classification yards began to decline in the mid-1900s, along with railroad traffic in general. In 1956, the Pennsylvania Railroad opened the Conway classification yard just outside of Pittsburgh, along the Ohio River. The opening of this yard greatly reduced the traffic that came through Northumberland. Furthermore, the use of diesel powered rather than steam powered locomotives rendered the roundhouse at Northumberland obsolete (*The Daily Item* 2013:G2). Railroad consolidation that took place in the latter half of the twentieth century also limited the traffic through the Northumberland yard. In 1968 the Pennsylvania Railroad merged with the New York Central Railroad to become the Penn Central Transportation Company. In 1976 the Penn Central Transportation Company became Conrail. Conrail's line through Northumberland and the yard were purchased by the Norfolk Southern in 1999 (*The Daily Item* 2013:G2). The large roundhouse was demolished in 1987. Conrail had installed a car washing plant in the yard but the Norfolk Southern discontinued its use. Eventually the Northumberland yard became a local servicing yard. The North Shore Railroad still operates within a section of the yard and uses the west-bound receiving yard (*The Daily Item* 2013:G2).

Trolleys

The Northumberland Electric Railway was one of the first trolleys located in the central part of the state. It was a 3.2-mile street railway that ran between Sunbury and Northumberland. It was first granted a charter in 1885 but due to funding issues it was not opened to the public for travel until 1890 (Bell 1891:533). The railway cost \$120,000 to complete with \$95,000 of that locally raised. Rockefeller, Gibson and Co. of Sunbury provided 4,000 tiles for the project and John C. Chesney of Northumberland provided the 328 poles that would carry the electric wires (*The Daily Item* 2011). The line originated in Sunbury before crossing the Susquehanna River, going across Packers Island, and entering Northumberland. Once in Northumberland the trolley cars traveled north on King Street to Water Street and west on Water Street to Queen Street. The line followed Queen Street and ended at Front Street (*The Daily Item* 2011). A 1923 map of Northumberland County indicates the trolley was extended out Queen Street, crossed Duke, and then went along Route 18 (now Route 147) into Point Township. It cost six cents to travel from Sunbury to Northumberland with an average daily ridership of 800 passengers. As automobile ownership and bus service increased in Northumberland trolley ridership decreased, and service was discontinued in 1939 (*The Daily Item* 2011).

Factories and Mills

There were several factories and mills within the borough throughout its history. The earliest of these were tanneries, four of which were located within the borough limits during the nineteenth century: one at the corner of Queen and Fourth Streets and three along the banks of the North Branch Susquehanna River. The three tanneries closest to the river were removed to make room for the North Branch Canal.

Sanborn Fire Insurance maps depict the various industries that were located in Northumberland. For example, the 1885 Sanborn map depicts a lumber mill between the Susquehanna River and the canal, at the corner of West Way and 6th Street. Sitting on eight acres of land, the mill was

constructed in 1867 by Frick, Chamberlin and Co. and was operated by Edgar Holt (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1885; FIGURE 5). It employed forty workers. The lumber that came out of this mill was used by railroads and shipbuilders (Bell 1891:535). According to the map, the lumber mill consisted of one upright saw, two circular saws, one single mill, and one lathe mill as well as two longways, five tramways, a lumber shed, and an office (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1885; FIGURE 5). A Sanborn Map from 1896 depicts the lumber mill as vacant. Eventually, the lumber mill and adjoining land was purchased by the Philadelphia & Erie railroad (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1896; Pennsylvania Rail Road, Freight Department 1903:53). A Sanborn Map from 1901 shows the Philadelphia & Erie's tracks in the lumber mill's place (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1901).

Iron Mills and Naileries

Another industry depicted on the 1885 map is the Van Allen & Co. Northumberland Iron & Nail Works, also known as Van Allen & Company's Muck Iron and Nail Mill, or the Van Allen Puddling Mill. The first location of the factory was on the east side of the West Branch Canal (See Figure 5). Established in 1867 by Timothy Oakley Van Allen (*Public Press* 1908:2), it originally contained nine puddling furnaces, one heating furnace, one train of rolls, a rotary squeezer, and 28 nail machines with automatic nail sorters attached. The factory could produce 6,000 tons of muck bar, 4,000 tons of nail plate, and 3,800 tons of nails annually (*Public Press* 1881:4). In 1894 the factory was destroyed in a devastating fire. The company then purchased a mill belonging to M. Houston Taggart, which had been constructed in 1884 (*Public Press* 1908:2). The 1896 Sanborn map notes that the buildings belonging to the Iron and Nail Works had been demolished (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1895). Likewise, the map depicts the new factory, just north of its predecessor, on the east side of Duke Street between 2nd and Front Streets. In 1908 the factory employed 150 workers, 90 of whom worked in the puddling department. Due to financial difficulties in 1908, the

factory sat idle for three months. That year also saw a devastating boiler explosion which killed eight employees (*Public Press* 1908:2). In 1916 the factory closed for an indefinite period. A newspaper article from 1938 notes that the factory had “passed from the picture in recent years”, thus, it is assumed that by this time the company was no longer operating (*The Daily Item* 1938:3).

Keystone Forging Company was founded in 1893 in Northumberland by the Van Allen Brothers, the same family that ran Van Alen & Co. Northumberland Iron & Nail Works. The forging company even shared a portion of the Duke Street factory with the Iron & Nail Works and eventually took over the entire plant when the nail mill closed (*The Daily Item*, 1966:15). In its early years, Keystone Forging Company produced metal spikes for railroads and forgings for carriages. Gradually, as the automotive industry gained prominence the company shifted their manufacturing to include automobile forging; they maintained a large contract with the Ford Motor Company (*The Daily Item*, 1966:15). The Keystone Forging Company was notable for their production of the Stull self-starter, which was a mechanical starter for automobiles. It would replace the hand crank found on Ford Model T's and allow for faster and safer engine ignition (*The Daily Item*, 1966:15). As of 2020, Keystone Forging Company is still an active industry in Northumberland in the same, albeit expanded, factory on Duke Street.

A short lived but notable industry in Northumberland was the Northumberland Car and Manufacturing Company which was founded in 1872. The factory was 330 feet in length and 50 feet wide and included a blacksmith shop, machine shop, foundry, construction department, and boiler and engine room. It was thought that it would employ 300 men (*The Sunbury Gazette* 1872:3); however, it never reached that number of workers because it operated for only a little over a year before it was listed for sheriff's sale in 1874. The building sat vacant until it was dismantled and repurposed for the construction of the Taggart Nail Company in 1884. As

previously discussed, the Taggart Nail Company would go on to be owned by the Van Alen & Co. Northumberland Iron & Nail Works after their building was destroyed by fire.

Textiles

In addition to iron works and nail factories, the borough was also the home a number of clothing manufacturers. The Susquehanna Silk Mills were founded in 1896 by Ewald Schniewinds and was managed, for a time, by his cousin Henry Schniewinds (*The Daily Item* 1943:2). The Susquehanna Silk Mills operated several factories, including its first mill in Sunbury. Construction on the mill in Northumberland started in 1913. The mill was located at the corner of Orange and 5th Street, and is seen on a Sanborn Fire Insurance map from 1923 (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1923). A newspaper article from the time discussed the proposed mill at length. The mill would be a two-story, red brick structure with 14-foot-high ceilings and would have an asphalt and slag roof that would allow for plenty of overhead natural light (*Public Press* 1913:1). It was similar in design to the other mills owned and operated by the Susquehanna Silk Mills Company. The mill was described as “up to date and desirable” and was equipped with an “air washing and conditioning” type of ventilation as well as automatic sprinklers, lockers, and toilets (*Public Press* 1913:1). The Northumberland mill concentrated on the “winding” process of silk making, in which the silk was wound into a long, continuous length in order to eliminate any defects or blemishes. It also readied the silk for further processing. A newspaper article noted that the mill would start out by employing 100 women, and that in the future it would consist of several different buildings (*Public Press* 1913:1).

In 1937 the Schniewinds withdrew from the textile trade to focus on metal manufacturing and the Susquehanna Silk Mills became the United Silk Mill (*The Daily Item* 1943:2). United Silk Mill already had a mill in Northumberland, located on the east side of Duke Street between 5th Street

and Brickyard Alley. That mill had been in production since at least the 1920s. In 1939 the silk mill made plans to replace the oldest looms with hosiery machines. This move came after the mill had not worked to capacity in some time, due to the lack of demand for silk in the United States (*The Daily Item* 1939:10). The hosiery department of the mill was to employ 75 men and women. One year later, in 1940, the company name was officially changed to United Hosiery Inc. (*The Daily Item* 1963:7). Due to a shift in fashion, the Northumberland United Hosiery Inc. mill was permanently shut down in 1963.

A second textile manufacturer in Northumberland was L' Aiglon Apparel, a branch of which was founded in the borough in 1935. The apparel company made high quality women's wear and employed 1,800 people throughout Pennsylvania and Maryland. In 1956 a modern, air-conditioned plant was constructed at 128 Water Street which employed one hundred people. The building presently houses Suncom Industries Incorporated.

Distilling and Brewing

Distilling and brewing were especially prevalent in Northumberland. One of the first distillers in the area was cooper John P. DeGruchy, who established a distillery in the 1790s (Deeben 2000). It was known as "one of the most important and extensive industries in this place" (Bell 1891:553). The distillery, which was described as a brick and frame building, was located "about half a square from the river bridge on the south side of North Way" (Bell 1891:533). Although the buildings have since been demolished it is assumed that the distillery was located on the south side of present-day Priestley Avenue between Orange and King streets (Northumberland County Historical Society n.d.). Coincidentally the previously mentioned boatyard in Northumberland owned by Charles Storer was constructed on ground previously owned by the distillery. The distillery was part of a larger complex which included large sheds for cattle and pigs, a cooper shop, and a boat yard. The proximity to the river allowed goods from the distillery to be shipped to Columbia,

Pennsylvania and Baltimore, Maryland (Bell 1891:533). DeGruchy lived across the street from his distillery at 373 Priestly Avenue (Northumberland County Historical Society n.d). William McCay constructed a stone distillery on Queen street in the mid-nineteenth century that was locally renowned for the windmill used to pump water from a deep well on the premises (Bell 1891:553).

The first brewery in Northumberland was established by Bernard Hubley in 1800. Located on Market Street (currently named King Street) it included malt, brew, still, and mill houses as well as a malt kiln which could hold forty bushels and brew enough alcohol to fill up to twenty barrels. There were several other breweries throughout Northumberland: “John Taggart[’s]..., a red frame building at the Queen street crossing of the canal, which originally occupied ground through which the canal passes; William T. Boyd’s, a brick building ninety by twenty-two feet, at the corner of Queen street and North Way; Levi Hibbert’s, on West Way between Water and Front streets, and Edward Lyon’s, at the corner of Market and Front” (Bell 1891:534).

Miscellaneous, Small-Scale Industry

Small-scale industries were also prevalent throughout Northumberland historically. A city directory for Northumberland from 1884-1885 also noted several small-scale industries including a shoemaker, tobacconist, furniture seller (who also doubled as the town’s undertaker), blacksmith, flour mill, carpenter, and harness maker. Likewise, a historic annual published in 1891 noted that small scale industries included a hat factory, potter, chair making shops, a brick yard, blacksmith shops, and wagon makers (Bell 1891:534).

Many of these small-scale industries are also depicted on Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, which range in date from (earliest) to (latest). For example, a Sanborn Map from 1895 depicts A.H. Stone's Agricultural Implements Factory at the corner of what was then S. Duke and Water Streets. A.H. Stone was a machinist who built and sold agricultural machines such as threshers and cheese makers (See Figure 5). The Schuylkill Hat and Cap Manufacturer is also depicted on the map. This company was founded in 1894 and was located in the old Harold building, located on the north side of present-day Church Avenue, between Orange and Wallace Streets. Information on when the company closed could not be ascertained; however, the Schuylkill Hat and Cap Manufacturer is not depicted on a Sanborn fire insurance map from 1913 (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1885; see FIGURE 5). Also depicted on the 1895 map is a livery, blacksmith, woodworking shop, several workshops, a vacant carriage shop, and a tin shop. Most of these small-scale industries were located along West 3rd Street, Front Street, Water Street, and Queen Street.

A later Sanborn Map from 1929 depicts other industries within the borough. In addition to the previously mentioned railroad classification yard and roundhouse, there were several automobile repair garages, demonstrating the rise of automobile ownership. As seen on previous maps, there were smaller miscellaneous work and general repair shops as well.

A newspaper article from 1962 gives an idea of the industrial activities in Northumberland in the mid-twentieth century. Along with previously mentioned manufacturers like Keystone Forge, L' Aiglon Apearel and United Hosiery, it also mentioned Kellers Creamery Inc., Paul S. Crebs, and Norry Welding (*The Daily Item* 1962:32).

Keller's Creamery Inc. was founded in 1960 and was located at the corner of Third and Duke streets (Duke Street was also known as the Susquehanna Trail), in the building that previously

housed Dutt and Wagner, a food producing company. The plant employed 30 individuals. In 1965 it became a branch of Beatrice Foods Incorporated. The creamery processed and supplied eggs, butter, cheese, and margarine. The company remained in business through the mid-1980s (*The Daily Item* 1962:32).

Paul S. Crebs Inc. was a moving company located on Ninth Street that got its start in Northumberland in the early 1920s before being sold in 1968. At the time of the newspaper article was published in 1962, the company employed 24 people. As well as acting as a moving company Paul S. Crebs Inc. also was an interstate carrier, running goods to 25 states.

Norry Welding, located at 924 Water Street, was founded in 1953 by Roy and Jean Shumaker. According to its website the company specialized in “building concrete mixer drums in the Mid-Atlantic region and was the first company to specialize in fabricating drums for all makes & models of mixers. In addition to drums, chutes, hoppers, water tanks and other mixer parts were added to the product line” (Shumaker Industries n.d.). At the time the newspaper article was published the company employed 18 people (*The Daily Item* 1962:32). In 1989 the company’s name was changed to Shumaker Industries and a second branch was opened in South Carolina.

Conclusion

Much of the industry in Northumberland was influenced by its role as a transportation hub. Early industry such as trade and boatbuilding were influenced by the canals and the Susquehanna River. With the development of the railroads, large-scale industry such as mills and factories became prominent. These industries shrank as the railroad lost prominence in Northumberland. The borough would not experience that influx of industry again. Instead, small-scale, specialized, industries took root, several of which are still present today.

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