

Robert P. Wolensky serves as Professor of Sociology and Co-director of the Center for the Small City at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, and as Adjunct Professor of Sociology and History at King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. A native of the Wyoming Valley of northeastern Pennsylvania, he has authored and co-authored books on the Tropical Storm Agnes flood of 1972, the Knox Mine Disaster of 1959, and the ladies’ garment workers industry in Pennsylvania between 1944 and 2000. He is also the director of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Oral and Life History Project. He earned an undergraduate degree from Villanova University and a doctoral degree from Penn State University.

Joseph M. Keating (1937–2006) was the founder of the Anthracite Living History Group in 2000, and the Avondale Disaster Site Preservation Committee in 2005. He was known as a leading anthracite preservationist and folklorist. Born in Larksville, Pennsylvania, he was a life-long resident of the Wyoming Valley. He worked as a truck driver for numerous construction companies, his last job before retirement being at the nuclear power station in Salem Township, Pennsylvania. He authored *Report With Honor: The Civil War, 1861–1865, Volunteers from Luzerne and Surrounding Counties* (2005), as well as a posthumously published volume, *Anthracite Tears: Youth Mining Fatalities, Ages Seven to Eighteen, In Luzerne and Lackawanna Counties, 1870–1920* (2007), which documents the often dangerous work lives of young boys in anthracite mines.

Tragedy at Avondale

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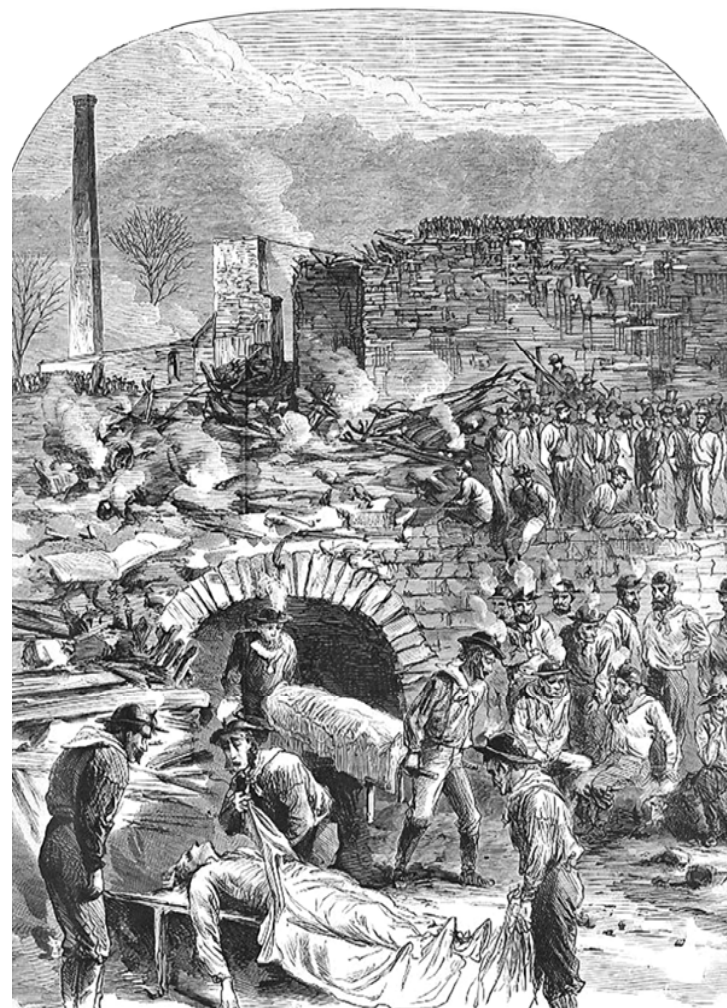
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TRAGEDY AT AVONDALE

*The Causes, Consequences, and Legacy
of the Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal Industry’s
Most Deadly Mining Disaster, September 6, 1869*



THE AVONDALE COLLIERY DISASTER—BRINGING OUT THE DEAD.—SKETCHED BY THOS. H. DAVIS.—[SEE DOUBLE PAGE.]

ROBERT P. WOLENSKY
JOSEPH M. KEATING

Avondale is a sad and difficult thing, but those guys may not rest in peace until we deal with the whole story.

Joe Keating

No catastrophe ever occurred in this country which created a greater sensation than this mining horror.

Andrew Roy, *The Coal Mines*, 1876

An impressive study, which avoids sensationalism or dogmatism, without in any way diminishing the magnitude of the disaster that befell the miners of Avondale. Surviving evidence about possible causes of the disaster is carefully sifted and alternative interpretations are considered. Examination of the role of inter-ethnic conflict is particularly intriguing. Overall, this is an important contribution to the literature on this most pivotal and traumatic of events in the history of the 19th century anthracite industry.

Richard G. Healey, author of *The Anthracite Coal Industry: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal Industry, 1860–1902: Economic Cycles, Business Decision-Making and Regional Dynamics* (2007)

The past is malleable and flexible, changing as our recollection reinterprets and re-explains what has happened.

Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, 1963

Doing historical research is rather like doing a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces are not all present in one box but are scattered over the house in several boxes and where, once it is put together, a significant number of the pieces are still missing.

Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, 1999

... a lively, engaging, deeply researched account of the Avondale mine disaster. Concise, well-written, and enlivened by charts and illustrations; it will reach beyond a specialist academic audience to those with an interest in coal-mining, immigration history, and the rich and tragic history of American labor. The chief contribution of Wolensky and Keating's work is to show that the matter cannot be left. The Avondale disaster is too important, complex, and controversial. And so the authors take the reader on a fascinating journey through the labor and corporate history, the regional divisions, and the ethnic antagonisms of Pennsylvania's anthracite coal industry. The glossary and timeline at the back of the book are extremely useful.

Kevin Kenny, author of *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (1998)

An exciting and well-written account of various possible reasons behind anthracite mining's greatest tragedy ... This book is sure to interest both historians and general readers.

Lance E. Metz, Historian, National Canal Museum

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The nation was horrified when news of the coalmine fire at the Avondale mine in Plymouth Township, Luzerne County, appeared in newspapers. Reports called it "the unparalleled disaster." Even more shocked were mineworkers and their families throughout the anthracite region.

This new book by Robert Wolensky and the late Joseph Keating presents details of the tragedy, along with numerous illustrations from periodicals of the time. A selection of striking modern images from Sue Hand's "Anthracite Miners and Their Hollowed Ground" complement the text and the contemporary images.

The authors go well beyond a thoroughly researched recounting of the events before and after the fire, and analyze the prevailing social and work environments in the anthracite region at the time, including favoritism, nationalistic resentment and even hatred, Molly Maguirism, politics and resistance to mine-safety laws that could have prevented the tragedy, and recent community efforts to memorialize the site and event.

Among the many issues discussed are: Why and how did it happen? Was the fire that trapped and killed 108 men and boys underground an accident? Was it arson? Was the Coroner's Jury willing to listen to the testimony of some more than of others? What was the national and even international response to such a terrible event? How did writers use the tragedy in their poetry and works of fiction? Why is this tragedy still unresolved in the minds of local residents?

The National Canal Museum is proud to offer this major study by two men who have spent years examining the Avondale Disaster and its consequences. Publication is scheduled for March. Look for further information in your local newspapers.



**Canal History and
Technology Press**

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