

CENTRALIA WANTS OUT OF COLUMBIA COUNTY

By George A. Turner

Articles appeared in regional newspapers in December 1902 and the following month about Centralia borough and Conyngham Township wanting to separate from Columbia County. Bloomsburg's newspaper, *The Morning Press*, reported a petition was circulating in the south end of the county in which residents wanted their area to be annexed to Northumberland County. Others advanced the idea that Conyngham should join the movement to create a new county consisting of Northumberland townships, Mount Carmel, Coal, and Ralpho, with the understanding that Shamokin would become the country seat.

What prompted this issue of separation? Since the creation of Columbia County in 1813, there was a feeling of detachment among those who lived near the southern boundary. Although Centralia was only twenty miles from Bloomsburg, the topography included mountains, and with lack of good roads, it was a difficult trip to Bloomsburg. This created a sense of isolation from the rest of the county.

Even with the advent of train travel, there was no direct link between the two towns. To take a train to Bloomsburg required a traveler to leave Centralia at six o'clock with a one hour wait in Mt. Carmel, two hours delay at Shamokin, and change to another train at Sunbury before arriving in Bloomsburg at eleven o'clock. Return to Centralia required a similar length to time. A trip to the courthouse on official business was inconvenient, took too long, and was expensive.

The economy of Conyngham Township was coal mining whereas other areas had a more diverse base consisting of agriculture and industry. Mining prompted a population growth that attracted many immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. The ethnicity of the newcomers was different from those who lived in the Bloomsburg, Fishing Creek Valley, and Millville areas at the start of the 1900s. More



of an affinity existed between the Centralia region and the coal mining areas of Northumberland County than with Columbia County. There was a lack of cohesion with the other sections of the county.

The people had a number of objections that caused many to embrace the call to leave Columbia County. Some complained about the amount of taxes paid to the county and that they received little or nothing in return for public services and improvements of roads and bridges. Others believed the county favored the other townships at their expense. Voters from the Centralia area felt their candidates for county offices had little chance of winning. They believed that political parties only wasted their votes for candidates from other parts of the county.

The issue of creating a new county came to a halt due to Pennsylvania's constitution. After consulting the document, proponents discovered Article XIII, Section I, stating the following: "No new county shall be established which shall reduce any county to less than four hundred square miles, or to less than twenty thousand inhabitants; nor shall any county be formed of less area, or containing a less population." This constitutional mandate effectively ended the idea of creating a new county from Columbia and Northumberland since each county's square mileage was 486 and 460 respectively. There simply was not enough land area to allow any partitioning to create a new county that would have at least 400 square miles.

Combined land area of Conyngham Township and Centralia was around twenty-one square miles. If it were to be incorporated into Northumberland County, Columbia County still would have had sixty-five square miles, more than the minimum requirement of 400 square miles. On this issue of allowing part of the county to be attached Northumberland, the attitude of elected Columbia County officials is unknown. Local newspapers never reported their views. However, *The Morning Press* did offer an assessment: "There has, for years, been an out-spoken desire to part company and with the equally out-spoken desire upon the section over the mountains to leave Columbia county there should not, in so far as mutual sentiments are concerned, be very much trouble." Despite this viewpoint, it seems doubtful that elected county officials would have acceded to the demands of citizens in Conyngham Township and Centralia to become part of Northumberland County. To have concurred would have meant a reduction in Columbia County's tax base and a loss in revenue.

After all of the attention to this issue in the early years of the twentieth century, nothing came of it, and today Conyngham Township and Centralia, although reduced to a few families because of the mine fire, are still a part of Columbia County.

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