The names of locations in Fayette County are in most cases designated by the county, townships, or boroughs. Many, however, are unofficial and receive their designations from a particular event or circumstances. Unfortunately, the passage of time and the eroding of memories of those who knew the original reason for naming a location often produce a historical blank.

One cannot talk to anyone in Masontown for long without hearing that someone lives on “Cannon Hill.” It is a strange name, indeed, because no known military event occurred there. When asked why it has this name, residents have answered variously: “It was a fortress”; “It was to celebrate Lincoln’s election”; “Guns were used to defend the town in a raid during the Civil War”; and “The guns were left over from old Fort Mason.”

According to Robert C. McClelland, a former native, the answer lies in the post-Civil War politics of the area. His source, Edward West, described how the Republicans had replaced the Democrats as the dominant political force in the county and in Masontown. In their enthusiasm, some local Republicans got a surplus piece of artillery that they mounted on the hill overlooking the village. After each election victory, a group went up the hill to celebrate. They had a barbecue, plenty of Monongahela rye, and a few kegs of powder. Firing the gun, they made the night miserable for the defeated Democrats, who were left “sulking and licking their wounds. . . .”

This continued for a few years until the cannon mysteriously disappeared. The Republicans knew that the Democrats had taken it and were certain it would be found. No one could hide a cannon in that rural area where everyone knew everyone. But the years passed, and the theft was forgotten. Finally, the lone survivor of the episode, shortly before his death, swore Edward West to secrecy and divulged the “true” story.

This unnamed Democrat, with his cohorts, had on the night before the election taken a team of horses up the hill and dragged the cannon down to Hyde’s Ferry. They pulled it onto the ferryboat, took it out to the middle of the Monongahela River, and dumped it opposite the mouth of Whitely Creek. The four individuals swore never to tell a soul about the incident, and they did not. Who were they? West referred to them only as “gentlemen,” and they remain unknown today.

John Kent Folmar