

# Digging and Devotion at the Gap Nickel Mines Since 1857

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Two churches, located in the Nickel Mines community today, are like a memorial to a once-great mining industry during the most profitable years of its existence, between the latter 1850's and 1893. The churches were closed for a period of years after the mines were shut down, but were re-opened later, and continue to hold services today. Built in 1857 and 1885, the churches are an outgrowth of the profitable years of mining at the Nickel Mines. Though the prosperous years of mining came slowly to this small community, they were successful, both economically and socially. In relating events leading to the building of these two churches, a history of the Gap Nickel Mines must be given.

The Gap Nickel Mines, located thirteen miles east of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in Bart Township, date back as early as 1718.<sup>1</sup> William Penn, because of pressing debts, was very much interested in mines to revive his fortunes through the process and sale of mineral resources. Consequently, the soil of Lancaster County was periodically searched into, for currently valuable metallic ores.<sup>2</sup> The land at the Gap Mines was purchased by James Steel, and divided one-sixth in part to Thomas Penn, Andrew Hamilton, James Logan, William Allen, Thomas Schute, and James Steel. Although much prospecting and digging of pits was done at this time, the first regular and systematic working of the mine was after James Steel purchased additional land in 1730 from William Markham, who owned property adjoining Steel's. Even though these six men discovered copper springs, they were apparently unaware of any value in the water, because nothing was done about it then.<sup>3</sup> Later, the mine was worked for copper by several independent companies, but because of the lack of sufficient funds to carry on the operation, it was left idle.

The scarcity of jobs, and poor pay during this time probably accounts for the persistence with which the mine was repeatedly opened, and then closed during the years from 1732 to the 1850's.

"During the 1850's, the Gap Mine took a turn for the better, when it was discovered that in the waste product of the copper mining process, there was nickel ore in such quantities as to make it commercially more important than the copper.<sup>4</sup> Operations immediately began to mine nickel

ore, and a report estimated by Joseph Wharton, owner of the Gap Mine from 1860 to 1893, shows that between 1858 and 1860, approximately thirty-eight million pounds of nickel ore was mined.<sup>5</sup>

It was during this profitable increase in the production of nickel that the Protestant Episcopal Church was built at the Nickel Mines. The corner stone was laid September 14, 1857 with five hundred people present for the ceremony. This seems to be quite a large group of people for a small community, and it is possible that the miners were married men with families. I found no authority for this fact, except that the mine supported a prosperous community, with tenant houses for the workmen. The Gap Mining Company donated the site for the church, and it was financed by voluntary contributions.<sup>6</sup> The church was a thirty by sixty foot English style building. The fact that it was an Episcopal church, leads me to think that the majority of miners were originally settlers from England, or a church affiliated with the Established Church of England. Even though the church was not completed, the first service was held December 25, 1857. It seated two hundred people, and was valued at \$2,000.00.<sup>7</sup>

As I was driving through the community, I noticed a small white church with the name, Nickel Mines Mennonite Mission, on a sign in front of the church. In a conversation with the former minister of this church, Reverend C. Marvin Eshleman, I found that this was the original Episcopal church, built in 1857. According to Ira D. Landis, Mennonite historian, the church was closed within a few years after the mine was shut down. It was re-opened as a Mennonite Mission September 29, 1935 by the Paradise Mennonite district. Every other week ministers were sent from surrounding Mennonite churches to have services. The church at present has regular services each Sunday, and the minister is Reverend David H. Wadel. The membership is 20 persons, in addition to the teachers and other workers.

The Nickel Mines Mennonite Mission is not owned by the Mennonite denomination. The church is still recorded in Harrisburg under the diocese of the Episcopal Church, but the mission is in the process of acquiring the deed, and expects to have it within the next six months.<sup>8</sup>

During the years of 1859 and 1860, the mine again lapsed, and lay idle. The mines filled with water, rusting the machinery, and crumbling the furnaces. In 1860, the mine, including the entire interests, was bought by Joseph Wharton of Philadelphia. He made repairs to the machinery, rebuilt the furnaces, and unwatered the mines. In the spring of 1863, operations began to mine, smelt and refine nickel.<sup>9</sup>

According to figures estimated by Joseph Wharton, the mine produced four and a half million pounds of nickel during 1863. Correct figures for the production of nickel in 1864 were ninety-two million, one hundred fifty-three thousand, three hundred sixty-four pounds. An interesting point, in studying the economic value in this small mining community, was the wage scale adopted by the mine company.

First Class Miners	\$1.60 per day
Miners Helpers=	1.25 per day
Laborers	1.05 per day

Boys—Washing and Picking  
Engineers and Mechanics

.45 — .70 per day  
1.50 — 1.80 per day<sup>10</sup>

The mine continued to support the miners and their families until 1893. There were tenant houses for workmen, a country store, a wooden school house, and a church. There were barns, stables, and sheds to house the mules used for hauling all materials to and from the mine and smelter. Also, we cannot forget the blacksmith and carpenter, very much needed during the mining era.<sup>11</sup>

Again, the concern for the spiritual well-being of the miners and their families was evident, for a second church was built during the most profitable years of mining in this community. The Monument Church and cemetery was built by Lavina and Uriah Eckert in 1885. The church received this name, because of the large monument placed over the grave of their father, William Eckert. William was a great lover of horses, and owned quite a few. He had a riding horse he valued highly, but one day it was kicked by a mule, and had to be killed. William, not wanting the horse to be left in the woods, told Uriah to dig a grave for his horse. His request was that he should be buried next to his horse when he died. This was the beginning of the Monument Cemetery. Later, it was enlarged to include friends and neighbors, who wished to bury their kinfolk. They paid one dollar for the deed.<sup>12</sup>

William Eckert owned several farms near the Nickel Mines, and when he died he left them to his children. One of these farms, now owned by Mark Hershey, still carries in its deed a five hundred dollar dowry left by Lavina. Every year, six per cent interest is paid by the owner of the farm, amounting to thirty dollars a year. The money is used for the care and up-keep of the Monument Cemetery. Roger Murray, a resident of the community, is the present caretaker. As far as Mr. Hershey knows, he and his father, Enos Hershey, are the only ones who have paid interest on this money. The first interest payment was paid in 1899.<sup>13</sup>

The Monument Church was built twenty-nine years after William's death. For nine years local churches supplied the ministers each Sunday, with the supervision and financial help of the Eckert family. In 1894, it was used by the members of the Kinzers Mennonite Church, until they built their own, and continued as a Mennonite Mission until 1921. The mission was closed from 1921, until October 1, 1930, when it was opened by the Assembly of God church. It was rented from the estate of Judge J. Hay Brown, who had acquired it from the Eckert family until 1933.<sup>14</sup> The church was bought at a public sale for one hundred dollars, by a small group of people, with Reverend Clarence L. Lefever as their advisor. They had to raise ten dollars for a down payment, before the bank would lend them the rest of the money to buy the church. At a time when jobs were scarce, and the pay small, Reverend Lefever recalls that this was very difficult.<sup>15</sup>

From a picture I found in the library of the Lancaster Newspaper, the original church building was of brick construction with white shutters. It was dated around 1921. The cemetery had a picket fence surrounding the graveyard, which has since been removed, and the church has been painted white.

The church was in need of extensive repairs, including a porch, which had rotted away during the years it was closed. The building programs from 1935 to 1963 include a new porch, the basement dug, and a furnace installed, the auditorium refinished with new flooring, a pulpit and balcony, and six Sunday school rooms to the west and north of the building. In 1958, a new basement was dug south of the church, which was used for additional Sunday school rooms, and the foundation for a new church building completed in 1963.<sup>16</sup>

The church was incorporated under the name Calvary Monument Bible Church, July 15, 1947, and gave the church the power to operate a public burial ground on additional land bought for this purpose.<sup>17</sup>

The dedication service for the new Calvary Monument Bible Church, was held October 19, 1963, with Reverend Clarence Didden of Limerick, Pennsylvania as the guest speaker. The forty by one hundred foot brick building is the eighth building program for the church since 1933. The church has over four hundred communicant members, and is still growing. This is quite a large group compared with the eight people present at the first service held in the original church building in 1933. Reverend Lefever has served as the pastor since that time, performing many weddings and funerals, in addition to regular morning and evening services, and Wednesday night prayer meeting.<sup>18</sup>

From the time the Monument Church was built in 1885, to 1893, the mines were still in operation, and continued to support the community. In 1893, the Gap Nickel Mines were forced to shut down, because nickel ore from Canada came on the market, which was lower in price. The competition was too great, and Mr. Joseph Wharton sold the mine to the International Nickel Company, which continues to hold the mineral rights to the land. The original mine property is now owned by C. M. Woerth, the present village storekeeper.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, it has been shown that, the persistence of the miners to successfully operate the Gap Nickel Mines, and support their families and the community, is a tribute not to be forgotten in the history of the Nickel Mines. The background of a church-believing people cannot be suppressed. The building of the two original churches, though changed through the years, stand today as a memorial to a once-great mining community.

## NOTES

1. Jack Locher, ed. "A History of Mining in Lancaster County: 1700-1900" in *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society*. Vol. 64, 1960. p. 10.
2. *Ibid.* p. 10.
3. R. J. Houston. "The Gap Copper Mines" in *Lancaster County Historical Society in The New Era*. Pennsylvania: 1897. p. 283-90.
4. Locher. p. 11.
5. H. Luther Willig. "Two Notable Mining Industries of Lancaster County" in *Historical Papers and Address of the Lancaster County Historical Society*. Vol. 27. Lancaster: 1923. pp. 73-4.
6. Captain Charles Doble. "Nickel Mines", "Bart Township" in *History of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania with Biographical Sketches of Many of the Pioneers and Prominent Men*. Part 2. Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans, ed's. Illus. Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1883, p. 669.

1872.  
W. L. COOPER  
MADE BY  
FROM THE ORIGINAL MAP  
LANKASTER CO. PA.  
J. H. COOPER  
CAP MICHEL MINE  
NICKEL MINE  
SECTIONAL VIEW  
PLAN VIEW  
PA. 1872.  
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7. **Ibid.** p. 669.
8. Mr. Ira D. Landis. Mennonite Historian. Conversation, May 10, 1964.
9. Willig. p. 74.
10. North Museum. "Name Changed, Fortune Smiled on Nickel Mines" in **Lancaster New Era**. Lancaster: 1961.
11. Doble. p. 669.
12. Mrs. Margaret Gilbert, foster daughter of Uriah Eckert. Interview, April 4, 1964
13. Reverend Clarence L. Lefever, minister of the Calvary Monument Bible Church, Interview, April 6, 1964, at his home.
14. Judge J. Hay Brown, formally a judge in Lancaster, now deceased. He was financed through school by Uriah Eckert.
15. Lefever. **loc. cit.**
16. **Ibid.**
17. Lancaster Newspaper. No Title. February 21, 1959.
18. Lefever. **loc. cit.**
19. "Geologist Says 2 Idle County Mines Could Again Yield Ore" in Lancaster New Era. Lancaster: May 27, 1949.

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