

**The Tarr Family:  
African-Americans in the Anthracite Region**

By William M. Baillie

I was looking in the 1850 U.S. Census of Main Township for an unrelated surname when I noticed a family named “Tarr” marked “B” or Black for race. Could this family be ancestors of Bloomsburg’s prominent African-American resident Isabel Tarr, a Society member who died four years ago?

The answer after some research turned out to be Yes: the Andrew Tarr of Mainville in 1850 was Isabel’s 2<sup>nd</sup>-great-grandfather. What was he doing in rural Mainville? Along with the next-listed family named Jones, they were the only households marked “B” in the township—in fact, the only ones in Columbia County south of the Susquehanna River. Tracing the family led to a fascinating story of African-Americans in the iron and coal industries in Pennsylvania over several generations.

Andrew Tarr was born about 1811 in Reading, Pennsylvania. He was probably the grandson of another Andrew Tarr who, when he died at Paxinos in Shamokin township in 1860, was said to be 110 years of age. A Lewisburg newspaper commented, “If his age is correctly stated, he was unquestionably the oldest man in Northumberland county.”

In 1850 the younger Andrew was working in Mainville as a “Forgeman.” That is, he labored at the forge connected to the Mainville iron furnace. (The furnace produced “pig iron” from raw ore, while the forge melted the pigs to cast useful items such as plowshares and stoves.) This iron-making facility was the first in Columbia County when it began production in 1815. The location beside Catawissa Creek just south of Mainville provided plenty of wood for charcoal (the main fuel), iron ore from the bogs near Centralia, and access to markets via the nearby Reading Road. In 1850 the furnace employed four furnacemen and the forge four forgemen. Many other workers were needed to dig ore, cut wood, burn charcoal, and haul ore and finished iron. The ironmaster, Benjamin Frick, owned the most valuable property in the township, worth \$10,000 when the price of most farms was a few hundred dollars.

The Tarrs were well-known in the region for making iron. In the *Danville Intelligencer* for June 26, 1840, the editor touted the prospects for the iron industry in the county and noted that “A piece of malleable iron was brought to us; it was tough, and appeared to be good. It was made from the pig by Peter Tarr, a black man, at the Catawissa forge.” Peter may have been Andrew’s father, who was listed in the 1840 census in Norwegian township, Schuylkill county, with a family of twelve “Free Colored.”

Before the Civil War Andrew left iron-making and moved to Shamokin, where he found work as a coal miner in the Bear Valley colliery just south of the city. All four of his sons also worked in the Coal Township mines: William S. (1836-1912), Thomas A. (1841-1903), Rheoboam (1842-1914) and Edward F. (1857- ). Various grandsons as young as ten also worked in the breakers as “slate pickers.” (Also called “breaker boys,” the lads sat on benches above a sloping chute and with nimble hands picked rock discards out of the fast-moving coal.)

Andrew's family were miners in a turbulent time in the coal industry. Union organizing efforts in the anthracite regions met with fierce and often bloody resistance. Andrew's family was directly involved: in 1898 a Tarr tenement house on Shamokin's Vine Street was dynamited at 4am one morning and badly damaged. The dynamite had been stolen from the nearby powder magazine of the Royal Oak colliery, which was set on fire by the thieves and exploded with a thunderous roar. Andrew's oldest son William, a mine foreman, was a delegate to a United Mineworkers union conference at Scranton in 1903; while the tone of the meeting was angry, "A colored delegate, William Tarr of Shamokin, arose to protest against . . . talking strike. 'We've had our belly full of it,' he declared. 'What we're here for is to avoid strike. We're not looking for bother'."

Among Andrew's sons, the ancestor of Isabel Tarr was Rheoboam, her great-grandfather. (He was named for one of the few traditionally dark-skinned persons in the Bible, King Solomon's son by the Queen of Sheba.) Rheoboam, called "Boom" as a boy, was born at Catawissa in 1842. He and two of his brothers, William S. and Thomas Tarr, were Union soldiers in the Civil War. The two younger men enlisted in 1864 in the 45<sup>th</sup> Regiment of U.S. Colored Infantry and served for just over a year. Rheoboam, who could not read or write, was enlisted by the clerk as "Rearbond Farr," and his military records maintain that name through the war and afterwards. He was noted in 1864 as age 20, height 5'9", with brown hair and black eyes.

The 45<sup>th</sup> Regiment took part in the campaign to capture the Confederate capital at Richmond, Virginia, and then after Lee's surrender they were transported to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas to hold the border against a rumored Mexican invasion. The regiment mustered out at Brownsville, Texas in August, 1865.

The oldest brother, William S., of whom we will hear more, enlisted in February 1864 in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Colored Regiment and served for eighteen months. He was later pensioned with "heart disease received in war."

After the War, the brothers returned to work in the mines near Shamokin; Rheoboam continued shoveling coal until his death in 1914.

His son Ramsey Tarr, born in Shamokin in 1880, like other Tarrs before him, became a breaker boy and then was employed as a miner and mine foreman. He worked at the Burnside Colliery and then at the Reliance works until his retirement in 1952.

Ramsey had two close calls with death in the mines. In 1922 he was seriously injured and his younger brother Donald, working beside him, was killed instantly when the mine roof gave way and buried them in tons of collapsed coal. Again seven years later, in the same Burnside mine, Ramsey and his son Paul were buried under a roof collapse and taken to the hospital with serious injuries. They were working at "robbing pillars," the risky task of cutting away the coal pillars which were left in ordinary deep mining to hold up the mine roof.

Despite these and other accidents, Ramsey lived to age 80. His family of six children included Isabel Tarr's father, Thomas Stephen Tarr, usually called "Steve." He had a brief flame of glory as a football star at Shamokin High School in 1929. Indeed, when his father Ramsey was injured

that October, he was identified in the local paper as “the father of Steve Tarr, famous football star.” Although Steve earned a varsity letter, he apparently did not play more than the one season. Later, though, he was involved in two separate attempts to start semi-pro football teams in Shamokin.

Like his forebears for three generations, Steve began his working life as a laborer in mines near Shamokin, and he continued for much of his life. For a while, however, he lived away from the anthracite fields, in Bloomsburg. (He had been preceded in that town by his oldest uncle, Civil War veteran William S. Tarr. Before William was a mild-speaking union delegate from Shamokin, he lived for a time in Columbia County, and he bought property at Bloomsburg in 1872.)



*Isabel and Elizabeth with their mother Rosella*

At Bloomsburg Steve met and later married Rosella Brown (1918-1991), whose family owned a house at 246 East Ninth Street. Her relatives worked at the brickyard along East Fifth Street, and probably Steve got a job there also. In any case, he fathered Rosella’s three daughters, Elizabeth (1939), Isabel (1942), and Phyllis Marie (1944).

When his middle daughter was five months old, Steve enlisted in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and served for more than three years in World War II. For 27 months his unit was in North Africa, building roads and fortifications. The Army was still racially segregated until after the war, so Steve’s platoon was all black within a larger unit of whites. When he returned from the service, Steve found work again in the mines around Shamokin and lived apart from his family.

Isabel grew up on Ninth Street in the Browns’ house, graduated from Bloomsburg High School in 1959, and found work as a presser in a local laundry and later as a machine operator with R.

R. Donnelly. As a small child, she saw prejudice in person. At age 3, her mother took her to a downtown ice cream parlor after a movie, but the waitress wouldn't serve them. Many years later, there were still some restaurants in the area, she averred, that refused to serve minority customers.

Isabel was a founding member of the Bloomsburg University-Community Task Force on Racial Equity in 1993. She helped to run diversity training presented to local companies and community groups. She also became the Task Force's media contact, relaying complaints and compliments through letters to the editor of the local paper.

In 2013, the year before her death, Bloomsburg Town Council honored Isabel with a Certificate Citation to recognize her service to the community and Bloomsburg University. The citation noted that Tarr stood "for resolution in place of recrimination and 'truth telling' instead of misrepresentation." A fellow Task Force member recalled that "She had the ability to speak her mind, but always did it with great dignity." Despite her occasional experience of prejudice, she told a reporter, "I still love Bloomsburg."



*Isabel and her sister Elizabeth as adults*

With her death there is no longer a Tarr in Bloomsburg, but the family's lengthy record of contributions to Columbia County remains.