

crisp, his arguments clear and firmly anchored in the larger historiography, and the conclusions never stray beyond what the evidence allows. *Deserter Country* is a much-needed contribution to the study of wartime dissent and resistance within Pennsylvania during the War of the Rebellion, and it invites further inquiry into wartime resistance patterns, both within Pennsylvania and beyond.

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Robert P. Wolensky and Joseph M. Keating. *Tragedy at Avondale: The Causes, Consequences, and Legacy of the Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal Industry's Most Deadly Mining Disaster, September 6, 1869*. (Easton, PA: Canal History and Technology Press, 2008. Pp. 191, illustrations, maps, appendixes. Paper, \$19.95.)

At 10:30 A.M. on Monday, September 6, 1869, flames erupted from Avondale's Steuben shaft. The only entry/exit was engulfed in flame, robbing the mine of all available oxygen and further emitting noxious gasses. Collapsed debris and toxic fumes precluded rescue efforts for over forty hours. One hundred and ten people perished in the event and subsequent rescue efforts. Sixty seven were found asphyxiated behind a make-shift barricade.

The long-accepted explanation for the disaster, based largely on the results of an official Coroner's inquiry, suggested that sparks from the ventilation furnace ignited the wooden mine shaft lining. However, the fire appears to have started over 300 feet from the furnace, and 200 feet from the flue's entry into the mine-shaft. Witnesses gave mixed testimony. The authors re-invigorate an interpretation that has historically been left unexamined—that the disaster may have been an intentional act of arson. While the authors adeptly examine various possibilities, the evidence clearly merits consideration of the incendiary explanation. The disaster occurred four days after a three-month strike cracked and miners returned to work. Racial tensions between the Welsh and Irish permeated the region; the majority of Irish workers were absent from the mine the day of the disaster; and no such accident—furnace generated fire—had previously occurred. Further, the burnt brattice having been above the mid-way point of the shaft indicates that the fire did not emanate from below.

The Workingman's Benevolent Association (WBA), an early union of anthracite miners, claimed that the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Co.

(DL&W), Avondale's operating company, generated the incendiary theory to divert responsibility for unsafe mining conditions. Such a verdict would have averted imposition of local legislation, and weaken the union by further propagating inter-ethnic quarrels. Conversely, the WBA found the court's accidental interpretation agreeable as it forwarded the union's push for worker safety and shifted accusation from their ranks. DL&W acceptance of the accidental verdict held them minimally accountable. This acceptance, coupled with the WBA's refusal to challenge the finding, ultimately left the interpretation uncontested and has thereafter perpetuated historical analysis of the event.

The authors quote Ellis W. Roberts's *The Breaker Whistle Blows* (1984) as stating that "the Avondale disaster still is the most tragic symbol of the dangers of coal mining." Indeed, the number of people killed in mining accidents through the first decade of twentieth century is staggering. Still, qualifying a disaster as the "most death dealing calamity" and an "unparalleled disaster" or similar can be misleading, but the authors have placed it in its proper context. Such studies typically profess that such incidents lead to greater regulation. In the case of Avondale, had the incendiary explanation been embraced, is it possible that the disaster would not have been as likely used to leverage new legislation?

Rich with illustrations, appendixes, maps, illustrations, diagrams, and other supplementary information, Robert Wolensky and the late Joseph Keating have crafted a cohesive account of the Avondale tragedy and subsequent events. Thoroughly researched, yet readily digestible, the visual elements compliment the text and emphasize the social and historical context. The authors interweave vivid imagery from artist Sue Hand's exhibition, *Anthracite Miners and Their Hallowed Ground*, expanding on the unadulterated social commentary provided by periodical illustrations, ballads and poems dating from the time of the tragedy. A glossary of terms further clarifies unfamiliar terminology. This is an accessible and thought provoking study ranging from the events prior to the disaster through current understanding and remembrances, one that serves to remind readers that "despite the general acceptance of the verdict of the Coroner's Jury for nearly 140 years, the case on the terrible tragedy at Avondale should not be closed" (75).

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