

## The Quarrymen of Sankanac

By Jonathan Hoppe

“I told the people of that section what the stones were and that they could be utilized,” William Noble remarked plaintively to a *Daily Local News* reporter in 1886, “but little attention was paid to my opinions, and it was left to a Yankee to come to the Falls and demonstrate to the people that my theory was correct.”

Mr. Noble, superintendent of the Warwick Iron Mines, knew better than most in the area about the tremendous value of the rocky land near the Falls of French Creek. He had not been the first. The Lenni-Lenape knew very well the wooded and rocky hills, nearly worthless for farming, held a bounty of mineral wealth; it was they who called the nearby creek *Sank-hanné* – “flint stream,” i.e. a stream by which flint is found. It was they too who first introduced Samuel Nutt, progenitor of the Coventry Furnace and the mines used to supply it, to the iron deposits on the land he settled in the area in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Lenape’s ore, in a cruel irony, would be mined to feed the early iron works that helped European settlers like Nutt forge a new nation out of the American continent, and in so doing lead to Lenape’s own diaspora westward at the end of steel bayonets and the muzzles of cannon.

Northern Chester County’s ubiquitous, insatiably-industrious Davis Knauer, like William Noble, had also recognized the great gift of Warwick’s natural resources as a young man when took advantage of its water power and built a cider mill on the creek at the Ridge Road at age sixteen. His success as a miller allowed him to branch into other areas. He prospered in the lumber trade, buying over 3,000 acres of timberland on the Chestnut Hills to make charcoal for the iron works, even going so far as to build and operating two forges himself near Douglassville and Knauertown. He later built a hotel and resort at the

falls of French Creek in the early 1870's where millionaires and mineworkers alike could excursion and picnic about the beautiful, boulder-strewn landscape. It was a slice of paradise.

But the security of his position left Knauer hungrier, emptier, and less satisfied with how things stood; he needed more – always more – and the granite boulders scattered over his woodlands was key. With no railhead to bring the bounty to market, his ideas – like Noble's – were stymied. But the times were changing. By 1881, the City of Reading's blast furnaces, Warwick Iron Mines, and Knauer's resort propelled the Wilmington and Northern Railroad to build branch line to Warwick Springfield (now Elverson), and the time was now ripe for Knauer to strike.

Knauer, it is said, broadcast his intentions to the world when he called on the West Chester offices of the *Daily Local News* on May 21, 1885, a piece of granite in hand. He announced that he and his over 2,000 acres of land at the Falls would soon be home to efforts to quarry the granite (actually diabase) there – now with access by rail to major cities throughout the country. He had partnered with William Noble's "Yankee" Philadelphian David Conrade to form the French Creek Granite Company. Within weeks of his visit to the *Local* their firm had a force of men working the loose boulders on the land into curbstones and paving blocks for streets big cities whose populations were expanding with waves new immigrants. Soon Knauer and his company would be going down into the earth itself to fill a huge order from the City of Philadelphia, and that would require many more men indeed.

Knauer knew that such a labor force would need housing, food, entertainment – all the necessities of life outside the quarries. As the summer of 1885 turned into autumn, Knauer began building a company town around his Falls Hotel. Complete with frame houses, a larger boarding house, a bakery, and a barbershop, the new company village

would soon become a hive of industry. We know it better today as Saint Peters.

But it was not the only town rising along the banks of French Creek – others also had designs to cash in on the stone bounty. Around the same time Knauer was building his village, another consortium leased 30 acres of Knauer’s halfway between his village and Trythall station to open a quarry of their own called the Pennsylvania Granite Company. With a \$300,000 order for paving blocks to fill – and to fill soon – this consortium knew they would need a force of men who were already skilled at the stonecutting trade to fill the order in time. For that they would look far from Chester County.

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On Tuesday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1886, the usual train from the junction at Springfield trundled its way eastward and then turned north up the “Boar’s Back,” as the locals called it, towards the terminus at the iron mines. Only this train carried a special car loaded with forty-five black laborers recruited from the rich granite quarries around Richmond, Virginia and Port Deposit, Maryland. Many were the sons of slaves or had been slaves themselves. Many had left wives and children behind in the south until the quarries would close for the winter; until then they would labor in Chester County for better pay to send back home.

Their number was certainly a great surprise for much of northern Chester County. Until their arrival, African Americans had been, in the words of one newspaper reporter in 1888, “a rare specimen of humanity” in the vicinity. Indeed, the largest single gathering of people of color anywhere nearby would have been at the A.M.E. Church on the Chestnut Hill north of Conventryville, and even then the congregation comprised no more than a handful. This was something else entirely that would require as much adjustment and accommodation on the part of the many southerners as it would their new neighbors.

But neighborly accommodation in the era of Jim Crow could only go so far. Quarrymen arrived in Warwick to find that the Pennsylvania Granite Company had built for their use a separate, segregated company town three quarters of a mile west of Saint Peters which they called *Sankanac* – a corruption of the Lenape’s name for the creek, and a name which they also gave, informally, to the quarry pit. The company town featured several boarding houses (one of which was said to sleep 250 men), a general store, a creamery, and a flag station on the railroad for all their needs. They would need a lot, for their work was backbreaking. The men drilled, blasted, hammered, cut, and shaped the stone by hand for \$3- 4 a day – more, it is notable for that time and place, than their unskilled white counterparts on other neighboring quarries that were being opened. They had earned every cent and more, for they worked with consummate skill and speed for their distant families. The *Daily Local News* was taken aback, writing in the summer of 1886 that the men of Sankanac were “temperate, industrious, and saving” – high praise from a paper whose own virulent racism led to the sacking of its West Chester printing office just after the outbreak of the Civil War.

As summer turned to autumn turned to winter, the work slowed and many would return home to their families for the winter. The next year, more skilled quarrymen were brought up from the South, and the year after that Davis Knauer himself had sent his agents to Richmond to recruit more skilled men. By the summer of 1888, over 500 men of color lived in and around the village.

Many of the men brought with them a deep Baptist faith, and, the summer of that year, they began building a house of worship. Prior to the establishment of the church, regular sermons were held from the steps of their large boardinghouse, with baptisms held in the creek behind the dam at Knauer’s forge. By November, the new church was ready for occupation. On December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1888 Morton Winston —

who, like other lay preachers there, had “daily toil[ed] by the side of the members of the party who turn out solid blocks for building purposes” – was ordained as Sankanac Baptist Church’s first official minister.

This was the heyday of Sankanac. By 1891, African American men composed about two-thirds of Warwick’s quarrying workforce. The village was thriving, and the surrounding hills echoed with the sounds of sledge, drill, and hammer. Wages for Sankanac’s men were high, ranging from \$1.25 to the princely sum of \$8 a day, and it is said that at the peak of production over thirty carloads of pavers a day were sent to market from Warwick’s quarries.

But the halcyon days of Sankanac were not to last long. The Pennsylvania Granite Company, rocked by a surge in labor strife and money troubles in the summer of 1891 and went bankrupt in 1892. It closed its doors not long thereafter. The days of ponderous Beaux-Arts granite and block-paved streets were drawing to a close. Though the men of Sankanac found work in nearby quarries for a time, changes in demand for the and in technology meant the slow depopulation of the village as the men gradually moved away for other opportunities.

The village of Sankanac itself disappeared not long behind them. The frame buildings in which the men once lived were moved away, one by one, to Saint Peters, to the Knauer farm, and to Harmonyville. Even the Granite Company’s stone office, half-finished when the firm closed its doors, was moved to the village of Warwick to serve as undertaker U. Grant Mauger’s new residence about the year 1896. The Sankanac Baptist Church, too, passed from memory. We last see mention of it in 1914, and after that it was gone.

The cleared land on which the village once stood was turned to pasture as part of the Trytheall Farm. Fittingly, it is said that horses and mules once used to pull trolley cars in the big cities – these relics of a previous age, displaced now by modern electric cars, some of whose tracks on

the city streets were paved with the stones quarried from Sankanac – were purchased and brought to the farm to be resold to local farmers.

But every story has an ending. As the supply of retired livestock dwindled, so did the need for grazing land, and the farm reverted to woodland. The scars and detritus of the once-prosperous quarrying industry still dot Warwick's forested landscape; the sounds of railroad and the quarries and the quarrymen are gone, and today the upper French Creek valley echoes with the sounds of birds and frolickers. Saint Peters Village has thrived through the years, branding itself as an anachronistic and isolated locale for day trippers to relax and live life measure for measure for a short while.

Sankanac though, a village born of opportunity and industry and segregation and sweat, has passed entirely from memory. It had gone as quickly as it had grown – a boomtown in a country and a county rending and clawing their way into the twentieth century. All that remains now to show us of the lives that were, hidden amidst the tangled undergrowth, are a flooded quarry pit and few lonely, unvisited gravestones of the men who never made it back home.

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