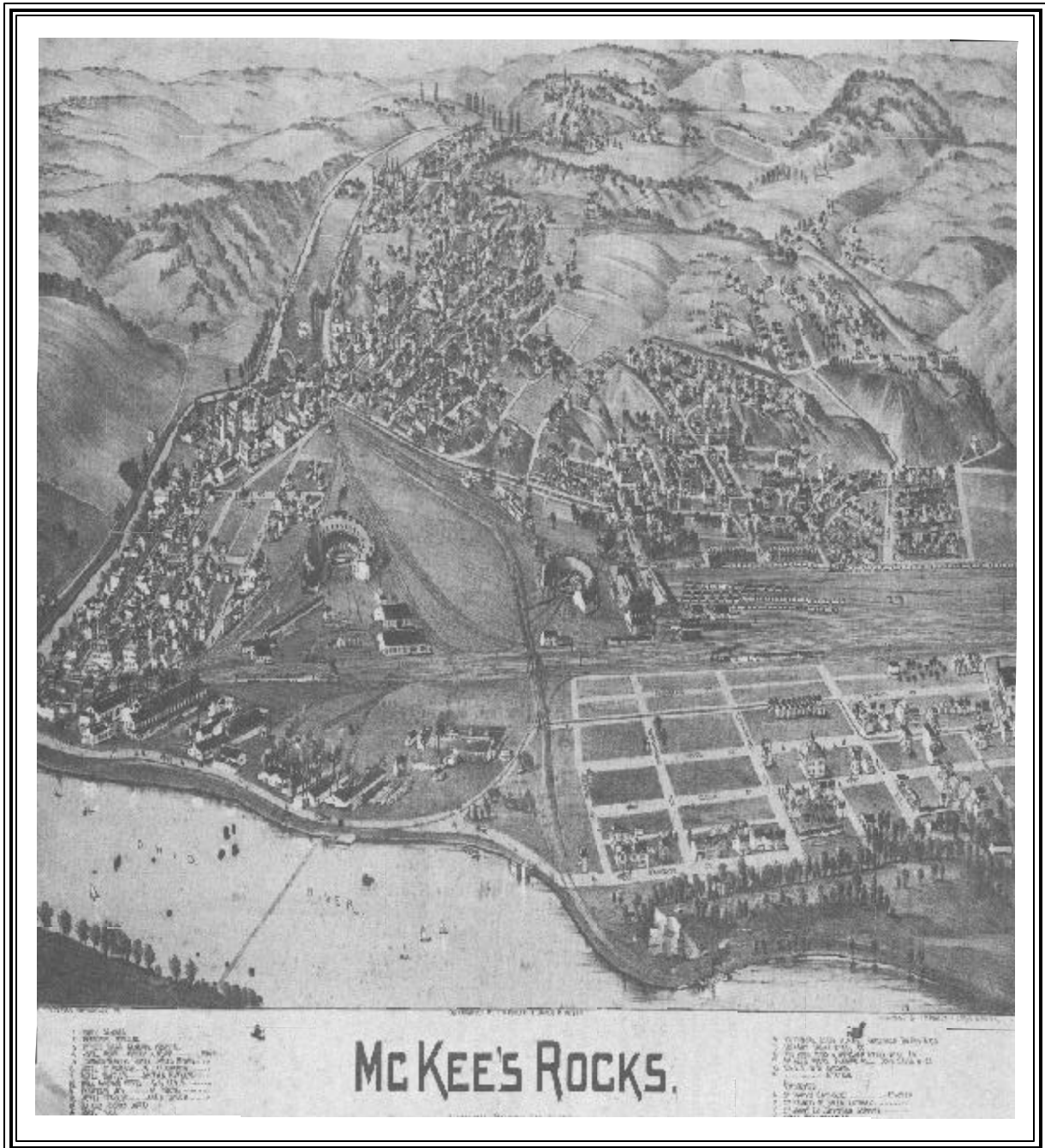


A Brief Guide to The History and Geography of McKees Rocks



STO-ROX SCHOOL DISTRICT
SPRING 2002

The History and Geography of McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania

STO-ROX SCHOOL DISTRICT
Anthony T. Skender, Superintendent



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The History and Geography of McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania

This curriculum guide is written in accordance with the proposed guidelines for Geography and Social Studies assessment standards. In particular, this guide responds to Standards 7.1.3B, 7.1.6B, 7.1.9A, and 7.1.12B. Furthermore, the Standards indicate “Basic Geography Literacy must include local-to-global progression (scales) for all students at all grade levels for the standard statements and their descriptors.” Teachers may use this guide at different grade levels in accordance with those standards as set forth below:

Primary Grades levels (1-3) – the emphasis should be on identifying the basic characteristics of the world, or area under investigation (answering the *what* question)

Intermediate Grade levels (4-6) - the emphasis should be on describing spatial patterns of phenomena (answering *where* and *when* questions)

Middle Grade levels (7-8) - the emphasis should be on explaining patterns of phenomena (answering the *how* question)

High School levels (9-12) - the emphasis should be on analyzing spatial patterns of phenomena (answering the *why* question)

The classroom teacher is always free to add or combine additional information and activities to enhance the learning environment in individual classes, depending upon the characteristics of each class.

A. Sample activities are provided emphasizing typical outcomes desired for the students studying this unit.

1. What kind of land and water features do we see in the area called McKees Rocks?
2. What do we know about its climate in the past?
3. What features of this area would have been appealing to Native Americans and early settlers?
4. What features would you look for if you had to settle in a new land, or even a new planet? Use your imagination.
5. Where did early settlers establish their homes? Why did they choose these locations?
6. When did the first settlements of McKees Rocks develop? Who settled here?
7. What kind of entertainment and pastimes would you expect to develop in this area 150 years ago, 100 years ago, and 50 years ago?
8. What features does McKees Rocks possess that would make it a good place for commerce and industry to develop?
9. Why would the presence of rivers be useful for commerce and manufacturing?
10. Why were railroads important to the development of McKees Rocks?

B. Draw a map showing where you live, relative to the McKees Rocks Bridge. List any streets or roads you would take to get from your house to the bridge.

C. Ask relatives and friends about their recollections of McKees Rocks from their youth. What were their favorite activities and sports? What kinds of jobs and employment did the people of McKees Rocks do 50 years ago?

D. Try to find old photographs and paintings, magazine articles, and website references to McKees Rocks, and assemble a pictorial history of the area as a class project. Be prepared to explain your parts of the collection or display.

E. Use research skills to help write a report about a feature of McKees Rocks that interests you. It may deal with the climate, local industry, population trends, early settlements, prehistoric times.

Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Staff Development
Dr. C. Dean Galitsis, Director

Cover, Artwork, and Layout
Ms. Emalee Ranalli
Community Involvement Coordinator

Editorial Assistant
Chris Singel

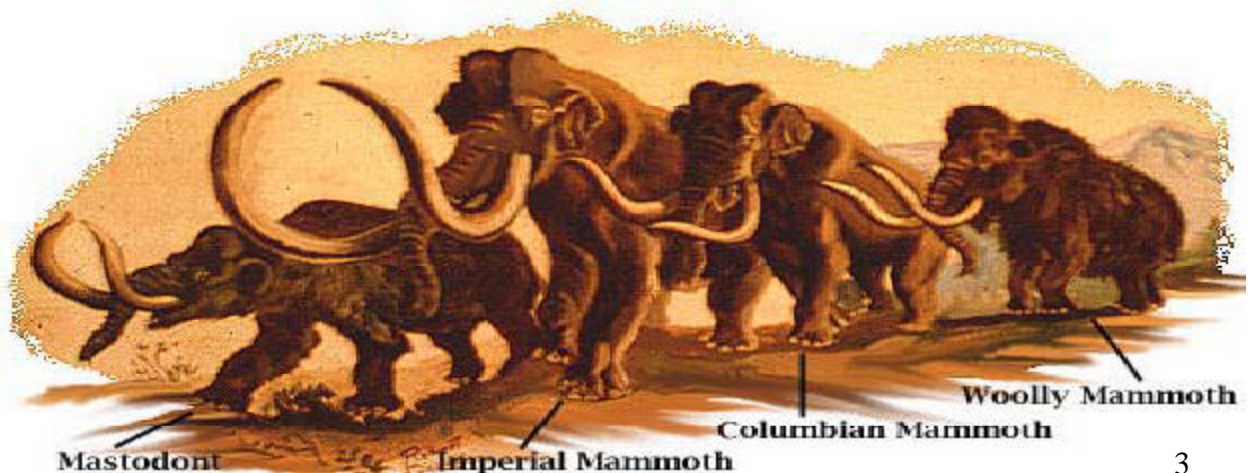
Fall 2001

I. The Prehistoric Era - The Area Around McKees Rocks

Introduction - In his book An Historic Portrait of McKees Rocks, author S. Condeluci describes how the forces of nature shaped the area now known as McKees Rocks. He highlights the fact that the entire valley “played a major role in the growth of the wilderness west of the Alleghenies.” The valley and the rivers that carved it made it possible for colonists to establish towns that could prosper. What forces acted upon this area to shape it into its current form?

Carboniferous Period (360 to 286 million years ago) - The formation of the Ohio River dates from the close of the carboniferous, or coal, era, and the time when the Appalachian Mountain chain reached its final elevation. Prior to that time, the area around the river bordered the ocean, and the Ohio often plunged through it as its waters headed south to the Gulf of Mexico. This area was under three hundred feet of water. The Monongahela River, which flows into the Ohio, has terraces made of silt, clay, and loam, containing the remains of plants and animals. However, these terraces and their fossils are located 70 to 275 feet above the low water mark of the river, and are between 1,045 to 1,065 feet above the level of the current ocean tide mark. The terraces were apparently produced by water, but they are too far above the level of the rivers to have been formed by them.

Glacial Period - The constant flow of water at considerable speed smoothed out the riverbed, and the course of the river became more stable as the rough spots were worn away through erosion and the passage of millions of years. By the time of the pre-glacial period over 25,000 years ago, the Ohio River Valley was home to the mastodon, as determined by researchers who found signs that mastodons made their home in these river valleys. When the glaciers progressed south at the start of the Ice Age, the ice crossed the Ohio River near what is now Cincinnati. Dr. C. C. Heisman, in an address before the Pittsburgh Philosophical Society in 1892, described a barrier of land that prevented the river from proceeding to the west, and glaciers prevented it from going to the north. The glacier acted as an obstruction which caused the river, including the present day Ohio River, to attain a depth of between 300 and 600 feet, and backed the flow as much as 400 miles upstream and up to 200 miles wide in some places. Dr. Heisman referred to this huge body of water as “Lake Ohio”. It was responsible for covering the area around Pittsburgh itself with 300 feet of water, and it backed up the Monongahela to a water level that carved out terraces along the riverbanks all the way down to Morgantown, West Virginia.



II. The American Indian and the Ohio River Valley

After the Ice Age, the area around the Ohio River Valley teemed with wildlife, and the clean streams contained plentiful supplies of fish and other marine life. The Native American Indians found this an ideal place to live and engage in some agricultural pursuits, making use of the fruits, berries, and other foods that grew wild in the valley. These first settlers roamed the area for thousands of years. In fact, according to material provided by William C. Beck, Borough Secretary and the individual in charge of the Borough's archives, McKees Rocks is one of the oldest places of human habitation in Eastern North America. Settlement of the area dates back some 5000 years, to a time when Greece and Rome did not exist and the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Babylonia had hardly begun.

According to archaeologist Richard Lang, who was recently engaged in research for the Carnegie Museum, the settlement around McKees Rocks was a sizable town for its day. The inhabitants were called the Panhandle Archaic people, because most of their homes are found along the rivers washing the shores of the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia. These people grew corn, beans, and other crops on the rich bottomland, but their villages were usually situated on the headland for easy defense and for protection against flooding. They made war with bows and arrows, and broad-bladed spears, which they threw with great accuracy with a device called an *atlatl*. Eventually, these settlers disappeared, and only their works remain. They may have been taken over by other tribes, or moved on to other territories, or they may have been wiped out by disease or even famine during a period of unusual weather conditions. Nobody knows. What is known from scientific studies of eastern North America is that North American Indian tribes routinely butchered the mastodon, using bone technology for cutting and processing these animals with bone tools, and that extensive human hunting may have been "an important factor in the late Pleistocene extinction of mastodons." (Fischer, D.C., 1984)

The next settlers of the Ohio River Valley around McKees Rocks were the *Adena*, or Mound Builders, who appeared here around 1000 B.C., or roughly at the time when King Solomon ruled in ancient Israel. They began building the famous mound, with only a small part remaining today. The Indian Mound was the largest mound ever erected in Pennsylvania. It began with a burial inside one of the houses, with the bodies laid out in a pit dug into the floor. Then earth was piled over and around the house, which was then burned before the work was complete. As the process was repeated over the centuries, the mound grew larger and larger. All told, the Mound was built in three layers by the Adena and Hopewell peoples.

The Adena were conquered by the Hopewell in 500 B.C. and other villages were constructed by various peoples next to the mound. The *Hopewell* people had a very high culture, although they still used implements of bone, stone, wood, and similar materials. They added to the Mound, and some of their burials were in crypts made of stone slabs. In approximately 1560 A.D., nearly two thousand years after the Adena had begun settling the area, traces of yet another settlement could be found here. This settlement followed the pattern of Indian villages along the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. The settlers raised corn and beans, and hunted deer. They also kept dogs, which they sometimes ate in time of famine or for ceremonial meals. The village was surrounded by a double set of posts to form a stockade fence, with guard posts at the entry points to the village. The houses were arranged in a circle or oval, with a central plaza, similar to a town square in a modern town, and serving much the same purpose.

III. The Colonial Era – Contact between European Settlers and Native American Indians

In the early 1700's, McKee's Rocks was the site of a thriving *Shawnee Indian* village. Peter Chartier, a fur trader, of half French and half Indian descent, had a house there, and his name is given to a creek that flows into the Ohio River at this point. In the early colonial period, this creek was often written as 'Shurtee's Creek.' After breaking relations with the British, he moved with the Shawnee tribe further west, in 1744. The Delaware Indians then took over this location, as they in turn were being pushed from their original location in the Allegheny Mountains of eastern Pennsylvania to the western part of Pennsylvania.

By 1752, the Ohio Company of Virginia tried to start a new settlement to attract Europeans, naming the settlement Saltsburg, in the hopes of attracting settlers from Salzburg in Germany. They had received a land grant of half a million acres, and had maps drawn of the place so parcels of land could be distributed to settlers, with parts reserved for use by the company. One of the maps drawn by George Mercer in 1753 describes a spot called "Fort Hill", the site of the Rock, and another area called "Town Lands", which is the actual location of the proposed settlement in McKees Rocks. They described the benefits of the location, including its military value as well as its general use for settlers to build homes and a school.

The Ohio Company ordered Christopher Gist to construct a very solid fortification around the Rock as protection for the expected wave of settlers. However, before any action could take place, young George Washington visited the spot while en route to Erie to deliver a message to the French. After surveying the entire location, he selected the "Forks" area, about two miles south of the Rock, as a better location for a fortification against both Indian attackers and the French in boats with artillery. Through this intervention of fate, the city of Pittsburgh ended up in its present location instead of in McKees Rocks!

While George Washington was examining this area on his visit here, he had an opportunity to learn about and, more than likely, to meet the famous Delaware Indian warrior chief, *Shingiss*, and another younger chief, *Guyasuta*. The reigning queen at the time was named Aliquippa. Guyasuta had guided George Washington from Logstown. In an oil painting on display in the Pittsburgh National Bank's McKees Rock's branch, entitled "The Arrival of George Washington at McKees Rocks", all of these individuals are portrayed: George Washington, Christopher Gist, Shingiss, Guyasuta, and other interpreters and people from the Ohio Valley Virginia Company.

McKee's Rocks got its name officially on a deed in 1769, when Colonel Alexander McKee received this property as payment for service in the expedition of General John Forbes in 1758. Its land measured 728 acres, with 624 acres equal to one square mile. This was an area that included virtually all of the present day town of McKees Rocks. Colonel Henry Bouquet occupied the land until 1768, when land claims became legal after the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, and Colonel McKee became the official owner of the land. Colonel McKee subsequently served as an Indian agent until the American Revolution, and George Washington had dinner with him at his farm called Fairview on October 20, 1770.

Alexander McKee was a valued British Indian agent and guide who worked at Fort Pitt. He was given the land of McKees Rocks by a British colonel. He built a mansion in the area of River Road

where George Washington was said to have dined. Later he was run out of McKees Rocks and left the land to his brothers. It appears that during the Revolutionary War, McKee encountered some difficulties concerning his dealing with the Indians, and he had to flee to Detroit rather than face a trial in Lancaster. He joined the British and never returned to McKees Rocks.

His treachery cost him his land, but his patriotic kinsman, James McKee, was permitted to take it up and occupy it until his death in 1835. The Rocks and town were probably named after this man, and it is important to note that the 1836 deed for this property referred to him as “James McKee, (of McKee’s Rocks).”



The area itself originally belonged to Moon Township, one of the seven original townships of Allegheny County, until 1788. In 1790, it became a part of the newly formed Fayette Township, and was part of Robinson Township when it was formed in 1801. Finally, it became a part of Stowe Township in 1869. By the middle of the 20th century, the use of the apostrophe “s” had largely disappeared, and the name appeared regularly thereafter as McKees Rocks.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

A. Locate the following items on a map:

1. Ohio River
2. Allegheny River
3. McKees Rocks

B. Can you find places around the McKees Rocks area that have names dating back to famous people who inhabited the area many years ago? Name at least three such places.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

3. George Washington considered building Fort Pitt at the Indian Mound. After negotiating with the feared Delaware King Shingiss (who ruled the area at the time), he decided on the Point. What factors made Washington decide on the area around the Forks as a better military location for a fort?
4. One researcher exclaimed that from the earliest times of human settlement of the McKees Rocks area, the three things that made it desirable were 'location, location, location'. What features does McKees Rocks possess that made people want to live here?
5. In your opinion, does the McKees Rocks area still have certain advantages related to its geography? What are these advantages and why would they be useful in the 21st century?
6. North of Pittsburgh there are lakes with names such as Pymatuning and the lake in Moraine State Park. What is the origin of the name for the first lake? Next, what is a glacial moraine?
7. What features of the geography were appealing to the first Indian settlers of the Ohio River Valley? Would these features still be important to the people of today?
8. Technology has changed the way people live and work. What features of the Pittsburgh area still make it a desirable location, and how would technology contribute to the future growth and development of the region? Explain.
9. Can you find other places in Western Pennsylvania that have Indian names? An automobile travel map would also be useful for this project. Look for a map on the Web and try to list as many as you can.
10. What is special about Punxsutawney? What event occurs there every year?
11. Can you draw a picture of how you think the McKees Rocks region looked 15,000 years ago? Include items such as animal life, vegetation, and human inhabitants.
12. The last Ice Age created many features on the earth's surface in Western Pennsylvania. Can you locate at least three such features and explain how they were formed?
13. Using a map, list the distances between Pittsburgh and the following major metropolitan areas, and indicate the compass direction from Pittsburgh, e.g., New York is east of Pittsburgh:
 1. New York is 400 miles east of Pittsburgh
 2. Chicago is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 3. Atlanta is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 4. Boston is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 5. Harrisburg is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 6. Philadelphia is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 7. Erie is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 8. Miami is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 9. Ontario, Canada is _____ of Pittsburgh.
 10. Los Angeles is _____ of Pittsburgh.

IV. The Development of McKees Rocks - 19th and 20th Centuries

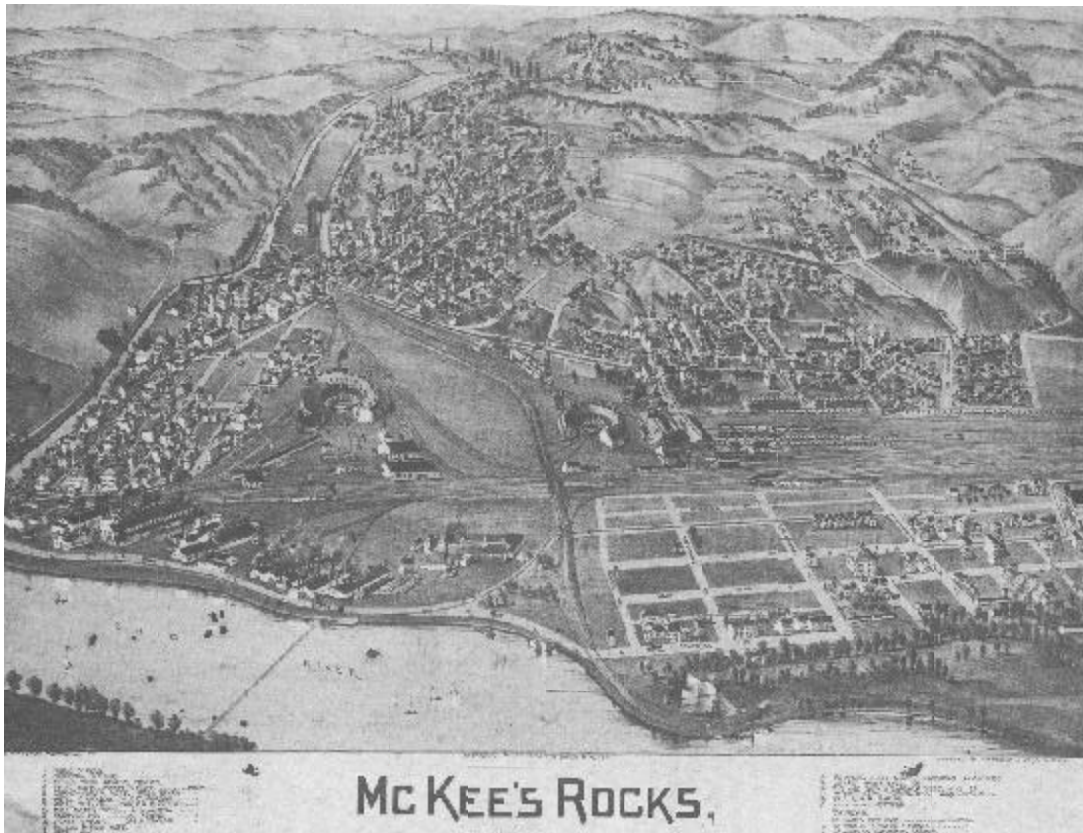
In 1880 Stowe Township, which included McKees Rocks, consisted of a small farming population of 867. By 1900, eight years after incorporation, the population grew to 6,352 and by 1910 exploded to 14,702. During the period from 1900 to 1910, the growth rate of McKees Rocks was eight times that of Allegheny County as a whole.

- The Importance of the Railroad to McKees Rocks - The P. & L.E.R.R.

No more important single factor contributed to the later growth of McKees Rocks than the construction and operations of the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad and, to a much smaller extent, the Pittsburgh, Chartiers and Youghiogeny Railroad.

The P. & L.E.R.R. was founded by local Pittsburgh men for local business needs. Although its beginnings were shaky, it grew to be known as the “Little Giant” in the railroad industry.

It all began on a wintery morning in 1879 when a three-car passenger train left the South Side depot headed for Youngstown through McKees Rocks. At first there was only 89 miles of track and tonnage of one million. But in eleven short years the system reached tonnage of 6.5 million and eventually track stretched 332 miles. The P. & L.E.R.R. started with around 1,120 cars and at its peak in 1950 had more than 20,000 cars and 7,600 employees.

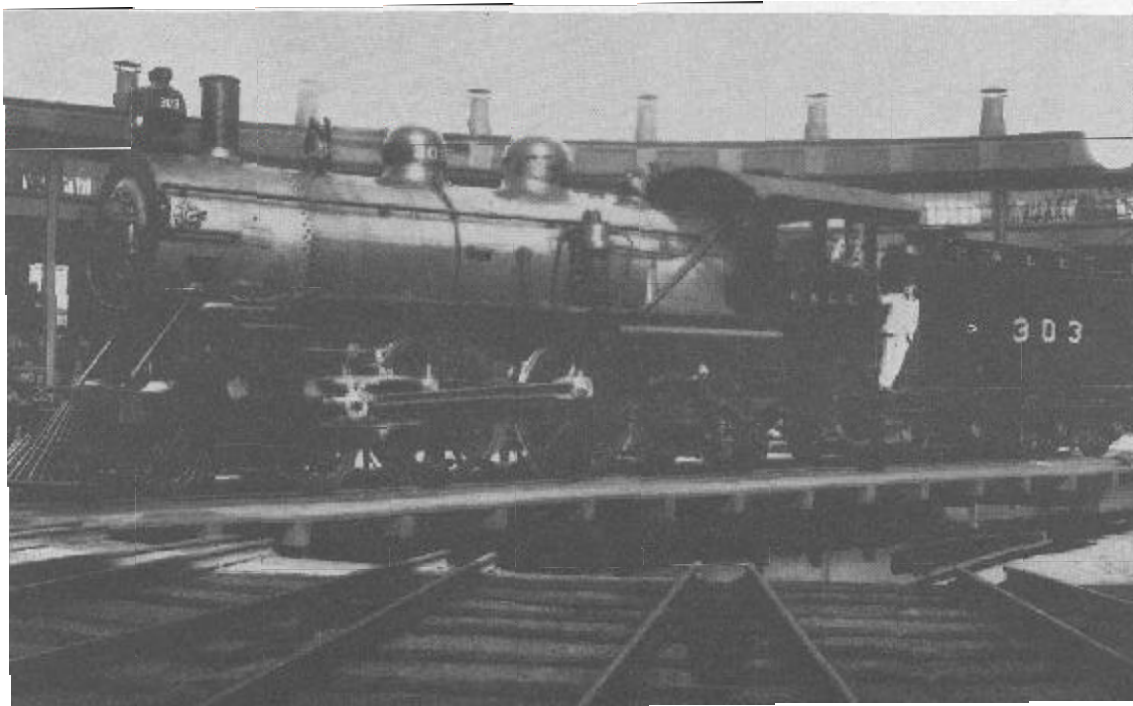


As the railroad grew, the need for more cars, more workers, and more repair shops also grew. Of momentous importance to this area, the P. & L.E.R.R. decided in 1888 to make McKees Rocks the center of its repair and maintenance activities. A car erection and repair shop, electric shop, paint shop, machine shop, two turntables, a planning mill and a passenger station was constructed on a sixty acre site. This station was located at the northerly end of Chartiers Avenue, and was the site where most immigrants entered the town and many soldiers left town for war.

The local railroad, always prosperous even during the declining years of railroads, began to lose money. Competition from trucks and other modes of transportation, coupled with declining shipments of its main bulk commodities - steel, iron ore, and coal - led to P. & L.E.R.R. losses. Its tracks fell into disrepair; workers were laid off as the company lost 60 million dollars between 1982 and 1987. It was sold in 1992 to Three Rivers Railroad.

- Pittsburgh, Chartiers and Youghiogeny Railroad

This was a purely local railroad. It shipped freight from Neville Island to Carnegie. The railroad was formed in 1881. Since then, the railroad has switched owners many times through the years and is now under joint ownership.

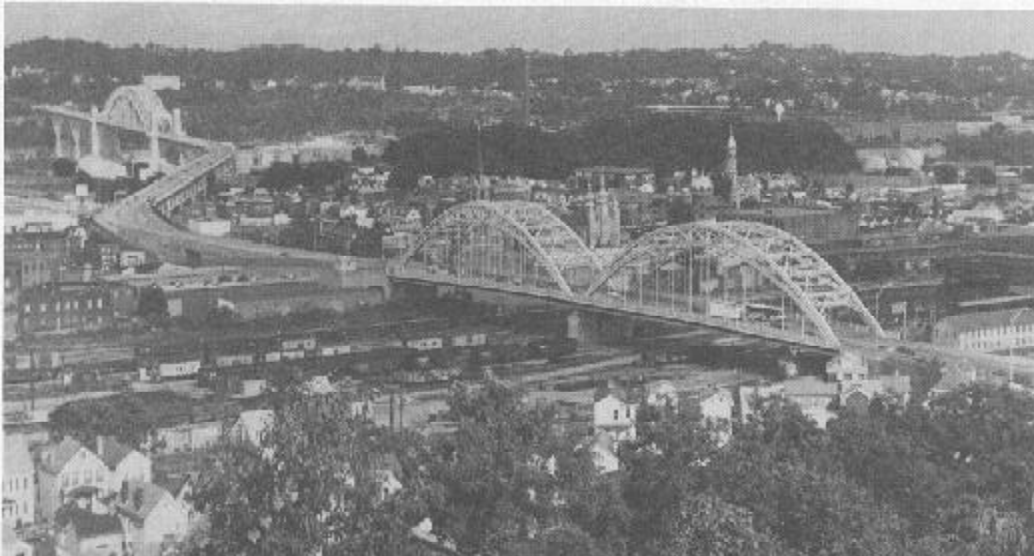


A view of one of the two famous locomotive roundhouse repair stations in McKees Rocks, at the P. & L.E.R.R. repair yard, ca. 1913.

McKees Rocks Area Photo, ca. 1901



Chartiers Avenue looking north, before construction of the P.C. & Y. Trestle, 1910

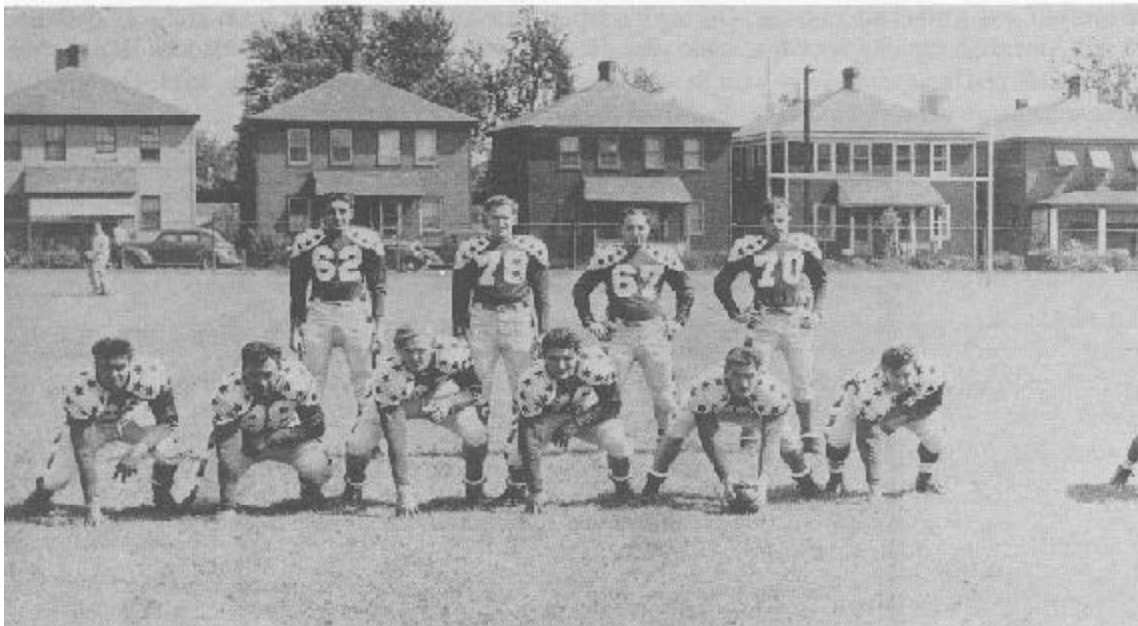


The McKees Rocks Bridge

The McKees Rocks Bridge was built in 1931 at the cost of seven million dollars. It was the largest bridge in Pennsylvania at that time, stretching 5,900 feet from Island Avenue to the newly constructed Ohio River Boulevard. It took two years to complete and was made of 12,000 tons of steel. Flood victims have sought refuge on it. World War II troops patrolled it. It has been a famous landmark along the Ohio River since its construction.

- The Town, The Schools, and The People

When Stowe Township and McKees Rocks were separate schools, there was a great football rivalry between them. For almost forty years, beginning in 1928 and ending when the schools merged in 1966, it was one of the most super-charged sporting events in the W.P.I.A.L. Crowds of 8,000 to 10,000 were common, and emotions ran high on both sides. Most of these games were close, many ended in ties, and on several occasions, one team would knock the other team out of the playoffs. In the end, Stowe had the slight edge.



Joe Vitelli's McKees Rocks All-Stars, 1947, one of many successful sandlot teams in the McKees Rocks area. The All-Stars were led by Ernie "Boom-Boom" Bulgarelli, running back No. 67.

After the schools merged this great high school athletic tradition continued in the Sto-Rox School District. These teams have produced great stars including Chuck Fusina, quarterback for the Penn State's National Championship team, Tony Magnelli, center on Pitt's National Championship Team, Myron Brown who played professional basketball, Carl Schaukowitch, who played football for Penn State and professionally, Robert Medwid, Pitt football standout and Bruce Byron, football star at the University of Maryland who played professionally. Island Avenue was the home to Joe "the horse" Vitelli. He played for Pitt as halfback and eventually went to the minors to play baseball. He pitched for the Cincinnati Reds and came back to play for the Pirates a short while.

- McKees Rocks - A Home for Immigrants in The First Half of the 20th Century



An influx of immigrants came to the area to escape oppression from their old world. Most were of Central and Eastern Europeans with 42% of residents Slavic in ethnicity.

McKees Rocks attracted many immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. These individuals were often skilled iron and steel workers in their homelands, and found a ready place in the iron and steel industry associated with the railroad industry around McKees Rocks. You will recall that the Ohio Valley Trading company had tried to recruit immigrants to the area during the 1800's by calling the area around Pittsburgh "New Salzburg" in an effort to attract immigrant settlers from Salzburg Germany. The combination of cultures from Germany, Slavic speaking nations, and Italy produced a local culture rich in traditions that is apparent in celebrations, foods, local businesses, and shops. Many of the enterprises such as bakeries, auto dealerships, repair facilities, and other businesses are famous throughout Western Pennsylvania. These traditions and practices are combined in the festivals, activities, and community oriented holidays that can still be seen today.

Often the entire town would turn out to hold a special event, commemorate the end of a war, or celebrate a holiday. These celebrations involved parades, flags and banners of all types, and people would display flags at different seasons of the year, as they still do in Europe to this day. In the 21st century, especially during holiday seasons, flags line the streets of Broadway, and students in the schools compete with each other to see which homeroom will receive top honors for the best classroom door decorations. Of course, food festivals rank high on the list of favorite activities. Churches, fraternal organizations, and teams looking for assistance use this practice of McKees Rocks to their advantage as they raise necessary funds from cooperative neighbors.

- The Rox Arena

The Rox Arena opened Thanksgiving Day 1938. It was the largest man-made ice skating rink in the eastern United States at the time. It was located on Furnace Street Extension behind the existing McDonald's restaurant. The rink became a source for a getaway from the times of the Depression.



New Year's Day, 1939, at the Rox Arena Rink

The idea of family outings was well-established in the minds of McKees Rocks residents, and they seized every opportunity to go outside and have a good time, despite the weather or the economy. With the economic depression of 1929, many people lost their jobs, and they had a very difficult time maintaining their old habits. Many families moved away from the area, hoping to find better situations in other parts of the country. Those who remained behind did so because of their memory of how McKees Rocks had been such a wonderful place in which to grow up.

With characteristic eagerness, they started to pay particular concern to their educational facilities, with the result that by the end of the century, McKees Rocks had built a new Elementary School, and had begun building a new Middle School. In addition, the Sto-Rox High School building would be receiving a multi-million dollar renovation, to enable its graduates to pursue their future well-equipped to handle the complex technological world they would be living in as adults.

STO-ROX ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
OPENED SEPTEMBER 1996



In the mid-1990's, the Sto-Rox community undertook to develop not only a new Elementary Center with the most modern facilities, but also to build a new Middle School, again with the very latest in technology and student facilities. At this time the Sto-Rox School District was the only one in the state of Pennsylvania to have two new schools built or under construction in such a short interval of time. By April of 2000, the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Middle School showed just how strong the community's desire was to provide the very best for its children. In addition, Sto-Rox High School was in the process of a complete modernization program at a cost of some \$5 million. In summation, the District was going to have three ultra-modern buildings to help students achieve from the first grade through the twelfth!

The McKees Rocks community is poised to accept the challenges of the next century, through the unique combination of location, strong local traditions, and the same pioneer spirit that attracted the first settlers to the area thousands of years ago. Its schools are ready to prepare the children for their roles through their exceptional use of technology to extend the reach of its students to all parts of the country and the world. This is a great time to show that pride for which McKees Rocks is famous.

The New STO-ROX Middle School
under construction



View from a Hilltop in Norwood



Sto-Rox High School



Information for this curriculum guide was taken from materials graciously supplied by the Office of the McKees Rocks Borough Secretary, Mr. William C. Beck.

Beck, William C., McKees Rocks Borough Secretary, Archives of McKees Rocks, Collection maintained and supplied for use by the Sto-Rox School District.

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Research Activities: Do a search for McKees Rocks on www.go.com and one will see many local business sites appear as you search the web.

Search the F.O.R. on www.trfn.org. Search 'local organizations' or go directly to F.O.R. homepage at www.trfn.clpgh.org/for/ .

Additional websites:

www.srsd.K12.pa.us

www.lintherocks.com

www.unitedwaypittsburgh.org

www.fhcinc.org

www.post-gazette.com (search 'McKees Rocks')

www.pe.net/~rksnow/pacountymckeesrocksorg.htm (to find local community organizations)



A View from a Hilltop in Norwood