

THE PENNSYLVANIA HOTEL: ITS HISTORY AND SPECTACULAR END

In the early twentieth century, citizens of Brownsville Borough were justly proud of the impressive Monongahela Hotel, which opened in the Neck in 1925. But south of Dunlap Creek in Bridgeport Borough was a four-story building that, when it opened in 1903, was the most splendid hotel in the Three Towns. It was called the Pennsylvania Hotel.

Today its former location is a vacant lot on the corner of Water Street and Cherry Alley (one block south of Arch Street) on the South Side, but if you mention the Pennsylvania Hotel, many Brownsville residents will begin telling you about the devastating blaze that destroyed it in 1968. Behind the story of that fatal fire is the tale of a grand hotel, one whose opening coincided with the 1903 arrival in Brownsville of the Monongahela Railroad.

The Pennsylvania Hotel was built by R. L. Aubrey, a West Brownsville planing mill operator who spotted an opportunity to make a profit by constructing a hotel in Bridgeport Borough, which became South Brownsville Borough in 1908. Why did Aubrey build his hotel in Bridgeport, so far from Brownsville's busy Neck? Several factors convinced him that Bridgeport was the right place for his new hotel.

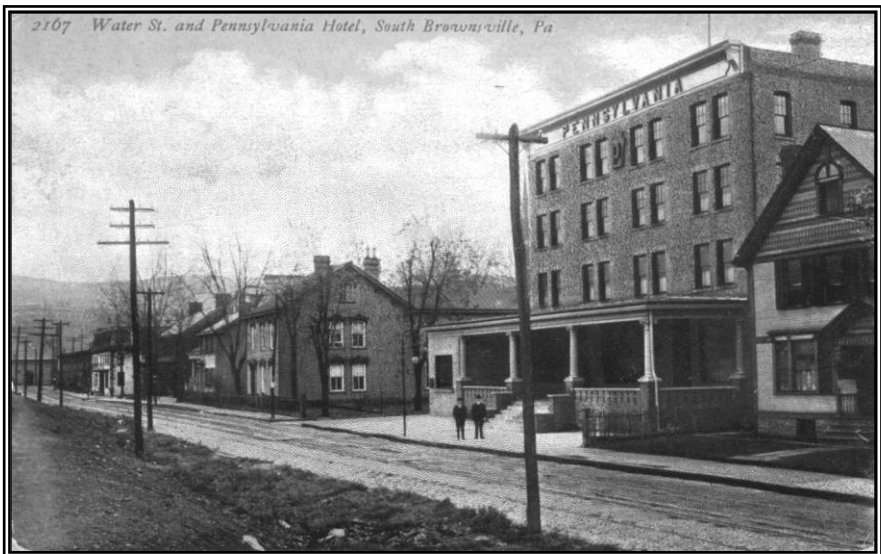
One factor was Aubrey's expectation that his hotel would attract plenty of business from employees of the new railroad that was coming to town. The Monongahela Railroad was a new joint venture of the Pennsylvania and P&LE Railroads. Aubrey anticipated that a rail yard and the shops for the railroad would be constructed just a few blocks south of the spot where he planned to erect his hotel. The corner lot that he had chosen was vacant in 1902, having previously been occupied by the Gibbons, Wood and Cromlow Saw and Planing Mill.

Aubrey's hunch was right on target. The book *The Monongahela Railway: Its History And Operation*, written by Brownsville's David E. Gratz, states that in July 1903, two months before the Pennsylvania Hotel opened, the Monongahela Railroad's board of directors approved construction plans for a rail yard and shops in Bridgeport Borough. The chosen site was previously occupied by an old racetrack.

A second factor influencing Aubrey's decision to build in Bridgeport was the closing of the old North Side wharf in Brownsville. For years, passenger steamboats had landed at the wharf, which was located along the riverbank about one hundred yards north of the Flatiron Building and directly down the hill from Nemaocolin (Bowman's) Castle. At the turn of the century, disembarking passengers could easily walk from the wharf to several hotels at the north end of town.

But the arrival of the Monongahela Railroad meant that a massive retaining wall would be built along the river to support the railroad tracks. This huge stone abutment would eliminate the wharf, and this was at a time when many passengers would soon be reaching Brownsville by train anyway. There was even speculation that a railroad station to handle passengers and freight might be built in Bridgeport.

According to McCready Huston, Aubrey chose his hotel's location based on his belief that the "great new railroad yards on the old racetrack and the closing of the north side wharf would, among other factors, make [his proposed hotel] a permanent paying structure."



The Pennsylvania Hotel, as depicted on a post card mailed in 1914

Aubrey's new four-story hotel was a showplace. Huston wrote that because of the hotel's "superior dining room and spacious lobby and in the naive custom of the day, a separate one for the ladies, it was to be the Three Towns social center as well as a trade mart . . . where the traveling salesmen could display their wares to the local merchants."

Aubrey installed James Risbeck as manager, and on September 4,

1903, the Pennsylvania Hotel hosted its first major event. Considering the reason that Aubrey had built the hotel in Bridgeport, it was appropriate that the inaugural event was a day-long celebration marking the Monongahela Railroad's commencement of operations.

J. Percy Hart, in his 1904 book *History and Directory of the Three Towns*, noted that although "both passenger and freight traffic actually commenced on the Monongahela Railroad on Monday, August 31, 1903, the formal opening did not occur till Friday, September 4th."

The day was blessed with perfect late summer weather. Following a 10:30 a.m. concert by the Bulger Band and a luncheon at the Barr House, the visiting dignitaries traveled two blocks southward on Water Street to the Pennsylvania Hotel. There on the hotel's veranda, the official "public exercises" began at two p.m., featuring six speeches by local politicians and railroad officials. The festivities were capped that evening with a banquet in the new hotel's dining room.

"The tempting viands [delicacies] were prepared and served in royal style under the supervision of the genial host of the new hostelry, James H. Risbeck," Hart wrote. "Landlord Risbeck served a fine menu. More than one hundred persons sat down to the banquet in the elegant dining room of the new hotel which, though not in complete order nor fully furnished, was in splendid array for the banquet, and Mr. Risbeck, proprietor, and R. L. Aubrey, owner, received many compliments on the success achieved."

After this auspicious beginning in 1903, the Pennsylvania Hotel operated as a hotel until 1918, when it underwent a dramatic transformation. In November 1918, the Monongahela Railway purchased the hotel with an eye to providing accommodations and activities for employees of the railroad, their families and the general public. The railroad renamed the building the "Monongahela Railway Y. M. C. A.," and it became a tremendous success.

By 1929, a Brownsville *Telegraph* article reported that the YMCA had become "a community gathering place, a home for unmarried railroad men of Brownsville, and last but not least, it figures prominently in the development of the boys of the community. . . . It is the meeting place of 50 per cent of the community gatherings here.

"Not only is it a home for railroad workers, but a place where anyone who desires to spend a quiet evening in reading and relaxation may go. The Y is sponsoring a half dozen boys organizations and recently inaugurated the Tri-Hi club for girls. All railroad organizations, as well as many civic and sportsmen's organizations, use the Y as a meeting place."

The YMCA also sponsored many activities beyond the confines of its Bridgeport headquarters building.

"The success of Hustead Field," explained the 1929 *Telegraph* report, "the community athletic grounds at Thornton field operated by

the Brownsville Athletic Association, has been due principally to the interest taken in the field by the Y.M.C.A. and [Y.M.C.A. manager] Mr. Wooten. Daily Mr. Wooten is on the field supervising its activities, with Athletic Director Frank Africa.”

The Thornton athletic fields were located along Thornton Road (Route 166) near the present-day Cox-Donahey Elementary School, but on the opposite side of the road. A streetcar stop at Thornton made access to the fields convenient for those traveling from Brownsville or nearby villages and coal patches.

“For a number of years organized junior and senior baseball has been conducted on the two baseball diamonds at Hustead Field,” reported the *Telegraph*, “and the four tennis courts find daily use by hundreds of local players. In addition, the field has been used for track and field meets and picnics on various occasions.

“This year three leagues operated by the Y.M.C.A. are using the baseball field. Eighteen teams make up the *Telegraph* and Y.M.C.A. Midget Leagues and there are four teams in the Junior League. The field is also the home field of the M.R. team of the Tri-County League and is used two nights each week by a West Penn Power Company baseball team. The work of the Brownsville Monongahela Railway Y.M.C.A. has filled a need which the community lacked prior to its formation in 1918.”

Brownsville’s Bob Petriello, whose home is a stone’s throw away from the corner of Water Street and Cherry Alley, often visited the YMCA as a boy.

“When I was a kid,” Bob recalled, “there was a gym on the side of the building facing toward town, and the YMCA installed an indoor miniature golf course in there.

“I used to go over and keep score for people,” he chuckled, “and they’d give me a dime for a tip! The building was still a YMCA when I graduated from high school in 1938, because a lot of the high school teachers roomed there at that time, and they were there until the early forties. Then I think the building was closed for a while until Mr. Ricco, Frank Ricco’s father, bought it. He remodeled it, turned the miniature golf course into a bar, and reopened the place as the Pennsylvania Hotel.”

Until the late 1960s, many Brownsville citizens made their home at the Pennsylvania Hotel. Then one winter day, a deadly fire erupted inside the building. Next we will revisit the tragic events of that Thursday afternoon, January 18, 1968, when the sixty-six-year-old Brownsville landmark came to a spectacular end.

**BROWNSVILLE'S PENNSYLVANIA HOTEL
PASSED THROUGH SEVERAL OWNERS**

In the previous article, we learned that Bridgeport's Pennsylvania Hotel was opened in 1903 by R. L. Aubrey. Aubrey, a planing mill operator from West Brownsville, owned the successful hostelry at the corner of Water Street and Cherry Alley until 1918, when it was purchased by the Monongahela Railway. The railroad company transformed the building into the Monongahela Railway YMCA, aiming to serve the many railroad employees and their families who worked at the nearby rail yard and shops. After serving the community as a YMCA for several decades, the facility was sold again. This time, the buyer was Joseph Ricco of Brownsville.

"I believe the building had been empty for a couple of years," said Brownsville's Bob Petriello, who lives across the street from where the hotel once stood. "Joe Ricco, Frank Ricco's father, bought the YMCA, and he spent about six months rehabilitating the place. It seems to me that when his boys came back from the service in the 1940s, they helped him remodel it, then Joe reopened it as the Pennsylvania Hotel. He installed a bar where the indoor miniature golf course had been, and he operated the business for several years. Then he sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Catalano Sr., and they were its final owners."

"That's right," confirmed Joe Catalano Jr., who lives on York Street in Brownsville. "I believe that my dad bought it from Mr. Ricco sometime in the mid to late forties. Dad had actually planned to buy the White Pillars hotel [on Route 40 east of Brownsville], but my mother made him change his mind. They operated the Pennsylvania Hotel until sometime in the early sixties, then Dad decided to retire.

"He asked me if I wanted to take it over. I was working in the coal mine at that time, but I agreed to take it over and pay him rental. I owned those four houses next to the hotel, and I lived in one of them."



Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Catalano Sr. were the final owners of the Pennsylvania Hotel.

“So you were running the business for several years before the January 1968 fire at the hotel?” I asked.

“That’s right. And since I was still working full time in the mine, I hired a manager to run the hotel.”

“During the years when you were operating the Pennsylvania Hotel,” I said, “would you characterize it as having been more of a rooming house or apartment building than a hotel?”

“Well, some of the units that I rented out had two, three or four rooms,” Joe replied, “and there were some families that lived there. Many other residents were bachelors or ladies living alone, and some of them rented just one room.

“I furnished the appliances, the bed, everything. In fact, I was in the process of remodeling all of the units and only had five rooms to go when the place burned down.”

“Was the dining room in operation when you had the hotel?”

“Well, there was a kitchen, and if someone wanted a sandwich or something, we could do that. Folks could sit in the dining room to eat if they wanted, but most just ate in the bar. When my dad ran it, he served steaks, spaghetti, and things like that. But when I took it over, since I was still working in the mine, I didn’t have time for finding cooks and running a restaurant.”

“And what about the old hotel’s lobby? Was it still intact?”

“The lobby was still there. A lot of the guys would go out in the lobby to sit and talk, look out the window, and watch the people go by.”

Joe mentioned an odd discovery he had made in the old hotel.

“You know, we found something strange in the basement of that hotel when we were doing some work on the sewerage system. We always had sewerage problems there, and we were digging up part of the basement floor for that reason. We dug down about fifteen feet and unearthed this round brick-lined hole. It was about six feet in diameter, with ladder rungs imbedded in the bricks to enable a person to climb up or down. We really didn’t have any idea what it was.”

I told Joe that I recalled hearing of the discovery of a tunnel under Water Street, leading from a former Water Street business place (now a residence) to the Monongahela riverbank. It had apparently been constructed long ago to facilitate loading of whiskey barrels onto river boats.

“Did you think that what you found might have been part of a tunnel that led to the river?” I asked Joe. “Since your hotel was built on the former site of a saw and planing mill, such a thing might have come in handy. Or then again, perhaps it was just a cistern. What more did you discover as you continued to dig?”

“To accomplish the task that we were working on,” Joe said, “we didn’t need to dig any more than fifteen feet, so we stopped. I don’t know whether it led to the river or not. Since it had rungs in its walls, I’d be curious if anyone has any idea what it might have been.”

The rooms and apartments at the Pennsylvania Hotel were fully occupied in January 1968 when disaster struck the sixty-six-year-old landmark. I asked Joe Catalano to recall how he learned that his hotel was on fire.

“As I mentioned earlier,” Joe said, “I had hired a manager to run the hotel for me. At the time the fire started, which was just after lunch time on January 18, 1968, I was working in J&L’s Vesta 5 mine. I was down at the bottom of the mine shaft when Steve Shashura came over to me and said, ‘Joe, your hotel’s on fire.’”

“I said to him, ‘How bad?’”

“Steve said, ‘I really don’t know.’ So I found a guy to give me a ride to Brownsville. As we drove back, I was very concerned about the hotel and its occupants, and I was also worried about the several houses I owned next to the hotel.”

According to the Brownsville *Telegraph*, the fire was discovered by Joseph Harden, a maintenance man at the hotel. Harden was working on the second floor when he noticed a fire in the air shaft, a former elevator shaft. He quickly picked up a hose in the hallway and began trying to extinguish the fire. His efforts didn’t last long.

“Two or three minutes after I saw the fire,” Harden told the *Telegraph*, “there was an explosion.”

Harden reported that he ran down to the bar on the ground floor and told those present to call the South Brownsville Volunteer Fire Company. Gene Franks turned in the alarm, and eight fire companies were eventually dispatched to battle the blaze.

But this fire was burning fast, and for some residents of the flaming hotel, there was too little time to escape. Just a few minutes after the explosion, with firefighters still racing to the scene, black smoke billowed from the fourth floor windows.

“When we drove onto the high-level bridge,” said Joe Catalano Jr., “I looked south and saw the thick smoke pouring out of the upper windows. I knew right then it was gone.”

“All the floors in that building had been cleaned with oil,” said Bob Petriello, “adding to the terrific amount of smoke.”

“And I had about two hundred gallons of paint in there,” said Joe Catalano, “that was to be used in the remodeling. I’m sure that also contributed to the fire and smoke.”

Frantic tenants appeared at the fourth floor windows of the burning

hotel, screaming for help to horrified people below. In the terrifying minutes before firefighting equipment arrived, ordinary passers-by courageously attempted to rescue the panic-stricken residents. Some bystanders entered the burning building to save people; others, despite their heroic efforts, fell heartbreakingly short of reaching trapped tenants.

The eight fire companies that converged on Water Street were greeted by a scene from their worst nightmare – a blazing four-story hotel, among the town’s highest buildings, with numerous residents trapped inside, many of them elderly or incapacitated.

In the moments and hours after the firefighters arrived, their training and skills were put to the test as they battled Brownsville’s most spectacular and tragic fire in decades. Next we will share the story of the heroes, the victims and the dramatic end of Brownsville’s Pennsylvania Hotel.

THE PENNSYLVANIA HOTEL FIRE WAS TRAGIC AND UNFORGETTABLE

Allen Johns stood on the front porch of the Brownsville Elks Club on that cold January afternoon, idly watching the slow-moving waters of the Monongahela River. It was one o’clock on Thursday afternoon, January 18, 1968. As Johns lifted his gaze to West Brownsville’s snow-covered hills across the river, sparkling in the sun beneath a brilliant blue sky, he was startled by the sound of an explosion.

He looked quickly to his left, the direction from which the loud noise had come. Sensing trouble, Johns hurried down the front steps of the Elks Club, simultaneously shooting more quick glances southward. When he reached the sidewalk, he turned left and began running up Water Street toward the Pennsylvania Hotel, just one-half block away. His pulse raced even faster when he spotted flames in the windows of the hotel’s upper floors.

Dave Letrick of Clarksville, driving down Water Street, slammed on his brakes when he realized that the Pennsylvania Hotel was on fire. Letrick jumped from his car and hurried toward the hotel.

Hearing shouts, he ran around to the southern side of the building, the side facing away from downtown Brownsville. He looked up and spotted a frightened Edna Craft, standing at an open third floor window of the burning hotel. The sixty-year-old woman was calling desperately for help.

Letrick quickly found a ladder, but to his dismay, discovered it was too short to reach the third floor. At that moment, Allen Johns arrived on

the dead run from the Elks Club. As the two men hurried off in search of a longer ladder, Brownsville patrolman Sam Nicola reached the scene. Nicola had hurried there from the municipal building two blocks away.

“When I got there,” Nicola told the Brownsville *Telegraph*, “I noticed this woman looking out a third-story window. A man told me she was going to jump, and I hollered to wait awhile, that the fire trucks were only a few minutes behind me.”

The wide-eyed woman stared in terror at Nicola. She was trapped by flames three stories above the ground. As the fire roared behind her and she felt its searing heat, she panicked. Before Letrick and Johns could find a longer ladder, before firefighters could reach the scene, and despite onlookers’ entreaties to Mrs. Craft not to jump, the horrified spectators watched helplessly as she leaped from the third floor window. Patrolman Nicola immediately rushed to her and transported her to Brownsville General Hospital, but his effort was futile. She was pronounced dead upon arrival.

South Brownsville Volunteer Fire Department was the first company to reach the scene, dispatched from its base at the Brownsville municipal building. It was soon joined by firefighting units from Brownsville (North Side), West Brownsville, Hiller, Luzerne Township (LaBelle), California, Allison No. 1 and East Bethlehem Township (Fredericktown). In all, eight fire companies and more than two hundred firemen were summoned to battle the fire.



A January 18, 1968 fire claimed three victims and destroyed the Pennsylvania Hotel.

“Not only did the firemen fight the flames,” said the *Telegraph*, “but they worked heroically with policemen in saving the lives of the building’s occupants.”

Among those who escaped the burning hotel was ninety-year-old John Westcoat. He was rescued from the third floor when twenty-four-year-old Larry Guesman ascended a ladder, entered Westcoat’s smoke-filled room, and helped the aged man climb out the window and onto the ladder. Mr. Westcoat slowly descended the ladder to the

ground, whereupon he was taken to the hospital and treated for smoke inhalation.

Many residents evacuated the building without assistance. The last tenant to flee the building was Walter (Fiddy) Rathmell, a first floor resident and operator of the Rathmell School of Percussion. According to the *Telegraph*, he was helped from the burning structure by Samuel E. Taylor and former Fayette County Controller Paul Thomas Jr., who went into Rathmell's apartment to recover his medicine and some personal articles.

As rescue efforts continued, the fire companies repeatedly hosed down the nearby houses to keep the blaze from spreading.

"The firemen worked unceasingly," reported the *Telegraph*, "trying to control the flames and doing a yeoman job in preventing damage to dwellings adjoining the fire site."

"The firemen did a good job," agreed Bob Petriello, whose Water Street home was within one-half block of the blaze. "No house around here suffered any damage."

How much water was used to battle the fire? Sam Taylor of the Brownsville Water Company said that a total of 450,000 gallons of water from four hydrants was used by the eight fire departments. By five p.m. on the day of the fire, two-and-one-half million gallons of water remained in the reservoir at Hiller.

The ladies' auxiliaries to the South Brownsville and Brownsville (North Side) fire companies set up a canteen in the basement of the Elks home on Water Street. There they served hot coffee and sandwiches to the firemen, some of whom remained on the scene throughout the night to suppress flare-ups.

Forty-three people resided in the sixty-six-room Pennsylvania Hotel, and the community responded quickly to take care of many now-homeless residents who had lost all of their possessions.

The *Telegraph* reported that on the afternoon of the fire, "O'Have Israel congregation furnished shelter for the homeless, and quarters were found for some in Frank Bock's Towne House and Brownsville Golden Age Nursing home. The Brownsville Golden Age club offered clothing it had accumulated. Brownsville General Hospital mobilized its resources for an emergency that thankfully did not develop.

"Thirty cots were obtained from the Fayette County Civil Defense organization," the *Telegraph* continued, "and doctors and nurses were alerted. The Salvation Army, the Fayette County chapter of the American Red Cross, the Department of Public Assistance and other agencies came to the assistance of the distressed. A number of homeless persons were housed by fraternal organizations in town. Those offering quarters

included the Fraternal Order of Eagles, Aerie No. 1356 and BPO Elks, No. 1344.

“Left homeless by the fire were Mr. and Mrs. Domenick Penteluk, Mr. and Mrs. Louis Rayburn, Sylvester Craft, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dennis and daughter, Mrs. Bessie Shazer, Mr. and Mrs. James Coleman and sons, George and ‘Herky,’ Mrs. Grace Shepley, Bill Miller, Walter Rathmell, Mrs. Alice Turner, George Walker, Mary Lowther, Harry Huffine, Linda Timms, Stanley Sober, John Busic, Norman Johnson, John Mattie, Hobert Parker, John Westcoat, Nancy Shepley, Joseph Harden, Tony Tousel, George Bailey, Ruth Gordon, Judy Griest, Margaret Evans, Frank Barry, Eugene McMaster, Richard Walter, Thomas Addis and Madeline Pochek.”

In addition to Mrs. Edna Craft, two other residents of the hotel perished in the fire. The body of Matt Pavlov, a seventy-three-year-old retired coal miner who was a native of Yugoslavia, was removed from the building at 4:30 p.m. on the afternoon of the fire. The next morning, officials entered the smoking ruins of the hotel and removed the remains of tenant Eugene Hileman, who was forty-seven.

As for the task of determining what caused the blaze, the *Telegraph* reported two days later that “state police fire marshals believe the costly fire started in an air shaft, formerly an elevator shaft, and quickly spread through the four-story hotel. An explosion followed about two or three minutes after the fast-moving fire.

“Officials estimated damage to the four-story brick structure at \$120,000, and from \$30,000 to \$40,000 to the contents. The building, partially covered by insurance, had been owned for twenty years by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Catalano Sr., who leased it to their son, Joseph Jr.”

Thirty-four years have passed since this devastating fatal fire stunned the Brownsville community. The corner of Water Street and Cherry Alley on Brownsville’s South Side is a vacant lot, as it has been since Joe Catalano razed the ruins of the building. Now only photographs, yellowing newspaper clippings, and indelible memories remain of Bridgeport’s grandest hotel ever – the Pennsylvania Hotel.