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**Contemptible Cravens and Dumb Beasts: The Story of the Wiggans Patch Massacre**

**by  
Kevin Cranney  
HIS 490 History Honors Thesis**

**Department of History  
Providence College  
Fall 2018**



*For John McCarron*

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE ANTHRACITE REGION IN THE GILDED AGE

On the afternoon of December 10, 1875, an already buzzing Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, erupted into another fit of excitement when James Duffy of the Coal & Iron Police and David Gorman, borough constable, arrived at the butchery of Frank Wenrich with a warrant for his arrest. Wenrich calmly complied, and the policemen took him to Justice Michael Groody for a hearing. A crowd gathered outside the Mahanoy City butchery in disbelief. The *Shenandoah Herald*, a prominent local newspaper, reported, “Men at first couldn’t believe their ears, as Mr. Wenrich is considered one of Mahanoy City’s most respectable citizens,” and the Coal & Iron Police were usually working to apprehend the feared Molly Maguires, not arresting reputable townspeople. Earlier that day, however, John “Black Jack” Kehoe, a miner, tavern owner, high constable of Girardville, Schuylkill County delegate of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and so-called “King of the Molly Maguires,” had accused Wenrich of assaulting the elderly widow Margaret O’Donnell the night before at her boardinghouse in Wiggans Patch and taking part in the shooting of her grown children, Charles O’Donnell and Ellen McAllister.<sup>1</sup>

The widow was present at Wenrich’s hearing before Justice Groody, and she sported a gruesome black eye as she recounted the bloody deeds of the night before: around forty masked

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<sup>1</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

men had broken into her house in Wiggans Patch, a mining town outside of Mahanoy City, and killed her pregnant daughter Ellen McAllister and her son Charles O'Donnell, an alleged Molly Maguire. She had been clubbed with a butt of a pistol. After putting around twenty bullets into the lifeless body of Charles O'Donnell, the raiders set his clothes on fire and fled the premises. Most of them were masked, but Margaret O'Donnell testified that Frank Wenrich, the local butcher for eleven years, had been her attacker. Wenrich, defended by G.H. Troutman, pleaded not guilty. According to one report, the widow falsely accused him, as she was "largely indebted to him for beef and mutton, and that he incurred her animosity for pressing her for payment."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Groody found little additional evidence against Wenrich beyond Margaret O'Donnell's accusation in the examinations of James McAllister, John Purcell, and James Blair (three survivors of the attack) and at another hearing on December 13 and 14. Other witnesses further contradicted Margaret O'Donnell's testimony, and the *Shenandoah Herald* confidently concluded, "The general opinion is that there is no case against Wenrich."<sup>3</sup>

Justice Groody released Wenrich for a small bail on December 14, and the butcher took the 8:38 p.m. train from Shenandoah back to his home in Mahanoy City. A crowd of three hundred people greeted him at the train station. They were not there to lynch the accused murderer, as some suspected the Molly Maguires might do, but to congratulate him: "The crowd followed him down town and manifested much enthusiasm on his return home. He proceeded to the Mansion House and was busy receiving handshakes and congratulations until bed time." Wenrich returned to work the next day.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Sun* (New York, NY), 14 December 1875.

<sup>3</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 14 December 1875.

<sup>4</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 16 December 1875.

That was the extent of the legal action taken following the violent Wiggans Patch Massacre, in which a suspected Molly Maguire and a pregnant woman were brutally murdered by a group of masked vigilantes. There was no further investigation or attempt to find any other suspects. After the funeral of Charles O'Donnell and Ellen McAllister, life carried on as usual in Mahanoy City. Was the crowd that greeted Wenrich celebrating that a good man was proven innocent? Or were they cheering because he successfully avenged an assassination supposedly committed by Charles O'Donnell and other Molly Maguires the previous September? Either way, the perpetrators of the Wiggans Patch Massacre literally got away with murder. One of the most brutal crimes of a particularly violent era was soon forgotten, especially when the Molly Maguire trials began the following month.

How did this happen? Why was the Wiggans Patch Massacre forgotten when within the next few years (1876-1879) twenty men were hung for murders committed up to sixteen years before? In order to find the answers, we must first understand the entire Molly Maguire phenomenon and its place in labor versus capital relations of the rapidly industrializing United States of America.

\* \* \*

The American working class went through a profound transformation in the decades following the Civil War. At the close of the war, most of the nation worked as self-employed small farmers, but by 1920 the United States was a thoroughly urban nation in which the vast majority of laborers worked for employers. It was an era that witnessed the demise of skilled domestic industry. Specialized shoemakers, tailors, or blacksmiths who formerly worked at small shops outside their homes began to leave their houses early in the morning to work long days at

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manual labor jobs alongside dozens of others for a wage. Over time, the changing nature of work had major ramifications on modes of life in America. Melvyn Dubofsky explained the gradual effect of industrialization best.

Children in each generation learned to move from the less structured, more habitual, more effective milieu of home and family to the rationally regulated, clock-disciplined, and impersonally ordered universe of the factory and shop...clear lines demarcated work from home, labor from leisure, the bosses' time from one's own.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas in preindustrial societies life and work flowed naturally together, industrialization separated the domestic sphere from the laboring one. The migration of millions of immigrants into the United States, who mostly found work at these industrial occupations, further transformed the identity of the American worker in the late nineteenth century.

Wages for these new, unskilled labor occupations that employed so many workers (especially immigrants) were often lower than proposed living-wage levels. It was an age before such progressive reforms as minimum wage laws and working place regulations, not to mention job discrimination. Industrial workers in cities lived in hazardously close quarters and were subject to squalor and disease. But life in isolated coal mining villages, like Wiggans Patch and the others in the Pennsylvania anthracite region, was often worse. There, "coal barons rule[d] their industrial serfs in feudal style, but without any of the reciprocal obligations built into the medieval order."<sup>6</sup> Besides paying their workers abysmal wages, the coal barons subjected the mine laborers to extremely unsafe environments. The United States had one of the highest rates of industrial accidents in the Western world; tens of thousands of workers died annually on the

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<sup>5</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker 1865-1920* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1996), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism*, 21.

job and hundreds of thousands suffered injuries. Coal mine explosions were some of the more fatal accidents. Besides poor wages and working conditions, sporadic unemployment further impoverished the American working class in the Gilded Age, especially coal laborers. The mines were usually not operational year round, and seasonal unemployment worsened the effects of cyclical unemployment brought about by depressions and recessions in the national economy.<sup>7</sup>

Emerging business tycoons, or robber barons, enforced these new regimented lifestyles. Corporate leaders worked on extending their control over the traditional economic order and violated the equality and independence enjoyed by employers and employees in past generations. In order to stay competitive in the changing business world, capitalists tried various options. Some tried to unilaterally control wages, hours, and working conditions while maintaining order among their discontented employees. Others sought to merge with other businesses to create larger, more stable corporations and monopolies. These changing methods challenged and redefined traditional American values of individualism, free competition, and equal opportunity.

Employees, however, were not powerless against the major capitalists. Especially in small mining towns like the ones in the Pennsylvania anthracite region, workers could influence local elections and even hold offices like mayor, sheriff, or county judge. “Black Jack” Kehoe, for instance, was the high constable of Girardville. The major weapons for workers in this era, however, were the trade union and the strike. In some of the greatest clashes between labor and capital in American history, large-scale strikes of combined workers seeking fairer working conditions and wages halted the corporate quest for control and unfettered growth, which often came at the expense of the laborers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism*, 20-24.

<sup>8</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism*, 34-38.

During these conflicts, radicalized laborers sometimes resorted to violence. Employers used the threat of labor violence to gain support for themselves and alienate unions, including those of which openly denounced such violence. For an example, in the late 1890s, the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), which had indeed adopted socialist beliefs, became a target for the Colorado Mine Owner's Association. Ignoring the WFM's repeated calls for peaceful compromise, the Mine Owner's Association, taking advantage of the public's fear of radicalism, gathered an alliance of corporate leaders, small businessmen, and politicians that crushed the WFM in a bloody conflict from 1903-1904.<sup>9</sup> The story did not end there. After an estranged drifter named Harry Orchard assassinated former governor of Idaho and famous opponent of the WFM Frank Steunenberg in December 1905, the Pinkerton detective agency attempted to use the crime to indict major leaders of an apparent "inner circle" of the WFM, including famous labor leader William "Big Bill" Haywood. The supposed conspiracy proved groundless, and, after a high-profile case, the jury found Haywood not guilty, accurately reporting, "that there was nothing against the accused but inference and suspicion." But it was not a victory for the laborers. Months of publicity around the trial falsely attributed a violent reputation and an association with anarchy and revolution to the WFM.<sup>10</sup> Thirty years prior, the Pinkertons, employed by coal tycoon Franklin Gowen, utilized similar tactics and enjoyed even better results in northeast Pennsylvania against a local miners' union and the Molly Maguires, a secret society of Irish immigrant laborers with a propensity for violence.

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<sup>9</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 50-51.

<sup>10</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 53-58.

Immigrant workers in the United States came from many different cultures, and they all “produced divergent social perspectives” in response to industrialization and the labor versus capital conflicts that went along with it. Whether it was remigration, violence, or participation in a trade union, these responses tell historians much about workers’ societal values. Dubofsky quoted Asa Briggs, an English historian, on this: “In order to understand how people respond to industrial change, it is necessary to examine what kind of people they were at the beginning of the process, to take account of continuities as well as new ways of thinking and feeling.”<sup>11</sup> This explains why some Irish coal laborers in the Pennsylvania anthracite region turned to Molly Maguire violence in response to perceived injustice at the work place.

About eighty percent of the American Molly Maguires hailed from north-central and northwest Ireland, specifically Monaghan, Cavan, Leitrim, Sligo, Upper Roscommon, Mayo, Fermanagh, and parts of Tyrone and Donegal. These largely rural regions featured traditions of agrarian violence. There, a homogenous nationalist movement against an oppressive English landlord class did not motivate the violence, as some like to believe. Rather, imbalanced socioeconomic relations and local grievances primarily inspired the agitators, and the targets were often Irish agents of English absentee landlords. The violence in Ireland was not irrational. It was an attempt to correct what was interpreted as “transgressions against traditional moral and social codes” of landholding and land use.<sup>12</sup> For an example, these agrarian agitators in Ireland were often opponents of the pasturage system and favored small-scale tillage, so they would sabotage land set aside for pasturage by killing livestock, tearing down fences, and digging up

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<sup>11</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism*, 7-9.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 18-19.

land to make it arable. Sometimes they would threaten or even kill their enemies. Historian Kevin Kenny called it a form of retributive justice: “collective violence designed to redress violations against a particular understanding of what was socially right and wrong.”<sup>13</sup> In Ireland the victims were English landlords and their agents, but the American Molly Maguires imported the same methods to target mine owners and superintendents, policemen, and municipal officials whom they perceived wronged them in some way or violated the acceptable social order.

The anthracite coal region in northeast Pennsylvania stretched across seven counties, 484 square miles, and contained the highest concentration of high-ash anthracite in the world. Located conveniently between the industrial centers of Philadelphia and New York City, its coal was in high demand. The region, however, was not the “urban paradigm often associated with the industrial revolution,” and it featured dense woods, hills, mountains, and valleys with isolated small cities and towns scattered about. Historians commonly divide the region into two halves. In the northern half, large corporations dominated the anthracite industry, and its geography made the coal easier to extract. There, workers were paid better than in the south and more reluctant to employ violence as a means to further improve their circumstances. In the 1860s, small companies owned the mines in the southern half. These small proprietors could not pay the miners as much as the northern corporations, which caused more turbulence. It was in this southern region where railroad and coal tycoon Franklin Gowen came to exert great control in the 1870s and after.<sup>14</sup>

Trade unionism and Molly Maguire activity were mostly active in the southern half of the anthracite region, especially Schuylkill County. Schuylkill County’s population of just over

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<sup>13</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 45-48.

100,000 was primarily split between Irish and Welsh, and ethnic tensions ran high between the two groups in Pottsville, the county's largest city (population of around 5,500), Shenandoah, the second largest city and the central hub for the Molly Maguires, Mahanoy City, the site of Wiggans Patch and notorious for its lawlessness, and all of the coal mines in between. Extended families, boarders, and multiple nuclear families populated households in Schuylkill County, including Margaret O'Donnell's at Wiggans Patch, but they were almost always ethnically exclusive. These ethnic divisions were perhaps most prevalent in the mines.

It is important to differentiate between miners and mine laborers, as the nature of their work and their ethnic composition were vastly different. Miners were skilled workers, largely independent, and better paid than the mine laborers. With few exceptions, most miners were Welsh. The much more undesirable position of mine laborer was usually designated to an Irishman, as it entailed unskilled labor, dependency on a superintendent or foreman, more hours, and less pay. Not only did this ethnic divide discourage working class unity, but it also prompted ethnic feuds and gang violence. This advanced stereotypes about Irish immigrants being prone to crime and drunkenness and gave an excuse for business leaders to tighten their grips on their already exploited workers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 49-62.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**A REIGN OF TERROR “OVER THE MOUNTAIN”**  
**THE MOLLY MAGUIRES, 1862-1875**

In the late 1850s, Benjamin Bannan, the Whig editor of the *Miner's Journal* newspaper in Pottsville, was the first to suggest that a secret society called the Molly Maguires were operating in the coal region. Bannan was a major proponent of the “free labor” ideology, which considered social mobility inherent in an expanding economy. He believed that the goal of laborers was to attain economic independence and held that hardworking mine laborers could eventually become miners and ultimately small independent mine operators themselves. His belief was becoming increasingly unrealistic in the industrializing United States, as social mobility on the scale he imagined was simply no longer possible. Unable to accept this change, Bannan clung to his archaic beliefs and used the *Miner's Journal* to lash out at the “drunkenness, ignorance, laziness, moral laxity, idolatry, and political indoctrination” characteristic of Irish mine laborers that prevented them from fulfilling the promises of the “free labor” ideology. According to Bannan, the Molly Maguires encouraged these un-American practices. Even before the Civil War, the *Miner's Journal* deemed a mysterious organization named the Molly Maguires responsible for drunkenness, lack of discipline, and political corruption among Irish mine laborers in the anthracite region. Their association with violence would come during the Civil War, but already

Bannan had secured a superior spot for American-born elites over an unruly and un-American immigrant working class corrupted by a secret conspiracy of Irishmen.<sup>16</sup>

The first major Molly Maguire murder occurred in Audenried, Carbon County, when someone in a crowd shot and killed mine foreman Frank Langdon after he gave a speech in preparation of a Fourth of July celebration in 1862. During his speech, Irish mine workers reportedly “displayed considerable anti-Union sentiment” and a mine laborer named John Kehoe (later “Black Jack” and leader of the Molly Maguires) spat on a flag. He worked for Langdon, who had docked his pay a few weeks prior. Although Kehoe apparently threatened Langdon during the speech, there was little proof that Kehoe was his murderer. Nevertheless, a jury found him guilty, but not until 1878 at the tail end of the high-profile Molly Maguire trials. It was not until the trial, too, that the Mollies were directly associated with the crime.<sup>17</sup>

The hub of Molly Maguire activity, labor activism, and draft resistance during the Civil War was not in Audenried where Langdon was shot, but Cass Township to the southeast, which featured the largest population of Irish in Schuylkill County. There, draft riots in October 1862 attributed to the Molly Maguires required military intervention to put down. The unrest did not stop there. More attacks on mine operators and cases of arson in collieries continued into 1863, and, when a new conscription law caused widespread unrest in March 1863, authorities sent federal troops into Schuylkill County again to enforce the draft. Furthermore, the troops served a secondary purpose of quelling labor activism and striking, which was seen as unpatriotic in the wartime economy of the Union. Mine owners opposed to the formation of local labor unions worked with troops to arrest labor leaders, who also often led draft resistance movements. At

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<sup>16</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 74-80.

<sup>17</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 85.



times, these mine owners fell victim to a form of retributive justice similar to that in northern Ireland against landlords and their agents. For example, the Molly Maguires murdered mine owner George K. Smith in November 1863. Smith had violated the social code of his Irish mine laborers by assisting authorities enforcing conscription, and he also opposed the formation of a labor union. As early as 1862, Catholic Archbishop of Philadelphia James Frederick Wood took a stance on the conscription and labor conflicts of the anthracite region by denouncing draft rioters and union organizers. His support for business concerns in the region against the laboring masses, which were largely Catholic, remained unwavering throughout the Molly Maguire era.<sup>18</sup>

Molly Maguire violence continued through 1867, but the dust settled in 1868. A reformed police force contributed partially to a mostly peaceful 1868 in Schuylkill County (with the exception of the Molly Maguire murder of mine superintendent Alexander Rea), but the major change that discouraged violence was the formation of the Workingmen's Benevolent Association (WBA) in February 1868. For the first time in the Pennsylvania anthracite region, "a labor movement emerged that was peaceful enough to unite mine workers of different craft and ethnic backgrounds in a single, well-organized trade union favoring negotiations and strikes rather than direct, violent action."<sup>19</sup> Unlike the Molly Maguires, the founders of the WBA all hailed from areas of Britain that were heavily industrialized and had experience with trade unionism. Their union was better suited to the economic conditions in Pennsylvania than the tactics of the Mollies, which derived from a specific part of the Irish countryside. Herein lay the fundamental differences between the Molly Maguires and the WBA. While the Mollies were "direct, violent, sporadic, and confined to a specific locality," the WBA strategy was "indirect,

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<sup>18</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 87-101.

<sup>19</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 111.

gradual, peaceful, and systematically organized across the entire anthracite region.”<sup>20</sup> In organizing the WBA, John Siney, its founder and first president, assured audiences that the union did not endorse violence. The union newspaper, *Anthracite Monitor*, also frequently denounced Molly Maguire violence and attempted to remove any association the WBA had with the secret conspiracy.<sup>21</sup>

The primary goal of the WBA was to diminish the oversupply of coal in the market to raise its price to healthy levels. With the increased price of coal in a less saturated market, the workers hoped to receive higher wages. For this reason the WBA launched its first general strike from May 10 to June 9, 1869. The strike enjoyed broad participation from the workers across the southern anthracite region, and it led to the introduction of a sliding pay scale depending on the price of coal with a minimum wage. This was a major victory for the young union, and, by the end of 1869, 30,000 of the 35,000 mine workers in the anthracite region were WBA members. Problems remained, however, because the operators’ organization, the Anthracite Board of Trade (ABT), refused to grant the WBA formal recognition, and ABT wage reductions in the spring of 1870 led to another strike. This set the stage for Franklin Gowen, owner of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, to reach his corporate arms into the affairs of the mining industry. In 1870 Gowen was already a powerful man. His railroad had monopolistic control over the transportation of coal in and out of the lower anthracite region, but the company’s charter, much to Gowen’s dismay, prohibited it from owning coal mines. Using his influence as a railroad

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<sup>20</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 118-119.

tycoon, Gowen settled the 1870 strike with the Gowen Compromise. The ABT agreed to recognize the WBA and both parties agreed on a modified sliding pay scale.<sup>22</sup>

In Schuylkill County, the ABT and the WBA had agreed on coal prices and wages for 1871 based on the Gowen Compromise, but when mine workers went on strike in Luzerne County, the WBA in Schuylkill urged a general strike in solidarity. The strike began on January 10, 1871, placing many small mine operators in Schuylkill in danger of bankruptcy, as it was the third year in a row that the WBA had halted the production of coal. Gowen, looking to further extend his control in the coal region, audaciously boosted transportation prices to record highs in order to prolong the strike and further weaken the struggling small mine operators.<sup>23</sup>

The state of Pennsylvania opened an investigation on Gowen for this, thinking that his exorbitant freight rates were unlawfully high. Fortunately for Gowen, the charter of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad permitted the hike in transportation rates, and he quickly flipped the investigation on the WBA. Gowen was indignant that the leaders of the WBA had the power to stop work and cripple the economy of the coal region, especially after the ABT and WBA had agreed on wage levels. In his anti-union tirade, Gowen announced:

There never, since the middle ages, existed a tyranny like this [WBA] on the face of God's earth. There has never been, in the most despotic government in the world, such a tyranny, before which the poor laboring man has to crouch like a whipped spaniel before the lash, and dare not say that his soul is his own.<sup>24</sup>

Gowen insisted that, should it have been decided via secret ballot, nearly all the coal laborers of Schuylkill County would have preferred to stay at work.

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<sup>22</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 115, 135-139.

<sup>23</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 139-142.

<sup>24</sup> Pennsylvania Senate, Committee on the Judiciary General, *Report of the Committee on the Judiciary General of the Senate of Pennsylvania, in Relation to the Anthracite Coal Difficulties with Accompanying Testimony* (1871), 19.

So why had the workers not disobeyed the order to strike? Gowen had this to say:

There is an association which votes in secret, at night, that men's lives shall be taken, and that they shall be shot before their wives, murdered in cold blood, for daring to work against the order...the only men who are shot are the men who dare to disobey the mandates of the Workingmen's Benevolent Association.<sup>25</sup>

He was, of course, referring to the Molly Maguires as an informal, but very real, militant arm of the WBA. Over the next few years, Gowen would increasingly lump the WBA, which always denounced violence, with the Molly Maguires in an effort to destroy both in his path to total control over the coal region. In this way, he set a precedent for opponents of the WFM thirty years later, who defeated the union by associating it with loosely related labor violence in Idaho and Colorado.

Immediately after his triumph in the investigation, in which he embarrassed the WBA, Gowen founded the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company (PRCI), a coal-owning subsidiary of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. Taking advantage of the small mine operators he forced into bankruptcy by artificially prolonging the January 1871 strike into April, Gowen began purchasing vast amounts of land and collieries. By the end of 1871, the PRCI owned 65,000 acres of coal land. By 1874 that number had increased to 100,000 acres, and Gowen had succeeded in destroying small-scale free enterprise in the southern coal region. Gowen took control of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad in 1869. It took him less than five years to solidify his monopoly on coal production and transportation in the lower anthracite region.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pennsylvania Senate, Committee on the Judiciary General, *Report of the Committee* (1871), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 148.

After a period of relative stability and peace ushered in by the formation of the WBA, by 1873 rumors swirled that the Molly Maguires were active again. Newspapers like Bannan's *Miner's Journal* reported that members of the Irish secret society had beaten Schuylkill County mine superintendents, derailed railroad cars, and set fires in coal mines. Seeking to destroy the Mollies once and for all and to demonstrate the ability of corporate power to bring about peace and prosperity in the coal region, Gowen hired Allan Pinkerton, the American detective whose agency gained renown during the Civil War, to investigate. In January 1874, James McParlan, a Pinkerton agent, arrived in Shenandoah, Schuylkill County as an undercover mine laborer. He soon infiltrated the local branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), an Irish fraternal organization whose lodges were often used as Molly Maguire meeting places, and, being literate, which was something of an anomaly among the coal workers, he became the secretary of the Shenandoah branch of the AOH in July 1874. Over the next two years, McParlan became initiated into the Molly Maguires and observed and even participated in several Molly Maguire crimes. With the ample evidence he gathered, McParlan served as the chief witness for the prosecution of the Molly Maguires in 1876.<sup>27</sup>

Violence continued to escalate in 1874. A brawl between rival Irish and Welsh fire departments in Mahanoy City on October 31 left the mayor, George Major, dead. The accused murderer was Daniel Dougherty, a member of the AOH, which many automatically associated with the Molly Maguires. This upsurge of violence, along with the disorder created by a national economic depression in 1873, enabled Gowen and many newspapers to label all striking mine laborers and labor activists as terrorists, "obliterating the very real differences in ideology and

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<sup>27</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 152-155.

strategy that had always separated Molly Maguireism from the trade union leaders.”<sup>28</sup> The blurred lines between peaceful labor activism and Molly Maguireism played right into Gowen’s strategy of construing the WBA and the Mollies as one in the same in an effort to destroy both. He prepared for a final showdown against them and stockpiled coal in anticipation for a final strike that he hoped would destroy the union.

To provoke the strike, Gowen introduced massive wage cuts to the laborers for the beginning of 1875 that he claimed were non-negotiable. Even Benjamin Bannan’s *Miner’s Journal*, which, despite its name, was traditionally critical of organized labor, deemed the wages unfairly low. Lehigh and Schuylkill County workers began what became known as the Long Strike in January 1875. In February and March, Molly Maguires were blamed for mine shaft arson, railroad sabotage, and the intimidation of blacklegs (workers refusing to strike). Although the WBA publicly denounced such violence, Gowen, and many others, began to associate the Mollies with the trade union. The Molly Maguires seemed to be using violence as a tactic to aid the WBA in their strike. As the spring became summer and Gowen showed no signs of backing down, the strike began to break in June 1875. Operators began to open their mines again, and, after six months of no pay in the midst of a national economic depression, most workers could not hold out any longer. Stubborn strikers remained in coal towns between Shenandoah and Mahanoy City, but state militia and the Coal & Iron Police, Gowen’s newly formed private police force headed by Captain Robert J. Linden, kept collieries open and prevented riots from disturbing the workplace. WBA leadership continued, as always, to condemn violence whenever it occurred, but it acknowledged that it had lost control over some of the more radical members of the rank-and-file. The union sought a compromise settlement with Gowen, but the tycoon

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<sup>28</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 165-167.

refused to meet with them. In mid-June, the WBA urged its starving men to accept the best wages they could get and return to work. By July 1, 1875, the Long Strike was over, and the WBA never recovered. Gowen's power over the southern coal region was secure, and coal workers would not have union representation until the emergence of the United Mine Workers at the end of the century.<sup>29</sup>

Benjamin Bannan's *Miner's Journal* recounted the end of the Long Strike in dramatic fashion, concluding, "The war between Capital and Labor is ended, and Labor is not victor. It is not even the drawn battle signified by compromise: it is an unconditional surrender, a capitulation of all the army, and relinquishment of all the claim for which it fought." A miner's ballad captured the feeling of raw defeat and desperation following the strike: "Well, we've been beaten, beaten all to smash, And now, sir, we've begun to feel the lash, As wielded by a gigantic corporation, which runs the Commonwealth and ruins the nation." It was a dark time for coal workers in the anthracite region. Enjoying his domination over the production, transportation, and distribution of coal in the lower anthracite region, Gowen continued to decrease wages over the coming years.<sup>30</sup>

But it was not yet a total victory for the wily robber baron. Because he associated the WBA with the Molly Maguires, Gowen's victory over labor required the final defeat of the Mollies, and their activity only increased after the fall of the union. In fact, the most concentrated period of Molly Maguire violence occurred in the three months following the Long Strike. Assassinations of mine officials and public authority figures during this time indicate that the Mollies were trying to fill in the vacuum of the collapsed trade union. Without the WBA, the

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<sup>29</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 171-180; Dubofsky, *Industrialism*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 180-181.

retributive justice characteristic of the Molly Maguires was the only form of labor activism left for the laborers in the coal region. Kenny wrote that the Mollies “briefly and violently became the unofficial voice of labor in the lower anthracite region.”<sup>31</sup> August 14, 1875, became known as Bloody Saturday, because on that day the Molly Maguires committed three separate murders in Schuylkill County. The Coal & Iron Police were also failing to incarcerate the Molly Maguire murderers. There was a degree of reciprocity and cooperation among the Mollies, who usually met at AOH lodges and taverns around Schuylkill County. Men were chosen to commit murders in towns where they were not from so that witnesses could not recognize them, and their tactics were working.<sup>32</sup> In the land “over the mountain,” as the citizens of Pottsville called the less populated and more rugged region to their immediate north, the Mollies were at their height.

The double murder of Thomas Sanger and William Uren reflects the tactics of the Molly Maguires, and the perpetrators would become the targets of the Wiggans Patch Massacre. For these reasons it deserves a closer look. In 1887, Allan Pinkerton wrote a highly sensationalized account of the Molly Maguires based on the testimony of his undercover agent, James McParlan. It provided rich detail about the murders of Sanger and Uren and, despite claims of Pinkerton’s book being semi fictional, matches newspaper accounts.

James McParlan woke up late on Monday August 30, 1875, in the boardinghouse of a certain Mrs. Cooney in Shenandoah after a heavy night of drinking. The undercover agent was surprised to discover that Mike Doyle, a Molly Maguire, was sharing his bed. The Smith and Wesson revolver on the wash-stand next to Doyle also alarmed McParlan, as Doyle did not previously have a weapon. After the agent roused him, Doyle revealed that the revolver had been

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<sup>31</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 200.

<sup>32</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 183-197.



a gift from fellow Molly Maguire Ned Monaghan for the “big job at hand.” This was the planned murder of Thomas Sanger, mining boss at Heaton & Co. Colliery in Raven Run, Schuylkill County. Doyle had been assigned the job with the brothers James and Charles O’Donnell, Charles McAllister, and Thomas Munley. Sanger had been a boss at Heaton & Co. for three years. He received a threatening coffin notice from the Molly Maguires in 1874 but had figured by this time the anger of his enemies was forgotten or appeased. He was wrong. Before McParlan had a chance to slip out and send a telegraph warning the Pinkertons and the Coal & Iron Police of the impending murder, he, along with several Mollies, were on their way through the streets of Shenandoah to meet the other assigned murderers, who were with James McAllister, brother of Charles. The party retired to the residence of Muff Lawler, another Molly Maguire, that night, and from there the murderers of Sanger departed for Raven Run early the next morning. McParlan hastily sent a letter to Benjamin Franklin, a Pinkerton superintendent based in, of course, Philadelphia, but his warning came too late.<sup>33</sup>

Hiram Beninger, a carpenter connected to the Heaton & Co. colliery at Raven Run, walked to work, as usual, at 6:00 in the morning on September 1, 1875. On his way he noticed two strangers with hats on and collars turned up to protect from the wind. John Nicolls, another worker at the mine, noticed the same two strangers and three others along the road leading to the colliery. Both witnesses assumed the strangers to be travelers seeking work, as it was not uncommon to see them arrive early in the morning to apply for jobs, but these were the same five

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<sup>33</sup> Allan Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives* (New York: G.W. Carleton, 1887), 428-433.

Molly Maguires with whom McParlan had just stayed at Muff Lawler's residence. They were patiently waiting for their victim to come to work.<sup>34</sup>

Not an hour after Beninger and Nicolls observed the strangers, Thomas Sanger said goodbye to his wife at their garden gate and set off to work with his friend William Uren. Uren was a miner at Heaton & Co. and a close friend of Sanger, who he also boarded with.<sup>35</sup> As the pair walked into work, the five Molly Maguires stopped them on the road. One of them asked for work, and, after being rejected, the assassins open-fired on Sanger and Uren. Sanger, upon the first volley, received bullets in his forearm and foot. He staggered but began to run back to his house, with one Molly in pursuit. Growing weak from his wounds, Sanger made for Mr. Wewell's house, a Raven Run resident he was friendly with. As he dragged himself up the steps to the back door, his pursuer shot him once more in the groin before fleeing. Mr. and Mrs. Wewell rushed out to tend to the dying Sanger, and other townsfolk alerted his wife. The mine boss hardly lived long enough to say goodbye to her before he expired.<sup>36</sup> Uren, who was also shot in the groin, slipped in and out of consciousness before dying the next day. Neither victim was coherent long enough to give an account of the attack.

Around one hundred witnesses to the crime, however, were present in and around the colliery. Dumbfounded by the sudden violence, most failed to pursue the fleeing Molly Maguires. Robert Heaton, the proprietor of the colliery, bravely pursued the fleeing murderers and exchanged fire with them using his own revolver. No one was hit as the murderers fled up a mountain and into thick woods to safety. Heaton organized a pursuing party and offered a \$1000

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<sup>34</sup> Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires*, 433-434.

<sup>35</sup> Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires*, 441.

<sup>36</sup> *The Daily Miner's Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 3 September 1875.

reward for the arrest of the murderers, but they managed to escape.<sup>37</sup> The murderers made it through the woods and all the way back to the outskirts of Shenandoah to the residence of Muff Lawler, where McParlan was still staying. Around 8:00 am, they barreled into the house, “covered with dust and perspiration.” There, after changing clothes to escape detection and rehydrating after their bold escape, the murderers exchanged boasts and shared stories of the murder with the mortified undercover agent.<sup>38</sup>

In the following days, newspapers both local and national had much to say on the double murder. Following the coroner’s verdict, the *Miner’s Journal* reported with frustration:

By heavens, it seems pitiful that this may be the last legal action in these premises. The more one contemplates all the circumstances of this outrage the more infernal does it seem. That two good citizens should be so coolly and foully murdered in the very presence of a hundred men, and the murderers escape, is in very truth a damnable disgrace.<sup>39</sup>

Bannan’s newspaper was clear about the identity of the suspected murderers, calling them “an organized secret body of assassins ... determined to obtain control of affairs here in the mining business,” on a “reign of terror and bloodshed.”<sup>40</sup> No longer an organization that merely encouraged heavy drinking and lethargy, the Molly Maguires were being characterized as a highly organized plot of cold-blooded murderers with the intention of taking power in the anthracite region.

Outrage at the Molly Maguires spread nationally, and newspapers from West Virginia, Louisiana, Tennessee, Virginia, Missouri, Texas, and more all reported on the murders of Sanger

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<sup>37</sup> *The Daily Miner’s Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 2 September 1875.

<sup>38</sup> Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires*, 440.

<sup>39</sup> *The Daily Miner’s Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 4 September 1875.

<sup>40</sup> *The Daily Miner’s Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 2 September 1875.

and Uren. A *New York Herald* article called it a “cool and audacious butchery.” The *Cincinnati Daily Star* reported that the Molly Maguires were on a “rampage” through the coal region. All the way in Nevada, the *Carson Daily Appeal* announced, “The Mollie Maguires (secret miners’ association) in Pennsylvania are again on the war path” and “committing outrages.” The newspapers were creating a national narrative of the Molly Maguires. Whereas in reality their targets were chosen primarily because of personal grievances for violating an unwritten social code, the newspapers made the Molly Maguires seem like a cohesive terrorist organization bent on taking control of the entire coal region.<sup>41</sup>

There is no evidence that the Mollies had these higher goals, and, although it is undeniable that the Molly Maguires committed several murders, the reported violence was exaggerated. The newspapers also failed to give due attention to violent acts committed against the Molly Maguires, often by Welsh gangs. One Welshman in particular, “Bully Bill” Thomas, was involved in the shootout that killed George Major and another on Black Saturday, but, although he assaulted several Irishmen, he was never convicted for any crime. In fact, he worked with Gowen’s Coal & Iron Police to gather evidence against the Molly Maguires.<sup>42</sup> Locally and nationally, the newspapers made the Molly Maguires an irredeemable enemy on an exaggerated reign of terror through the anthracite region in an Irish conquest for control. Nothing yet had stopped this great evil, however embellished, but the people were about to fight back.

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<sup>41</sup> *New York Herald* (New York, NY), 4 September 1875; *Cincinnati Daily Star* (Cincinnati, OH), 18 September 1875; *Carson Daily Appeal* (Carson City, NV), 19 September 1875.

<sup>42</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 192.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **THE “SHOOTING BUSINESS” BROUGHT TO THE MOLLIES**

**DECEMBER 10, 1875**

Aggrandized as the Molly Maguire myth was becoming, the newspapers correctly observed that the law had not yet stopped the Molly Maguires and neither had Gowen’s private Coal & Iron Police. Some citizens in the coal region considered taking matters into their own hands. After the Molly Maguires murdered Benjamin Yost, a policeman, in Tamaqua in July 1875, several men of the town formed a vigilante committee to hunt his killers, and they appealed to the Pinkerton offices in Philadelphia for assistance. Although they were unsuccessful, Allan Pinkerton liked the idea of vigilante justice in response to Molly Maguire attacks. The Pinkertons had experience working with vigilante committees. In 1868, they cooperated with vigilantes in the lynching of nine members of the Reno gang in Indiana. Reflecting on this, Allan Pinkerton wrote to his close friend and associate George Bangs on August 29, 1875, just days before the murders of Sanger and Uren.

If Linden [Captain of the Coal & Iron Police] can get up a vigilance [sic.] committee that can be relied upon, do so. When M.M’s [Molly Maguires] meet, then surround and deal summarily with them. Get off quietly. All should be securely masked...the M.M’s are a species of Thugs...The only way then to pursue that I can see is to treat them in the same manner as the Reno’s were treated in Seymour, Indiana. After they were done away with, the people

improved wonderfully and now Seymour is quite a town...pounce upon the M.M's...take the fearful responsibility and disperse.<sup>43</sup>

This was a turning point in the Pinkerton investigation of the Molly Maguires. The detectives now deemed it more effective to bypass the authorities and state institutions of justice in favor of extra-legal measures taken by private citizens. The Pinkertons were prepared to facilitate the creation of vigilante committees and respond to Molly Maguire violence with more violence. Pinkerton's idea echoed popular sentiment in the coal region.

Following the murders of Sanger and Uren, local newspapers were explicit in calling for vigilante committees. The *Shenandoah Herald* plainly stated that the institutions of the law were powerless against the Molly Maguires and that it was time to "take the law in our own hands and drive the men who are known to be at the bottom of the murders out of the district." The strongly worded call to action continued:

The county north of the Broad Mountain is too small to contain both the respectable portion of the community and this band of assassins. One or the other must leave. Who shall it be? In a single week a Vigilance Committee could make things so hot here that we will never be troubled with them again. Let the work commence. Do not delay until another good citizen is made a victim at their bloody hands.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, the *Miner's Journal* observed that the people of Schuylkill County were "getting ripe for the formation of vigilance committees" and warned "the ruffians that fall in their path" of their impending demise.<sup>45</sup> Two of the most widely read newspapers in the anthracite region made no attempt to hide their wishes for bloody reprisal against the Molly Maguires. Rather, they urged their readers to take up the responsibility, illegal and dangerous as it was, to take up arms

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<sup>43</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 206.

<sup>44</sup> *The Daily Miner's Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 2 September 1875 (quoting the *Shenandoah Herald*).

<sup>45</sup> *The Daily Miner's Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 3 September 1875.

against the so-called terrorists and destroy the Molly Maguires once and for all. The newspapers contributed to the stereotypes Schuylkill County carried about being the “Wild West” of Pennsylvania. Soon, popularly supported vigilante gangs would be having gunfights with the Molly Maguires in the lawless land “over the mountain.”

Just days after the murders of Sanger and Uren, Thomas Foster, editor of the *Shenandoah Herald* and outspoken proponent of the formation of vigilante committees, received a coffin notice from the Molly Maguires. On the top of the note was a skull and crossbones. It read, “Mr. Edtore wie wil give ye 24 hurse to go to the divil out this ye son A Bitch R. we wil send ye after gomer James and Mr. [illegible, probably Sanger] and som more Big Bug with ye.” It was signed “P. Molley” and featured a threatening postscript: “We aint done Shooting yet.” There was a picture of a gun printed on the bottom of the note. Unyielding, Foster allowed the coffin notice to be printed in an article in the *Miner’s Journal*. The same article quoted his response:

It is all folly and waste of ink and paper to send us coffin notices such as the above. We have to laugh when we read the...paragraph – ‘we aint done shooting yet.’ To be sure we are not. But we are willing to bet that the one-sided feature of the shooting business is now and forever ended.<sup>46</sup>

Although the “shooting business” was never entirely one-sided as Foster contended, considering the violence committed against the Molly Maguires and other Irish coal laborers by predominantly Welsh gangs, Pinkerton efforts fulfilled the editor’s threat to the Mollies. Allan Pinkerton had decided that it was time to come out in support of vigilante justice against the Molly Maguires rather than continue to work within the framework of the law.

Soon after the murders of Sanger and Uren, the Pinkertons, using the information gathered from McParlan, released a document listing the names, addresses, and AOH ranks of

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<sup>46</sup> *The Daily Miner’s Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 6 September 1875.

suspects in various murders committed in 1875 by the Molly Maguires. It stood as an open invitation for vigilantes to take the law into their own hands, and bring the “shooting business” to the very homes of the Molly Maguires. The list was a major catalyst in the downfall of the Mollies, and Allan Pinkerton proudly called it “the prelude of the thunderbolt which was soon to cast consternation into the hearts of the leaders of the society [Molly Maguires].”<sup>47</sup> It included James O’Donnell, Charles O’Donnell, Thomas Munley, Charles McAllister, and Mike Doyle as the suspected murderers of Sanger and Uren. The list said the O’Donnell brothers and Charles McAllister lived at Margaret O’Donnell’s boardinghouse in Wiggans Patch, “a small mine patch near Mahanoy City.”<sup>48</sup> With all of this information, all the vigilante committee had to do was decide when to strike. The ever-sensational Allan Pinkerton proclaimed, “Their [the Mollies] long day of murder had set in crimson, and the day of their abnegation and shame was at the dawn.”<sup>49</sup>

Months went by, however, before the vigilante committee made their retaliatory attack at Wiggans Patch. One early historian of the Molly Maguires observed that, although the McAllister’s and the O’Donnell’s were suspected of the crime, “it was beginning to be believed that the guilty parties would entirely escape punishment.”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the vigilantes used this time to prepare their carefully coordinated attack, receive more direction from the Pinkertons, and plan their escape. Whatever the case, they decided to bring the “shooting business” to the Molly

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<sup>47</sup> Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires*, 455.

<sup>48</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 207.

<sup>49</sup> Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires*, 455.

<sup>50</sup> F.P. Dewees, *The Molly Maguires: The Origin, Growth, and Character of the Organization* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1877), 237.



Maguires in its fullest and deadliest manifestation to date in the early morning hours of December 10, 1875 at Margaret O'Donnell's boardinghouse in Wiggans Patch, just west of Mahanoy City.

It was but another chapter in a notoriously tumultuous area of the Pennsylvania anthracite region. The citizens of Pottsville, the largest city in Schuylkill County, referred to Mahanoy City and its surrounding communities as "the land over the mountain." The Broad Mountain stood higher than the other peaks north of Pottsville, and stories swirled through the city about the crimes and outrages, usually committed by the Molly Maguires, in and around Mahanoy City north of the mountain.<sup>51</sup> Main Street of Mahanoy City featured a shootout on October 1874 that killed the chief burgess (mayor) George Major and another on Bloody Saturday less than a year later.

Crimes "over the mountain" continued to fill the pages of the *Miner's Journal* and similar local newspapers at the time of the Wiggans Patch Massacre. In the same weekly issue of the *Miner's Journal* that reported on Wiggans Patch, there was an article on an attempted murder at a tavern in nearby Silver Creek and another on a fight between two mine laborers in which one was violently assaulted with a shovel. These crimes were usually blamed on drunkenness, another major theme in the newspaper accounts. Four days after the Wiggans Patch Massacre, an article reported that a couple of men were sharing a bottle of whiskey in the streets as children were passing to go to school. The column ended mockingly: "Of course they were from that blessed Mahanoy."<sup>52</sup> Word of the lawlessness of Mahanoy City spread beyond the anthracite

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<sup>51</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 50-52.

<sup>52</sup> *Miner's Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 17 December 1875.

region. An article in New York's *The Sun* following the Wiggans Patch Massacre painted a vivid picture of what life was like "over the mountain."

[Mahanoy City is] a town filled with idle, desperate men. To intensify the evil, Mahoney [sic.] City is so heavily stocked with cheap and bad liquor that any man can get drunk and crazy with less money than would be necessary to buy a cup of coffee in a first class New York restaurant. The town has about seven thousand inhabitants, and more than one hundred liquor stores.<sup>53</sup>

Hyperbolic as this article may be, the press gave Mahanoy City and the surrounding area ample attention during the Molly Maguire era, as it established a fitting setting as unruly as the murder gang supposedly terrorizing the region.

Wiggans Patch was one of dozens of patches surrounding Mahanoy City in the late nineteenth century. Patches were mining villages, and they featured several small houses, often connected, near a colliery where the male residents usually worked. The coal company owned the houses in the patch and often opened company stores among the houses where the laborers could purchase tools, clothes, food, tobacco, and other supplies on credit that was docked from their wages.<sup>54</sup> Wiggans Patch was associated with the Bear Run Colliery west of Mahanoy City and named after its original proprietor, George Wiggans.<sup>55</sup>

Margaret O'Donnell, an elderly widow, owned the boardinghouse in Wiggans Patch where the Pinkertons directed the vigilante committee in their hunt for the murderers of Sanger and Uren. The detective agency did not lead the avengers astray. Although Munley and Doyle

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<sup>53</sup> *The Sun* (New York, NY), 14 December 1875.

<sup>54</sup> Breandán Mac Suibhne, "'Them Poor Irish Lads' in Pennsylvania," *Dublin Review of Books* 104 (October 2018).

<sup>55</sup> "Suffolk, Saint Nicholas, Mahanoy Township, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, USA," *Planet Suffolk* online, accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.planetsuffolk.com/suffolkpennsylvania.htm>

lived elsewhere, the alleged murderers Charles McAllister and James and Charles O'Donnell (sons of Margaret O'Donnell) did indeed reside in the boardinghouse, but James was absent on the fateful night of December 10. There were also four paying boarders in the household: Tom Murphy, John Purcell, James Blair, and James McAllister, the brother of Charles. Charles McAllister's wife, Ellen, who was the daughter of Margaret O'Donnell, lived with him and their infant son, John, on the first floor of the house. At the time of the Massacre, Ellen was late in pregnancy, and the young couple anticipated the birth of their second child soon. The rest of the household lived upstairs in three rooms. Margaret O'Donnell had one, Tom Murphy, who was also elderly, had another, and the boarders shared another larger room. With three suspected murderers of Sanger and Uren living there, the house at Wiggans Patch carried a strong affiliation with the Molly Maguires. Furthermore, Margaret O'Donnell's second daughter, Mary Anne, was the wife of John "Black Jack" Kehoe, Schuylkill County delegate of the AOH and leader of the Molly Maguires, but the couple did not live there.<sup>56</sup>

The residents of Margaret O'Donnell's boardinghouse were all sleeping soundly between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning on December 10, 1875. It was during these late hours of night that a party of vigilantes entered Wiggans Patch to avenge the murders of Sanger and Uren. Different newspapers report different numbers, but there were between thirty and fifty armed men who entered the village from the direction of Gilberton, a town west of Wiggans Patch. According to the testimonies of the victims, some wore oilcloth coats and carried lanterns to show them the way through the dark colliery town. Most wore masks to conceal their identities.<sup>57</sup> Evidently, whether it was because of the dark, incorrect Pinkerton directions, or the one hundred similarly

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<sup>56</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 207.

<sup>57</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

looking houses in Wiggans Patch, the raiders first knocked on the door of the wrong residence.<sup>58</sup> Realizing their mistake, the vigilantes hastily withdrew and soon identified Margaret O'Donnell's boardinghouse.

Hoping to find the murderers of Sanger and Uren inside, "the majority of them spread themselves over what they supposed to be the most advantageous positions, while six or seven of their number broke in the back door of Margaret O'Donnell's house."<sup>59</sup> This small contingent of assailants, wielding lanterns and revolvers, smashed their way through the door and found themselves in the kitchen. Across the kitchen from the broken-in back door was the bedroom of pregnant Ellen McAllister, her son John, and her husband, Charles McAllister, one of the suspected Molly Maguire murderers of Sanger and Uren. The sound of the door breaking in interrupted the peaceful sleep of the young family, and Charles, immediately realizing what was going on, leapt out of bed to hide in the cellar, which could be accessed from the bedroom. He told Ellen and his terrified infant son to lie still in bed, and he opened the doorway to the cellar.

Charles was still peeking out from his hiding spot to observe his heavily pregnant wife ignore his advice, rise from the bed, and stumble into the kitchen in her nightclothes, where the raiders were now gathering. It was a grave mistake. The *Shenandoah Herald* reported, "Before she had time to speak, one of the parties fired, the ball entering the nipple of her right breast."<sup>60</sup> Charles McAllister would testify that after the gunshot, in disbelief, Ellen stammered, "I'm shot," before she tumbled backwards and fell in the bedroom doorway so that half of her body was in the kitchen and half in the bedroom. Seeing his innocent wife crumble onto the ground

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<sup>58</sup> *The Sun* (New York, NY), 14 December 1875.

<sup>59</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>60</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

and paying no heed to young John, Charles closed the cellar door and fled down the stairs. Hearing this, one of the vigilantes fired a shot after him that went through the wall but did not hit anyone. The cellar connected the boardinghouse with the house next door, and Charles McAllister was able to hide safely in the shared cellar for the remainder of the episode.<sup>61</sup>

Upstairs, Margaret O'Donnell also woke up upon hearing the back door breaking in. Like her daughter Ellen, she got out of bed to investigate what had happened, although the next morning she claimed that she had thought the commotion was caused by "Old [Tom] Murphy who had got up to light his pipe and had fallen downstairs."<sup>62</sup> At her bedroom doorway, she met two of the raiders who had led the charge upstairs in the search for the other wanted Molly Maguires. According to the *Miner's Journal*, "one of the party pointed a revolver at her head and would have shot her, but for the interference of another of the party, who dealt the widow a blow on the head with his revolver, felling her to the floor."<sup>63</sup> The man who clubbed her "was not tall but stout, had whiskers, was middle aged and wore an overcoat."<sup>64</sup> He was unique among the vigilantes in that he did not wear a mask, and Margaret O'Donnell later identified him as Frank Wenrich, butcher of Mahanoy City, the only suspect investigated for the Wiggans Patch Massacre. The wounded widow fell to her bedroom floor, and her attacker, whether it was Wenrich or someone else, closed the door behind her.

After the assault on Margaret O'Donnell, most of the vigilantes entered the room where her Molly Maguire son Charles O'Donnell, James McAllister (brother of Charles, who at this

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<sup>61</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>62</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>63</sup> *Miner's Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 17 December 1875.

<sup>64</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

point was hiding safely in the cellar next door), John Purcell, and James Blair slept. One of them, however, burst into the room of Tom Murphy, who was around 65 years old, and pointed a gun at him. He was awake but had not left his bed. Another vigilante with a lantern followed him, but, when he shined the light on the old man and realized that he was not one of the Molly Maguires they were looking for, the masked pair exited the room to help the others.<sup>65</sup>

When they entered the final room upstairs, the raiding party found the four boarders still confused in their beds, and they quickly overcame them. The vigilantes tied John Purcell, who was not dressed, to his bedpost despite his loud protests that he would go outside with them if they allowed him to put some clothes on. Then, the raiders bound the other three, Charles O'Donnell, James McAllister, and James Blair, with ropes around their necks before leading them downstairs and out of the house through the door they had broken in just minutes before, passing the body of Ellen McAllister. Margaret O'Donnell, who had not lost consciousness from the blow she received, heard her son go willingly downstairs with the vigilantes, saying, "I never did anything to be afraid of."<sup>66</sup> These would be the last words she heard uttered from her nineteen-year-old son, the only Molly Maguire suspected of murdering Sanger and Uren that the vigilantes were able to capture.

After being wrestled outside the house and onto the road, the vigilantes asked for the names of the three men who they had tied up, and Charles O'Donnell, James McAllister, and James Blair complied. Upon discovering the identity of Blair, who was not associated with the Molly Maguires, the vigilantes let him loose and he fled the scene. Although the raiders were indeed looking for Charles O'Donnell, James McAllister was not on the Pinkerton list of

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<sup>65</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>66</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

suspected murderers, but it appeared that the vigilantes were going to lynch both of them. Panicking, both men struggled free of the ropes that bound them and attempted to escape. The vigilantes fired a volley of shots after them before they could reach the other side of the road. McAllister was shot in the back of the shoulder but remained on his feet and was able to hide in the woods nearby until the vigilantes left. He survived the bullet wound. Charles O'Donnell was not so lucky. A bullet fired in the first volley felled him on the other side of the road near a house owned by the Polander family.<sup>67</sup> The vigilantes then ran up to his prostrate body and fired anywhere from fourteen to twenty-five bullets into him, including one through the mouth, which would have killed him instantly if he was not already dead.<sup>68</sup> They then set O'Donnell's clothes on fire and left in the direction from which they came.<sup>69</sup>

Despite her head wound, Margaret O'Donnell joined "Old Tom" Murphy (and probably John Purcell, but his testimony was not published) after the vigilantes had dispersed and descended the stairs to assess the damage. Downstairs, she saw her daughter Ellen lying on her back with her head propped up on her bedroom door. Blood was running from her breast, and she was clearly dead. John McAllister, her infant son, was weeping over his mother and unborn sibling. Through the window, the survivors saw the body of Charles O'Donnell lying across the street in front of the Polander's house. His clothes were still burning.<sup>70</sup>

In the following hours, James Blair, Charles McAllister, and the wounded James McAllister probably made their way back to the house. The neighbors carefully lifted the burnt

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<sup>67</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>68</sup> *The Sun* (New York, NY), 14 December 1875.

<sup>69</sup> *Miner's Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 17 December 1875.

<sup>70</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

and lifeless body of Charles O'Donnell and brought him back into the house and laid him on the floor of the bedroom on the first floor. Above him, they placed Ellen McAllister, his sister, on the bed where she had slept peacefully with her husband and son just hours before.<sup>71</sup> Around this time, the survivors of the Wiggans Patch Massacre discovered a note scrawled on a piece of paper by the vigilantes that was left near the burning body of Charles O'Donnell. It read: "You are the murderers of Uren and Sanger."<sup>72</sup> The motive of the vigilantes was clear. They intended on avenging the murder of Sanger and Uren, and the Pinkertons directed them to the house of the suspected murderers based on the information gathered by McParlan, their undercover agent. Although the vigilantes killed Charles O'Donnell in retribution, they also murdered a pregnant woman and wounded her equally innocent elderly mother.

James McParlan heard the news of the Wiggans Patch Massacre around 8:00 a.m. on December 10, five or six hours after the crime. Outraged, he immediately wrote to Benjamin Franklin, the Philadelphia superintendent for Allan Pinkerton. He lamented the fact that his inside information was given to vigilantes rather than the authorities, and he was disturbed at the murder of Ellen McAllister.

I wake up this morning to find that I am the murderer of Mrs. McAllister. What had a woman to do with the case – did the Sleepers [Molly Maguires] in their worst time shoot down women? If I was not here the Vigilance Committee would not know who was guilty [of the Sanger and Uren murders] and when I find them shooting women in their thirst for blood I hereby tender my resignation to take effect as soon as this message is received. It is not cowardice that makes me resign but just let them have it now...I am not going to be an accessory to the murder of women and children.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>72</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 208.

<sup>73</sup> James D. Horan and Howard Swiggett, *The Pinkerton Story* (Putnam, 1951), 152.



Although Franklin later persuaded McParlan to remain in his position, the agent's letter is important in uncovering the truth of the Wiggans Patch Massacre, as it shows that the Pinkertons had serious influence over the vigilante committee. Without the direct support of the detective agency, the crime would have never happened. More simply, the letter further proves that the perpetrators of the Wiggans Patch Massacre were indeed vigilantes on a mission to avenge the murders of Sanger and Uren. Although this may seem obvious, the identity of the perpetrators and thus the nature of the crime was immediately a subject of debate. Controversies and blatant misinformation concerning the Wiggans Patch Massacre swirled in national newspapers and published histories for years to come.

Rumors started soon after sunrise on December 10, 1875, outside of Margaret O'Donnell's boardinghouse in Wiggans Patch. Standing in the road where Charles O'Donnell had been brutally murdered, groups of townspeople congregated and "talked in subdued voices" about the events that unfolded the previous night.<sup>74</sup> The local coroner, Dr. Phaon Hermany, pushed his way through the crowd of "several hundred people" flanked by a reporter from the *Shenandoah Herald* and a jury for the coroner's verdict.<sup>75</sup> Entering the house and clearing it of curious onlookers admitted by Margaret O'Donnell, he examined the bodies of the victims. Ellen McAllister was lying on her bed. The reporter described her as "a young woman of about twenty-four years of age, [who] looked as peaceful as if sleep instead of death were upon her, and the mark of the bullet was in such a position as not to be more than noticeable." On the floor below Ellen lay the mutilated body of her younger brother, Charles O'Donnell. The following is the *Shenandoah Herald's* description of his gruesome corpse.

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<sup>74</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>75</sup> *Pottsville Standard* (Pottsville, PA), 11 December 1875.

The head, which had received no less than fifteen bullets and was in a shockingly crushed condition, was tied up in a white cloth. From the hips to the chin the body was crisped, there being no less than the marks of ten balls to be seen, and the fire-arms must have been held in such close proximity that the powder had actually roasted the flesh.<sup>76</sup>

Needless to say, it did not take long for Dr. Hermany and the jury to confirm that both victims died of gunshot wounds.

The coroner then began the first of several examinations of Margaret O'Donnell. The mother of the two victims and wounded herself (she had a black eye from being clubbed with a revolver) broke into fits of sobbing that interrupted her testimony, but she uncovered most of the details included in the local coverage of the massacre in the coming days. At one point during this initial examination, her son-in-law "Black Jack" Kehoe, alleged leader of the Molly Maguires, strode into the bedroom to pay his respects to the dead. After kissing the faces of the victims, Kehoe asked Dr. Hermany to stop the questioning. Ignoring him, the coroner continued the examination, but when he asked Margaret O'Donnell if she recognized any of the murderers, Kehoe interjected loudly and ordered her not to answer the question. In response, the authorities escorted "Black Jack" out of the house, and Margaret O'Donnell said she did not recognize any of the raiders. The examination continued with "Old Tom" Murphy, but a couple of minutes into his testimony Kehoe stormed in again and demanded that the *Shenandoah Herald* reporter leave. The reporter refused (for which he was praised in the next day's issue), and, defeated, Kehoe departed.<sup>77</sup>

Later that morning, as Dr. Hermany was finishing the coroner's examination with the testimony of Charles McAllister, who had emerged unscathed from the shared cellar beneath the

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<sup>76</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>77</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

boardinghouse and the adjacent residence, Kehoe gained audience with Justice Michael Groody and claimed that Frank Wenrich, a Mahanoy City butcher, was the man who clubbed Mrs. O'Donnell and was among the shooters of Charles O'Donnell and Ellen McAllister. A borough constable and a member of the Coal & Iron Police arrested Wenrich, and they brought him before Justice Groody at 3:00 p.m. on December 10, about twelve hours after the crime. Also present was Margaret O'Donnell, and at her cross-examination that afternoon, the widow insisted that she was positive that Wenrich was the man who had clubbed her. When asked why she did not mention Wenrich at Dr. Hermany's examination, all O'Donnell said was that she knew she would be examined again.<sup>78</sup> Groody scheduled a formal hearing for Monday, December 13, but the suspicious role Kehoe played in the accusation of Wenrich, as well as the crowd who gathered outside Groody's office protesting the butcher's arrest, foreshadowed Wenrich's legal innocence.

Hundreds attended the double funeral of Ellen McAllister and Charles O'Donnell on Sunday, December 12 at the Catholic church in Mahanoy City. They buried the murdered siblings in the same grave. According to the *Shenandoah Herald*, "the funeral was in every respect conducted in a most orderly and decorous manner,"<sup>79</sup> but *The Sun* in New York claimed, "Few of them [funeral attendees] reached home sober."<sup>80</sup> It was not the last time the national newspapers reported something contradictory to the local papers in relation to the Wiggans Patch Massacre. To the surprise of no one, the court found Wenrich innocent, as his own witnesses contradicted the prosecution on multiple occasions. Released on Tuesday, December 14, a large

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<sup>78</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>79</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 13 December 1875.

<sup>80</sup> *The Sun* (New York, NY), 14 December 1875.

crowd of friends and neighbors greeted him at the Mahanoy City train station. Wenrich happily returned to his butchery the following day.<sup>81</sup> There were no additional suspects and no urgent investigation to find the murderers.

Whereas Franklin Gowen's Coal & Iron Police worked diligently with the Pinkertons to find and arrest Molly Maguires, they did nothing to pursue the perpetrators of the Wiggans Patch Massacre beyond the arrest of Frank Wenrich at Kehoe's insistence. This is no coincidence, as the Pinkertons were undoubtedly behind the crime. It can be assumed that the Coal & Iron Police were also involved in directing the vigilantes. In an aforementioned letter written by Allan Pinkerton, he recommended that Captain Robert J. Linden, leader of Gowen's private police force, be the one who organizes the vigilante committee. While the Pinkertons and police kept quiet about the embarrassing truth of the Massacre, residents of Wiggans Patch and around the coal region continued to speculate.

According to Benjamin Bannan's *Miner's Journal*, "there were as many theories of the affair as there were men to set them afloat." Although nobody seemed to know what exactly had happened and why, the newspaper entertained two theories. One popular belief was that the murderers were members of a gang from Gilberton who were acting out of revenge after being defeated in a fight against James McAllister and Charles O'Donnell. The *Miner's Journal* found it more likely, however, that it was a vigilante committee avenging the murders of Sanger and Uren and that they had made a "fearful botch of it" by killing the pregnant Ellen McAllister. Although the latter was correct, the newspaper advised its readers not to believe any theories until the perpetrators were apprehended.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 15 December 1875.

<sup>82</sup> *Miner's Journal* (Pottsville, PA), 17 December 1875.

Another widely read local newspaper, the *Pottsville Standard*, had its own ideas about the purpose of the murder. They attributed it to “some old grudge,” as the O’Donnell family included “the possessors of certain ugly secrets in regard to some of the recent acts of lawlessness in that locality.” These “recent acts of lawlessness” referred to, among other things, the murders of Sanger and Uren, in which the O’Donnell brothers participated. The article continued, “The O’Donnell’s themselves have not borne the best of reputations; and the house itself was a place of resort for desperate characters. All the parties implicated are doubtless of the very worst class of our heterogenous [sic.] population.”<sup>83</sup> This gave rise to a very popular theory among the national newspapers that the Molly Maguires themselves, led by “Black Jack” Kehoe, murdered Charles O’Donnell because of the supposedly dangerous evidence he had against the organization.

The next weekly issue of the *Pottsville Standard*, however, featured a strongly worded editorial condemning a vigilante committee as the perpetrators of the massacre. Whereas effective vigilante committees are composed of “brave and honorable men,” the editor labeled this one as “a crowd of skulking cowards.” The murderer of Ellen McAllister was a “contemptible craven,” and the man who clubbed Margaret O’Donnell, “a dumb beast.” The editorial went on to mention the note that the vigilantes left behind which named their victims the murderers of Sanger and Uren, and it pointed out how ridiculous that statement was considering the innocence of the female victims. After a sarcastic comment of surprise that the vigilantes neglected to kill the infant John McAllister too, the editorial ended on a solemn note.

Vigilance committees...are the worst possible remedies for crime and disorder...controlled entirely by passion and impulse, [they] eventually lead to

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<sup>83</sup> *Pottsville Standard* (Pottsville, PA), 11 December 1875.

retaliation and more bloodshed... The cruelty of it all will only add to the lawlessness which has already brought so much disgrace upon our county.<sup>84</sup>

Although most of the local newspapers in the anthracite region eventually acknowledged that a vigilante committee was probably responsible for the Wiggans Patch Massacre, their condemnation of the crime was never as explicit as this *Pottsville Standard* editorial, and it did not prompt a more serious police investigation.

Residents of the coal region quietly made the realization that a vigilante committee, following the lead of the Pinkertons and Coal & Iron Police, made a tragic mistake in their first act of retribution. An investigation of those guilty of the crime, however, would only be helping the wicked gang of Molly Maguires, and nobody wanted to endorse such an idea. The Mollies themselves also could not pursue an investigation of the vigilante committee. They had to remain cautious and confidential. As promised by Thomas J. Foster, editor of the *Shenandoah Herald*, the “shooting business” had indeed been brought to the Molly Maguires in a horrible way, and they needed to remain on the defensive as more vigilante committees, emboldened by their virtual legal immunity, took action against Molly Maguire targets in cooperation with the Pinkertons and Coal & Iron Police.<sup>85</sup>

The *Miner’s Journal*, *Shenandoah Herald*, and *Pottsville Standard* stopped reporting on the Wiggans Patch Massacre after the subtle realization that the vigilante committee was behind it, and the largest local news story of the first half of December 1875 came to a screeching and unresolved halt. National newspapers further amplified the already obvious partiality the local press showed towards the Pinkertons and the other powers in conflict against the Molly

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<sup>84</sup> *Pottsville Standard* (Pottsville, PA), 18 December 1875.

<sup>85</sup> James D. Horan and Howard Swiggett, *The Pinkerton Story* (New York: Putnam, 1951), 153.

Maguires. Whereas the local newspapers refused to demand a more thorough investigation of the crime and stopped reporting on it after realizing the Pinkerton-inspired vigilante committee was behind it, national newspapers published blatant lies in their reporting of the Wiggans Patch Massacre.

The *Albany Evening Journal* and *Chicago Daily Tribune* were outliers among national newspapers because, like the local newspapers, both published articles on the Wiggans Patch Massacre that suggested the possibility of it being carried out by a vigilante committee against Molly Maguires.<sup>86</sup> This, however, was far from the prevailing story on the national level. One needs only to glance at some of the headlines of national newspapers to realize their misreporting of the Wiggans Patch Massacre, specifically how it relates to the perpetrators of the crime. Titles including “An Outrage by the Molly Maguires,” “Molly Maguire Murders,” and “A Reign of Terror in a Little Pennsylvania City: The Recent Molly Maguire Murders” drew readers into the events at Wiggans Patch in Louisiana, New York, Texas, North Dakota, and most everywhere in between and stirred their hatred and fear of the Molly Maguires.<sup>87</sup> Little did these national readers know that they were receiving a false account of the Massacre.

Many of the national newspapers made minor, excusable errors in their stories about the Wiggans Patch Massacre in the days following December 10, 1875. For instance, the *New Orleans Republican* and the *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* reported that the raiders entered multiple houses, not one, in Wiggans Patch en route to killing both Charles O’Donnell and James

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<sup>86</sup> *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, NY), 11 December 1875; *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), 17 December 1875.

<sup>87</sup> *New Orleans Republican* (New Orleans, LA), 11 December 1875; *The Sun* (New York, NY), 14 December 1875; *Dallas Daily Herald* (Dallas, TX), 14 December 1875; *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), 15 December 1875.

McAllister.<sup>88</sup> Although McAllister actually survived his bullet wound, it is understandable that many national newspapers jumped to the conclusion that he, too, perished after the intruders shot him. Even the *Philadelphia Inquirer* mistakenly called the Wiggans Patch Massacre a “triple murder.”<sup>89</sup>

What is more troubling and absolutely unacceptable from the standpoint of objective journalism was the nearly wholesale attribution of blame to the Molly Maguires for the Wiggans Patch Massacre, a crime in which they and their relatives were in fact the victims, across the nation. The *Alexandria Gazette* (Washington D.C.), *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Somerset Herald* (southwest Pennsylvania), *Helena Weekly Herald*, and *Massachusetts Spy* all included the following sentence as it pertained to the suspects in the Wiggans Patch Massacre: “The murderers are supposed to belong to the organization known as the Molly Maguires, a band of men that are a terror to the mining regions.”<sup>90</sup> What drove the Mollies to the murder of a family in the night, instead of their usual targets of mine superintendents and local officials? The prevailing national opinion was this, published in several newspapers around the country:

It seems the shooting grew out of a previous shooting affair, the facts of which the O'Donnell's were aware of, and it is thought that the murderers found it necessary to silence them for fear of damaging evidence they had in their possession.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *New Orleans Republican* (New Orleans, LA), 11 December 1875; *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), 15 December 1875.

<sup>89</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 11 December 1875.

<sup>90</sup> *Alexandria Gazette* (Washington, DC), 10 December 1875; *New York Times* (New York, NY), 11 December 1875; *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 11 December 1875; *Somerset Herald* (Somerset, PA), 15 December 1875; *Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, MT), 16 December 1875; *Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester, MA), 17 December 1875.

<sup>91</sup> *New Orleans Republican* (New Orleans, LA), 11 December 1875; *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 11 December 1875; *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* (Cincinnati, OH), 11 December 1875; *Dallas Daily Herald* (Dallas, TX), 14 December 1875; *Somerset Herald* (Somerset, PA), 15 December 1875.



It was an easy and believable assumption. As audiences around the nation read the articles on the Wiggans Patch Massacre published in their respective newspapers, they would have recalled episodes of Molly Maguire violence over the past several years, including the “cool and audacious butchery,” as the *New York Herald* put it, of Sanger and Uren the previous September.<sup>92</sup>

The Molly Maguires had earned serious notoriety nationwide by late 1875, as newspapers widely recounted the details of their many crimes in the coal region. It was natural to again place the blame on the Molly Maguires in the latest murder. Reporting that the perpetrators were actually members of a vigilante committee directed by the famous and respected Pinkerton Detective Agency would, however true, shatter the over simplistic view of most Americans that the Molly Maguires were a band of murderers on a reign of terror in the coal region. It was easier to uphold the narrative that the Molly Maguires were the unequivocal “bad guys” in Schuylkill County without staining the flawless reputation of the Pinkertons and their allies defending American civilization against the unruly murder gang.

To this end, the majority of national newspapers adopted the theory that the *Pottsville Standard* and other local newspapers entertained but never confirmed: the Wiggans Patch Massacre was a conflict between two parties of Molly Maguires. The major faction, presumably led by “Black Jack” Kehoe, sought to silence fellow Molly Maguire Charles O’Donnell because he was not to be trusted with potentially incriminating evidence about the organization, and they murdered him. According to New York’s *The Sun*, Kehoe’s “dislike and suspicion of his brother-in-law, Charles O’Donnell, were well known.” Although there is no evidence to support this

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<sup>92</sup> *New York Herald* (New York, NY), 4 September 1875.

claim and an ample amount to prove the opposite (Kehoe's respect for the victims at the coroner's inquest, his concern for Margaret O'Donnell's privacy, and previous relations with the family), readers in New York with little background knowledge bought into this myth. *The Sun* explained the murder of Ellen McAllister and her unborn child as "merely an act of wanton barbarism," which again would not particularly surprise its readers given previous coverage of bloody Molly Maguire crimes.<sup>93</sup> Intentional or not, national newspapers turned the story of the Wiggans Patch Massacre on its head in a prime example of what is now referred to colloquially as "fake news." Because of widespread misreporting, most people outside of Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania believed that the Wiggans Patch Massacre was just another murder to add to the long list of Molly Maguire crimes over the past several years. This had major implications for the fall of the secret society in the coming months and the early history of the Molly Maguires.

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<sup>93</sup> *The Sun* (New York, NY), 14 December 1875.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE LEGACY OF WIGGANS PATCH

Philadelphia's Archbishop Wood likely read the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* account of the Wiggans Patch Massacre, which, like so many other national newspapers, made the false claim that the murderers were Molly Maguires. Although Wood had always denounced the organization, the murders in Wiggans Patch seemed to push him over one step too far, and within a week he formally excommunicated the Molly Maguires from the Catholic Church. An editorial in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* praised the excommunication and urged the clergy to follow Archbishop Wood's example to reform the troublesome Irish. It argued that the temperate and faithful Irish were some of the best people in the country, "but the intemperate Irish we need not describe, as their evil deeds, and misfortunes, and wretchedness are too sorrowful and disgraceful for pleasant narration."<sup>94</sup> The deeds attributed to the Molly Maguires would also have been published widely enough that no summary was needed. The *Morning Herald* in Wilmington, Delaware, and the *New York Tribune* echoed similar sentiments in support of the excommunication.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), 25 December 1875.

<sup>95</sup> *Morning Herald* (Wilmington, DE), 23 December 1875; *New York Tribune* (New York, NY), 23 December 1875.

Locally, too, in the coal region where most knew the harsh reality of the murder, the Catholic population lacked much sympathy for the victims of the Wiggans Patch Massacre. At mass on Sunday, December 19, Father Daniel O'Connor of Mahanoy City read Archbishop Wood's excommunication letter to the congregation and expanded upon it. He explicitly urged his parishioners not to sympathize with the Molly Maguires, claiming that Charles McAllister himself had told him that the vigilantes shot his wife accidentally. Furthermore, the priest coldly dismissed and even justified the killing of Charles O'Donnell, saying, "whether the man received one bullet or a hundred it is all the same. He belonged, or was suspected of belonging, to the Mollie [sic.] Maguires." Father O'Connor showed no sympathy or leniency to the secret society, warning his congregation that, should they be persuaded to join them, "the church will curse you and you will be a pariah and shunned by all respectable people." In his conclusion, the priest claimed that the Molly Maguires were "scum and a disgrace to us as Irishmen and American citizens."<sup>96</sup>

As victims of the Wiggans Patch Massacre, the Molly Maguires suffered their most severe blow to date, but the excommunication and the lack of sympathy for them that immediately followed, especially from the Irish Catholic community, compounded their misfortune. Historian Kevin Kenny summarized the significance of excommunication succinctly: "Long denounced as un-American in the nativist and anti-labor press, the Molly Maguires were now placed firmly beyond the pale of respectable Irish society as well."<sup>97</sup> It was the beginning of the end. Not only was there no popular effort to find and apprehend the perpetrators of the Wiggans Patch Massacre, but also the victims did not find any sympathy in the coal region, even

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<sup>96</sup> *Shenandoah Herald* (Shenandoah, PA), 20 December 1875.

<sup>97</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 212.

from their Irish Catholic brethren. The aftermath of the Wiggans Patch Massacre demonstrated the isolation of the Molly Maguires and foreshadowed the fall of the organization.

Seeing that there were no repercussions for the Wiggans Patch Massacre, vigilante activity against the Molly Maguires increased in the following weeks. On January 4, 1876, vigilantes shot and wounded Hugh McGehan, the suspected Molly Maguire murderer of Tamaqua policeman Benjamin Yost, on his way home from a saloon. Less than two weeks later, they attacked his house, but McGehan was more fortunate than Charles O'Donnell and escaped with his life.<sup>98</sup>

On January 21, the first trials of the Molly Maguires began with the suspects of the murder of John P. Jones, a mine boss at the Lehigh and Wilkesbarre Coal Company in Ashton, Carbon County. Vigilantes had captured the suspects.<sup>99</sup> Michael Doyle, also a suspect in the murders of Sanger and Uren, was the first to be found guilty for the murder of Jones on February 1. Around this point, Jimmy Kerrigan, another suspected murderer of Jones, turned informer, which led to a series of arrests by the Coal & Iron Police.<sup>100</sup> Although James O'Donnell and James McAllister fled the anthracite region soon after the Wiggans Patch Massacre and were never captured, Charles McAllister and Thomas Munley were among those arrested in the following days for the murder of Sanger and Uren.<sup>101</sup> By spring 1876, the Molly Maguire organization had collapsed and dozens were imprisoned.

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<sup>98</sup> Horan and Swiggett, *The Pinkerton Story*, 153.

<sup>99</sup> *New York Herald* (New York, NY), 4 September 1875.

<sup>100</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 215-216.

<sup>101</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 293-294; Horan and Swiggett, *The Pinkerton Story*, 154.

The Mollies finally suspected McParlan of being a traitor, and he fled the coal region in early March 1876.<sup>102</sup> The agent later returned to provide condemnatory evidence at several of the high-profile Molly Maguire trials over the next two and a half years, which, according to Kevin Kenny, “bordered on a travesty of justice.” They were remarkably privatized. Franklin Gowen’s private corporation, the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad, initiated the investigation through a private detective agency, the Pinkertons. The Pinkertons then worked with Gowen’s private police force, the Coal & Iron Police, to arrest the supposed Molly Maguires. Even at the trials, the prosecutors were often connected with the coal company, and Gowen himself served as the chief prosecutor in several of the cases. Kenny wryly observed, “The state provided only the courtroom and the hangman.” In a further offense to justice, the juries selected were absent of any Irish citizens and consisted primarily of Germans, many of whom spoke little to no English. Informers like Jimmy Kerrigan provided questionable evidence that they often embellished in an attempt to save themselves from the same fate their former comrades were suffering. The prosecutors, aided by McParlan’s testimonies, incorrectly lumped the Molly Maguires and the AOH as one and the same, which crippled the fraternal organization for years to come. Arguments presented by the defense that McParlan was an agent provocateur who instigated several of the Molly Maguire murders fell on deaf ears.<sup>103</sup>

During the trials, newspapers continued to hyperbolize and depicted the Molly Maguires as a bloodthirsty terrorist conspiracy headed by the AOH to take over the anthracite region. While this is untrue, and some men were wrongly convicted, it should be noted that many Irish immigrants did indeed operate in a semi-organized group called the Molly Maguires who were

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<sup>102</sup> J. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 185.

<sup>103</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 213-233.

undoubtedly responsible of various murders and other crimes in the coal region during the 1860s and 1870s. In the end, twenty convicted Mollies were hung and dozens more imprisoned (including Charles McAllister, who escaped association with the murders of Sanger and Uren altogether, but not his part in the attempted murder of James Riles).<sup>104</sup>

The excitement of the Molly Maguire arrests, trials, and hangings, particularly on Black Thursday, June 21, 1877, when the first ten convicted Mollies faced the gallows, took attention away from the Wiggans Patch Massacre. People seemed to forget about the horrific night of December 10, 1875, and there was still no further investigation or arrests. The only media coverage on the Molly Maguires concerned their trials and hangings, and newspapers did not hide their vehement anti-Molly biases. In one notable exception, Father Daniel McDermott, a Catholic priest in the coal region, wrote an article published in the *Catholic Standard* (based in Philadelphia) in June 1877, complaining that the men responsible for the Wiggans Patch Massacre had not been brought to justice after a year and a half. McDermott went further and disclosed that the identity of the perpetrators “has long been an open secret” in the locality, and that it would require “very little effort” for the authorities to arrest them. Unfortunately, the priest did not reveal the names, and, granted that there was no renewed investigation, he did not have a very willing audience. Insofar as the “open secret,” no evidence has survived that reveals the identities of the murderers.<sup>105</sup>

The apathy shown towards the Wiggans Patch Massacre and the apparently well-known murderers compared to the simultaneous hysteria over the captures, trials, hangings, and ultimate destruction of the Molly Maguires is further evidence that a popularly supported vigilante

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<sup>104</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 214, 270, 292.

<sup>105</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 209.

committee committed the crime. No one was willing to defend the hated Mollies, and forgetting about the Wiggans Patch Massacre made looking back at the Molly Maguire era more comfortable. Ignoring Wiggans Patch or distorting it like the national newspapers did strengthened the narrative that the Molly Maguires were a band of barbarians set on a reign of terror preying on a wholly innocent and highly civilized population in the anthracite region. Exposing the truth of the Massacre and bringing the murderers to justice would add an uncomfortable new dimension to the conveniently simple story of the Molly Maguires. Doing so would stain the reputation of the Pinkertons and the Coal & Iron Police as the fearless leaders of the law-abiding population of the coal region who triumphed over the evil Molly Maguires. It did not take long for people to realize that they could get away with ignorance or false interpretations of the Wiggans Patch Massacre. Franklin Gowen achieved final victory over the Molly Maguires in the trials from 1876 to 1878, and the Mollies left no written records besides their infamous coffin notices. The enemies of the Molly Maguires had total control over writing the history of the era, and newspaper biases (and misreporting) and widespread support only encouraged their one-sided interpretations.

Early historians of the Molly Maguires concealed the truth of the Wiggans Patch Massacre. In 1877, with the trials of the Molly Maguires still underway, F.P. Dewees published the first history of the phenomenon entitled *The Molly Maguires: The Origin, Growth, and Character of the Organization*. Dewees was unsure of the identity of the perpetrators, but admitted that it was “generally supposed to have been the work of a vigilance committee.”<sup>106</sup> Still doubtful, he continued, “If this was the work of a vigilance committee, in their retaliation and in the character of the crime they closely followed the example of the ‘Molly Maguire.’” Far

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<sup>106</sup> Dewees, *The Molly Maguires*, 237.



from confirming that vigilantes were behind the Wiggans Patch Massacre, Dewees, probably inspired by the narrative peddled forth by “fake news” on the national level, still entertained the possibility that another faction of Molly Maguires led by “Black Jack” Kehoe was responsible. According to the historian, the murders of Sanger and Uren greatly troubled Charles O’Donnell, and Kehoe was afraid that he would publicly reveal details of the murder that would expose the Molly Maguires to the authorities. This paralleled the theory put forth by most national newspapers in explaining the Wiggans Patch Massacre. Puzzled by the exact nature of the crime, Dewees was unable to surely identify the murderers, concluding, “Who they were, whence they came, and whither they went, are still wrapped in mystery.”<sup>107</sup> Either Dewees or Father McDermott was not telling the truth, as this contradicts the priest’s article in the *Catholic Standard* published in the same year insisting that the murderers were well known. The ambiguity of the murderers in this history also shed any association they might have possibly had with the Pinkertons or Coal & Iron Police, who were not mentioned at all in relation to the crime. Dewees also softened some of the details of the Massacre. Although he acknowledged the murder of Ellen McAllister, he made no mention of her pregnancy and maintained that the murderers mistook her for her husband.<sup>108</sup> His account was well received by the opponents of the Molly Maguires. Dewees was vague about the identities of the murderers, still proposing they could have been other Molly Maguires, and he refrained from detailing some of the more gruesome elements of the crime, making it easier to forget.

A decade later, in 1887, Allan Pinkerton published his 500 plus page semi fictional epic, *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives*, in which a measly two pages discussed the Wiggans

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<sup>107</sup> Dewees, *The Molly Maguires*, 238-240.

<sup>108</sup> Dewees, *The Molly Maguires*, 238.

Patch Massacre. Unlike Dewees, Pinkerton was forthright in attributing the crime to a vigilante committee, but he shrewdly removed any association his detective agency or the Coal & Iron Police had with the murderers.

The people, strung to madness by the rapidly succeeding murders of the summer and fall, were, it appeared, taking the law in their own hands and giving payment for assassination in similar coin. It looked natural that this should be so. There was a breach of the law, it is true, but it was in the interests of humanity and the law, and...had a wonderfully tranquilizing effect upon the society.<sup>109</sup>

Pinkerton intentionally portrayed the Massacre as a natural outgrowth of a discontented population independent of outside support as a means to distance his detective agency from the crime. Although he did not say it, Pinkerton knew that the vigilantes had made a botch of the Wiggans Patch job by murdering a pregnant woman and assaulting an elderly widow (details he did not dwell on), and he did not want to associate his company with such crimes even though, according to him, they were in the “interests of humanity and the law” and catalyzed the downfall of the Molly Maguires. Pinkerton went on to discuss “Black Jack” Kehoe’s explosive reaction to the Wiggans Patch Massacre, in which he promised vengeance against those who had killed a woman “forgetting, for the moment, the several attempts the Mollies had made in the same direction.”<sup>110</sup> Here, Pinkerton was simply lying. The Molly Maguires never killed or attacked any women, but making the accusation that they did would not have surprised most of the country, who read exaggerated accounts of Molly violence in the newspapers for years. With details like this, Pinkerton’s story reinforced the myths of the barbarism of the Molly Maguires and further concealed the full truth of the Wiggans Patch Massacre.

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<sup>109</sup> Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires*, 458.

<sup>110</sup> Pinkerton, *The Molly Maguires*, 458.

It was not until quite recently when historians like J. Anthony Lukas in 1997 and especially Kevin Kenny a year later began to publish unbiased, accurate accounts of the Molly Maguires including the Wiggans Patch Massacre.<sup>111</sup> Both recognized the role that the Pinkertons played in influencing the vigilantes who committed the crime, but they make no mention of the national misreporting that further shrouded the Massacre in mystery and influenced the historiography of the crime.

After the hanging of the last Molly Maguire, Peter McManus, on October 9, 1879, Franklin Gowen had secured total control over the lower Pennsylvania anthracite region by silencing the last voice of the most radical element of labor dissent in the area. Gowen was a cunning corporate tycoon who took advantage of the unique conditions of the industrializing United States. The nature of work was changing, and mine laborers, many of whom were Irish immigrants, toiled in the hazardous coal mines of northeast Pennsylvania for long hours and low wages. In response to these unfavorable working conditions set forth by corporate leaders like Gowen, who by 1874 was dominant, the laborers organized into unions, and the most radical among them engaged in violence. Gowen twisted the violence to his advantage, setting a precedent for future opponents of organized labor. Molly Maguireism was discussed in the nativist press as far back as the 1850s to describe Irish drunkenness and propensity to crime, but Gowen built the myth that it was connected to the WBA and was a highly-organized conspiracy to take over the anthracite region. Before long, as the *Irish World* stated, “when any midnight deed was done, whether by isolated miner or special policeman, it was attributed to an organized band of conspirators who received the name of ‘Mollie Maguires.’”<sup>112</sup> This supposed Molly

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<sup>111</sup> Lukas, *Big Trouble*, 64-65; Kenny, *Making Sense*, 208-212.

<sup>112</sup> Kenny, *Making Sense*, 266.

Maguire conspiracy reached its height in the summer of 1875, following the Long Strike that Gowen used to crush the WBA. With the union out of the way, Gowen and his Pinkerton allies, along with his private Coal & Iron Police, inspired vigilante justice against the Molly Maguires. The bloodiest example of this was the Wiggans Patch Massacre on December 10, 1875, in which a mob of men directed by the Pinkertons attacked a house in a night raid to kill the alleged Molly Maguire murderers of Sanger and Uren the previous September. The vigilantes killed Charles O'Donnell, one of their targets, but also the pregnant Ellen McAllister, and they wounded her mother Margaret O'Donnell and James McAllister. It was a bloody and horrific crime, but no one was ever found guilty of it, and there was hardly an investigation to find the perpetrators.

The murderers got away with the Wiggans Patch Massacre for several reasons. Firstly, they did not cause as much of an outrage as several of the other murders around the same time because the victims were the widely hated and feared Molly Maguires. Just as Allan Pinkerton said in his account of the Massacre, many people wanted the Molly Maguires dead or at least imprisoned, and they were willing to forgive the murder of an innocent woman because the vigilantes also killed one of the supposed Mollies. Furthermore, to most of the United States, the perpetrators were Molly Maguires. Gowen's myth that labeled the Mollies as conspiratorial and bloodthirsty terrorists was so entrenched in the American mind that the vast majority of national newspapers ignorantly reported that the Wiggans Patch Massacre was just another murder in the long list of Molly Maguire crimes in the anthracite region. This prompted further action against the Mollies, including Archbishop Wood's excommunication of the organization and increased vigilante action, which contributed to the fall of the Molly Maguires within a few months of the Massacre. Finally, the Pinkertons and the Coal & Iron Police were the most effective bodies of justice in the anthracite region. They obviously did not want to pursue an investigation of the

Wiggans Patch Massacre because that would ultimately incriminate them, and they enjoyed a stainless reputation in the anthracite region as the heroes who defeated the hated Molly Maguires. With the details of the Wiggans Patch Massacre clouded by apathy, “fake news,” and a failure of justice rooted in the Molly Maguire myth formed by Franklin Gowen and other corporate leaders in the anthracite region, between thirty and fifty guilty men received no punishment for one of the bloodiest crimes of the era as they watched dozens of Molly Maguires face execution or imprisonment for equal or lesser offenses.

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On November 17, 2006, bulldozers approached a decrepit wooden building outside of Mahanoy City on property owned by the Reading Anthracite Company. It had been Margaret O’Donnell’s boardinghouse in Wiggans Patch, but it now leaned dangerously into the adjacent roadway and was to be torn down. Most people knew it as one of the most haunted locations in Pennsylvania, but Ellen McAllister’s ghost proved to be more effective at warding off children than excavators, and, after a small campaign to preserve the building failed, officials demolished the boardinghouse 131 years after the Wiggans Patch Massacre. In 2008, preservationists again nominated the site to receive a state historical marker, but the nomination suspiciously failed.<sup>113</sup> After these failed attempts at preservation, it seems that the coal region is still struggling to cope with the mysterious crime at Wiggans Patch and the implications behind it.

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<sup>113</sup> “Suffolk, Saint Nicholas, Mahanoy Township, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, USA,” *Planet Suffolk*, accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.planetsuffolk.com/suffolkpennsylvania.htm>.

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