

ESPY AND THE PENNSYLVANIA CANAL COMPANY

INTRODUCTION: The following is an excerpt from an article entitled, “Espy Showed Its Heels to Bloomsburg Then: In Fight for Boat Yard Location, It Got the Ear of the Pennsylvania Canal Company,” written by William L. McCollum that appeared in *The Morning Press* on December 15, 1923. The author, who grew up in Espy, referred to Espy’s various businesses in the early 1870s. But the major focus of his account is how Espy, rather than Bloomsburg, succeeded in getting the Pennsylvania Canal Company to locate its boat building and repair operation in the village. The community and its leaders, especially William Milnes, a coal merchant, clearly understood the economic importance of being pro-active in recruiting this industry.

In the earlier years of the North Branch Canal, Espy was the home of several small boat building companies. By the early 1870s the Pennsylvania Canal Company began to buy out these businesses, and engaged in building larger boats to haul coal from the Wyoming Valley area to the tidewater markets.

Clearly by the 1890s the canal business was in sharp decline due to competition with the railroads. In addition, another crucial factor was the decision to discontinue the operation of the Susquehanna and Tidewater Canal due to significant flood damage in May 1894. This disrupted the key link for the Pennsylvania Canal Company to get its boats to the Chesapeake Bay area and the coastal markets. The company announced on April 11, 1901, that it would end its canal business along the Susquehanna River.



Pennsylvania Canal Company Boat Yard at Espy

The picture in today's *Press* showing the canal boats and the basin at the upper end of the former dry docks will revive memories not only among the residents of Espy, but also of those in the big army of *Press* readers who either sailed on the raging canal or remember the days when that liquid artery was one [of] the principal means of transportation in the Susquehanna Valley.

The old boat yard meant much to Espy when it was established there by the Pennsylvania Canal Company and up to the time that the waterway was abandoned the chief source of employment of the mechanics and a laborers of that village.

Espy was a flourishing little place in the early 1870s. The D. Snyder & Co. planing mill at the depot, and the T. W. Edgar planing mill on Second Street were hives of industry. The big flouring mill on Main Street, owned by C. S. Fowler, operated on a double shift practically the year through. In addition it had several individual boat yards and other small industries. Then came the panic and everything fell flat. The planing mill and flouring mill firms failed and their plants were idle for years and never were again operated continuously or full handed. But though Espy was down on its back it was full of fight as events proved. The state sold that portion of the canal extending from Wilkes-Barre in the north to Columbia, [Pennsylvania,] on the south to the Pennsylvania Railroad. The Pennsylvania Canal Company was formed to operate the ditch and among its necessities was a boat building and repair plant. There was considerable rivalry among the towns along the line to have the plant located in their midst and Espy entered the lists. Finally it narrowed down to a choice between Espy and Bloomsburg.

In the former place hustlers like the late William Milnes, S. W. Edgar, S. A. Worman, Silas Edgar, Butler Edgar, M. C. McCollum, Daniel Snyder, Hiram Creveling and others got busy and kept at it. Mr. Milnes took options on all lands along the canal from the aqueduct [over Fishing Creek] down to the line of John Shuman's farm and offered it free to the canal company as a site. Engineers and surveyors went over the ground, and decided that it was too narrow by at least twenty feet for the purpose. Nothing daunted the Espy people – [they] went at it again and every property owner on the south side of Main Street offered to deed over to the canal company a strip from the ends of their lots sufficient to give the company the needed twenty feet and to relocate the alley which would be needed by both the company and property owners.

That brought the balance even between Espy and Bloomsburg again and then William Milnes threw in the weight that turned it in Espy's favor. Mr. Miles had been forced to take over the mansion of C. S. Fowler, then located on the site of the home now owned by J. W. Hidlay and at the psychological moment, Mr. Milnes offered to deed over this home for the use of the company's superintendent should the boat yards be located at Espy. It was accepted and the home was occupied by the late Thomas Rutledge, who as inspector of the Pennsylvania Canal also had charge over the boat building plant.

The boat yards gave Espy a new lease on life. It not only employed all of Espy's available labor but men from Bloomsburg, Light Street, and Almedia were employed.

With the boat yards also came skilled mechanics who had been with the company at Beach Haven, among them Jesse Stookey, the first superintendent; Henry Frane, the draughtsman and pattern maker; Elias Hummel, a skilled boat builder; Clark Kressler, now of Bloomsburg, then employed at Lock Haven, also returned in the capacity of head bookkeeper and paymaster and remained until the canal company was abandoned.