

Pittston City: History, Culture and a Reputation

The Wyoming Valley of Northeastern Pennsylvania has a rich history that goes back to 1768 when it was settled next to the Susquehanna River between today's Wilkes-Barre and Scranton by the Susquehanna Company of Connecticut. Pittston was originally known as Pittstown, named after the English statesman, William Pitt, the Elder. On July 3, 1778, it was the site of the Battle of Wyoming between the British and the Continentals. The British were assisted by 700 Indians which became the Wyoming massacre of 300 American Patriots. The British went on to destroy a fort in the immediate area. Two years later, the fort was retaken by the Continentals.

During the mid-1800s, Pittston experienced civil and financial difficulties. It caused a separation between the governing bodies on each side of the Susquehanna River. One became a township, the other a borough. Pittston City was chartered in 1894 in Luzerne County. It is one of 57 cities in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.



The discovery of anthracite coal in the late 1770s and opening of a mine in Pittston helped the area flourish with coal and railroad growth during the 19th century. This growth attracted thousands of European immigrants. According to epodunk.com, Pittston's major ancestry groups are Italian, Irish, Polish and Lithuanian.

Unfortunately, the coal mining industry used children in both the mines and collieries or breakers to process the coal. Child labor lasted into the 20th century before laws were passed to prevent the abuse. Besides child-labor, accidents and disasters in coal mines were other problems facing this industry. In 1896, 90 miners were killed in the Twin Shaft cave-in, caused by an explosion.



In January 1959, the mine roof caved in under the Susquehanna River and billions of gallons of water poured into the mine. Coal mining companies were notorious for not abiding by safety rules regarding room and pillar mining. Keeping a certain distance from other mining companies adjacent proved to be a catalyst for an industry disaster. The Knox Mine cave-in and flooding created a domino effect that basically destroyed deep mining throughout the Wyoming Valley. I was in junior high school at that time. A boy in my school lost his father who happened to be one of the 12 miners that died in Knox Coal Mine in Port Griffith, Pennsylvania.



Pittston's history also is linked to the garment industry. During the 1920s, the anthracite coal industry had become depressed. The New York City garment district saw an opportunity to move to Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley to get away from a growing unionization in NYC. Between 1930 and the 1980s, Pittston City was known as a national center in the garment manufacturing business. Women worked to support their families in factories, and though the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union made its presence known in 1937, organized crime, particularly in Pittston, kept the unions out. It took many decades before union efforts were able to make an inroad.

In March of 1958, a dress-making general strike was called. It involved '40 factories and 6,000 workers in the Wyoming Valley. The 1950s were a period when contractors and racketeers were involved in "sweetheart" deals to prevent unionization and even preventing strikes. The garment industry, as well as coal companies, were prone to such activities during this period. Gaining higher wages, better workplace and safer working environments plus improving workers rights was not easy.

The 1960s began to see even harder times for the garment industry in the Wyoming Valley, as garment shops in the South and in Asia were beginning to enter the northeast United States markets. By the 1970s, the local garment industry was devastated. In 1997, Pittston had only one factory left on Main Street, compared to 40 factories that were once on that street.

As coal and the garment industry failed, Pittston City began to see an eroding tax base with the loss of its factories and the ability for the mines and coal industry to keep going. The stress was seen in buildings and their upkeep, and people leaving the area for other work. Easy solutions to the problem of urban blight were not readily available.

Today, Pittston City has begun to see a revitalization through local agencies and city and state government working together to improve the area. One of the areas of potential growth has been seen in encouraging tourism through art and cultural events. Pittston City is known as “The Quality Tomato Capital of the World.” Its annual Tomato Fest has an interesting story.

Usually held for four days each August, the Pittston Tomato Festival includes food, music, a farmer’s market, carnival, rides, arts and crafts, contest for a Tomato festival queen, little mister and miss, a festival run and walk, bingo and a tomato fight. Yes, a tomato fight is open to 150 people with eye protection. A face-off “with no losers” say the organizers. The tradition began in 1944 in Bunol, Spain. It was founded in 1984 as a tribute to backyard farmer’s fruit and local crops. Pittston was given the title of “Tomato Capital of the World” in the 1930s. The title attributed to the area fulfilled a high demand for tomatoes for metropolitan New York. I was told by a Parks and Recreation employee that the acidic soil in the region makes for an excellent tomato growth. According to Local Legacies, The Library of Congress, fifteen to six thousand acres of farm land in the region have commercial tomato growing. In 1999, a solarium was built in Pittston for that purpose. Profits from the Tomato Festival go to local charities. This photo program shares a bit of Main Street and street art.



Mural of region's coal/garment history



Columbus Statue, 167 South Main Street

"The deeds and the legacy of Christopher Columbus have been the subject of no small amount of controversy in the past several decades, but Pittston's Columbus statue still stands tall and proud. Modern-day Pittston – depending upon which source you consult – maintains a population of Italian-Americans that is upwards of 30%. It's hard to imagine that as recently as the late 19th century and early 20th century, Italians (as well as Irish and others) were subject to prejudice, economic exploitation and even violence in America ... but it was sadly the case. In many towns and cities that grew out of the Industrial Revolution (Pittston among them) this created the need for separate social clubs, churches, restaurants and even stores to support the needs of immigrants and their progeny. In my view, the statue is as much a reminder and tribute to the rich Italian cultural heritage of the area as it is a celebration of Christopher Columbus in particular."

Source: <http://roadside wonders.net/pittstoncolumbus/>

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Sources: <http://www.pittstoncity.org/>, <http://www.pagenweb.org/~luzerne/patk/pits.htm>, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Pittston-Pennsylvania.html>, <http://www.pittstonchamber.org/>, <https://pittsontownship.org/>, <https://pittstonmemoriallibrary.org/>, <http://greaterpittstonhistory.org/>, <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/genealogyInfo.php?locIndex=14674>, <http://mulocalhistoryprojects.org/main-street-pittston/mapping-historic-pittston/>, <http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-362>, <http://roadside wonders.net/pittstoncolumbus/>, <https://journals.psu.edu/phj/article/viewFile/25095/24864>, <http://www.governing.com/finance101/gov-bankrupt-cities-overshadow-distressed.html>, <http://www.pittsontomatofestival.com/>, <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/legacies/loc.afc.afc-legacies.200003464/>, <https://wnep.com/2018/01/25/flood-concerns-in-luzerne-county/>, https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/ruralroadsstudentreadinglong.pdf, and