



## Look homeward, Hazleton

By Charles McElwee

Ariovistus Pardee, perpetually restless, took a stroll along the mossy, muggy paths of his summer retreat in Rockledge, Florida. Rarely idle and always pensive, Pardee needed the walk, and so he marched onward, betraying and discrediting the infirmity and maladies usually associated with an 82-year-old man.

He was distinguished looking, but his gentle facial features didn't suggest an unrivaled ingenuity or a

\$30 million net worth. Pardee attentively maintained a humble disposition, and despite his age and accomplishments, he walked as if he was still in his youth, a time when he surveyed dense Pennsylvania forests, discovered opportunity in anthracite coal and railroads, and built an empire in a small remote village called Hazleton.

But on that warm Friday evening, after a lifetime of steady heartbeats and strenuous exercise, Pardee had succumbed to fatigue. He returned to his cottage, and the doctor who accompanied him on this winter sojourn advised against eating.

Pardee disregarded the doctor's orders, and as the twilight hours passed he slipped into a worsening state. His wife and three daughters fearfully awaited the outcome, watching over a patriarch who, up until that evening, was in remarkable health. As dawn neared, the sun slowly rising in the swampy Victorian hamlet, the family watched Pardee in his final, silent moments.



### Pardee's legacy

When Pardee died on March 26, 1892, he was the country's leading anthracite operator. His extensive land holdings spanned the East Coast and Midwest, and the resources found within these holdings fueled railcars, built houses, defended armies and contributed to America's gilded expansion.

His death occurred just months after Hazleton became a chartered city. It was nearly 60 years earlier when the 23-year-old Pardee arrived in the swampy outpost, surveying for the Beaver Meadow Railroad Co. and boarding at a hotel near the future intersection of Broad and Wyoming streets.

Although descended from the Yale family, Pardee lacked an academic pedigree. He was a voracious reader, but his rearing in upstate New York didn't afford him a diploma. Despite these disadvantages, the young boarder was preternaturally enterprising and ambitious. And so in the subsequent years he purchased land in the region, realizing that the nation's future depended on coal and railroads.

Pardee's investment paid off. Within his lifetime, Hazleton became a city of nearly 12,000 people, a population comprised of immigrant workers who worked in his prosperous mines, constructed railroad lines and factories, and expanded municipal boundaries.

On the day he died, there was no time for mourning. The Pardee family quickly packed their belongings and traveled northward by train with the newly departed. The sudden development spread in local newsprint or by word of mouth. City residents, regardless of socioeconomic position, were shocked by his death. As *The New York Times* reported, "No man of wealth was ever more unpretentious." He was the founding father, the man who commandeered the regional economy and presided over its social hierarchy.

More than 1,500 people overflowed First Presbyterian Church, a Pardee-endowed structure that still stands at West Broad and Church streets. "Millionaires jostled elbows with slate pickers, Hungarian women stood by exponents of fashion," wrote a Plain Speaker reporter. Dr. W.C. Cattell, former president of Lafayette College, gave the eulogy, recounting how Pardee saved the institution from closure with his generous contribution. Pardee later donated \$500,000 to build a state-of-the-art scientific building. This ornate brick structure, known as Pardee Hall, is Lafayette's oldest campus building and now houses the college's humanities and social science departments.

## **Industrial hub**

In the 19th century, Pardee was revered like today's Silicon Valley innovators. He marketed his vision and disrupted the economy like any garage-based techie. His base on Spring Mountain, along with Pottsville, Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, were not unlike today's Cupertino, San Jose, Palo Alto or Menlo Park. Located just close enough to major metropolitan markets, these coal region cities powered factories, bakeries, breweries, and domestic homes. Urban markets depended on anthracite for heating and cooking. Industrial pioneers found inspiration for new pursuits.

Hazleton became the premier regional setting for industrial experimentation. It was the commercial base of the Lehigh Coal Field, which contained some of the world's richest deposits of anthracite. This abundant resource made Hazleton a laboratory for new technology. The city attracted inventors, including Thomas Edison, to apply their mechanical and engineering skills. Edison tested drilling inventions and inspired the construction of a groundbreaking trolley system.

Coal operators modernized breakers and discovered game-changing methods for draining mines. By the turn of the 20th century, Hazleton became the nation's third city to have a city-wide electric grid. In the surrounding patch towns, mines were drained by what was considered the world's largest drainage tunnel.

Pardee lived to see Hazleton's economic and industrial transformation. He also witnessed his community's direct and indirect impact on national affairs. His son, Ario Jr., played a pivotal role at the Battle of Gettysburg, which eventually led to a Union victory. His banking partner, W.A.M. Grier, cast the sole vote for James Garfield at the 1880 Republican National Convention. Grier's vote built momentum for the candidate, who won the nomination, then the general election, and later served a tragically short presidential term.

Pardee's final years also bore witness to the beginning of Hazleton's profound demographic and population change. Eastern and southern European immigrants arrived en masse to work in mines and factories, creating tension among the established labor pool. But new migration patterns didn't endanger the social structure that Pardee helped create. Although considered humble, Pardee exhibited privilege and financial confidence

through his antebellum mansion. The home stood grand and stoic in the center of downtown, guarded by high iron fences and trees that signified its occupant's importance.

Family and friends within Pardee's elite orbit expressed their confidence in residential architecture throughout the city. New homes, bloated with beauty, competed in size with Pardee's mansion. They were colorful monuments to the Gilded Age, dressed up with all the glamour and riches of that inequitable period. Such ostentatious displays were made possible by Pardee, who created the local market for competing coal operators, factory owners, bankers and publishers.

The city's upper class socialized in almost incestuous circles. In his masterful study of Hazleton, "Population Change and Social Continuity," the late historian Harold Aurand found that the city's social clique was confined to only two dozen people. Their names consistently appeared on party lists, club memberships and the boards of directors of civic and financial institutions. Their weddings were less public displays of love and affection than mergers and acquisitions of Hazleton's wealthiest families.



The offspring of these mergers attended private boarding schools, toured Europe and vacationed in summer homes along the Eastern seaboard. Once matured and educated, the dignified sons of these families courted women they often knew since childhood, thereby preserving the bloodlines of the Lehigh Coal Field's aristocracy.

And yet the upper class, as intimate as they appeared, did not seclude themselves in segregated neighborhoods. Their hilltop mansions, immediately north of Broad Street, overlooked a deforested vista of mills, factories and breakers.

Interspersed between these structures were the shanties or wooden homes of immigrant workers. The immigrants' abject poverty wasn't concealed from Hazleton's elite. Their ethnic enclaves, whether on Donegal Hill, Nanny Goat Hill, the North Side, East End, or the new Diamond Addition, were a short distance from the Victorian splendor of their employers. The tragic sight of widows, orphans, or the maimed was accepted as the reality of a city with unfettered economic growth.

### **Good fortune**

In 1887, the Standard-Sentinel reported the disturbing discovery of a woman who lived in a small hut without heat, plumbing or clothing. It was that same year, on Broad Street between Locust and Vine, when Alvan Markle completed his shingle-style frame mansion. The turreted estate, magnificently curtained and flanked by gazebo-like porches, was reminiscent of the seaside homes that graced the shores of New Jersey or Long Island. Its proud new owner was a brilliant businessman and inventor whose fortune stemmed from his father's fortuitous connection to Pardee.

Alvan's father, George, had a modest upbringing in Milton. In order to support his parents, George moved to Philadelphia and learned carpentry. After sustaining a serious injury, however, George returned to Bloomsburg to follow his father's pursuit of the saddler's trade. Young George excelled in the town as an expert saddler and harness maker.

In 1848, George married Emily Robison, who came from a large local family. Emily's favorite sister, Anna Maria, had recently married Ario Pardee in Hazleton. Pardee's first wife, Elizabeth, died in childbirth the year before, and he had hired Anna Maria as a governess to his four children. They soon fell in love and within a few months a wedding was arranged.

Anna Maria urged her husband to offer George a job with his flourishing mining firm. George was hired, and the newlyweds relocated to Hazleton. Pardee's brother-in-law and colleague advanced within the firm, eventually becoming superintendent of collieries. Within a decade, George parted ways with Pardee to form his own mining company in Jeddo.

The success of G.B. Markle & Co., along with the patriarch's lucrative inventions and banking interests, allowed Alvan to build his Broad Street residence. He lived in the home until 1924, when he relocated to the family's "Highacres" estate, now known as Penn State Hazleton's Pasco L. Schiavo Hall. His former residence housed the Hazleton Elks Lodge until its demolition.

### **Victorian row**

When World War I erupted in 1914, Americans and Europeans longingly recalled the 19th century's final decade, a peaceful period of unrestrained wealth, intense patriotism, and boundless scientific and artistic pursuits. In Europe, cousins ruled empires that stretched across global time zones. In America, a vibrant democracy expanded its economic power and tested its imperial possibilities.

The growing country's urban industrial centers imperiled Europe's seemingly timeless supremacy. Among these centers was Hazleton, which not only boasted a limitless coal supply but also the world's largest silk mill.

Pardee lived only two years into this harmonious decade. His passing, however, didn't jeopardize the family's social or financial standing. Instead, they inherited their father's many business interests. Family members carried out his legacy from stunning mansions that lined North Laurel Street, North Church Street and Diamond Avenue.

In 1893, just a year after Pardee's death, one of his youngest sons built a Queen Anne Victorian on the corner of North Laurel and Aspen streets. Israel Platt Pardee commissioned George W. Barber, one of America's most celebrated architects at the time, to build the 19-room "pattern book" residence. The home, which still commands the intersection, features a large tin-roofed wraparound porch, oak doors, and a three-story turret with curved glass plate windows. A charming carriage house, on the Aspen Street side, housed the property's caretaker and still retains its workbenches and a wooden platform for horses.

The cheerful yellow clapboard home reflects the personality of its first owner. Israel, affectionately nicknamed "Izzie" by family and friends, was known for his warmth and humor. His outgoing persona wasn't derived from his father, who was famously known as "the silent man."

But Israel proved that sparing words didn't dictate successful outcomes. He continued his father's legacy as a donor to Lafayette College and served as president from 1914 to 1925, a turbulent period for young men upon America's entry into the war. Israel also served as a founder and president of Hazleton National Bank, and watched the completion of his institution's modern brick high-rise, located at the corner of Broad and Laurel streets.

In the 1890s, Israel could walk a few short blocks southwest to visit his brother-in-law, Augustus Van Wickle, at the corner of North Church and Fern streets. Van Wickle's home was another sturdy Victorian that included an airy porch and mammoth dormer roof. Van Wickle had married Israel's younger sister, Bessie, a debutante

who studied at Manhattan's Graham School. Bessie was known to favor New York's latest fashion trends over academics. Her best friend from school later married the outgoing "Izzie."

Van Wickle was descended from American nobility. His mother was a Randolph, a dynasty that had dominated Virginia politics since colonial times. His great-grandfather, Nathaniel FitzRandolph, raised the money and land required to establish Princeton University. FitzRandolph donated the land for the construction of Nassau Hall, which is the oldest building on campus.

The imposing FitzRandolph Gate, which serves as the university's official entrance, was funded by a bequest from Van Wickle in honor of his descendant. The gate was locked except at graduation until 1970, but many students continue to avoid crossing the entrance as a symbolic gesture.

Born in New Brunswick and educated at Brown University, Van Wickle settled in Hazleton to take over the coal operations of his father, who was president of the Ebervale & South Mountain Coal Co. He served as president between 1879 and 1881, but later relocated to Cleveland to oversee the company's Ohio branch.

Four years later he returned to Hazleton to establish a new firm, Van Wickle & Co., which was a successor to his father's business. The firm was headquartered in Manhattan at No. 1 Broadway in the United States Lines-Panama Pacific Lines Building, a landmark Renaissance Revival structure that still stands. Van Wickle, however, remained in Hazleton to carry out his many business interests, which included oversight of the Tomhicken, Milnesville & Eastern Railway Co. and Hazleton Iron Works. He also served as president of Hazleton National Bank.

Van Wickle carried the ease of a man without financial constraints. He was a product of that happy decade and more or less filled the void left by his powerful father-in-law. A socialite and sportsman, Van Wickle lived for parties and athletic pursuits. In 1893, he built the Van Wickle Casino at the southeast corner of Church and Magnolia streets, which was a short block from his home. Known as an "indoor pleasure resort," the casino was an entertainment center where Hazleton's elite could play cricket, bowl, or participate in other competitive sports. The building also hosted dances and performances and later housed Company G, 9th Infantry, during the Spanish-American War.

Van Wickle's millions afforded a life of luxury. He traveled the world, owned a yacht, and in 1896 oversaw the construction of a sprawling summer estate that overlooked Narragansett Bay in Bristol, Rhode Island. Known as Blithewold, the shingled Queen Anne-style mansion allowed Van Wickle's family to enjoy new social circles.

It was from this New England sanctuary, in the summer of 1897, that Van Wickle learned of his coal company's strike. The number of striking miners increased each day, disrupting the production of mines owned by Van Wickle, Pardee and other coal operators. The strikes ended in tragedy on Sept. 10, when armed deputies in Lattimer massacred 19 miners.

The massacre haunted Van Wickle, who was proud of his philanthropic endeavors and agreeable negotiations. Within months of that infamous showdown, on June 8, 1898, Van Wickle went skeet-shooting with his brother-in-law near his Church Street home. While engaged in the activity, Van Wickle leaned against a loaded gun and accidentally shot himself to death.

His mysterious demise shocked the city. He was buried in the Pardee plot at Vine Street Cemetery beneath an elaborate Celtic cross. Following the funeral, watchmen struggled to keep vandals from destroying or stealing the flowers that surrounded his grave.

On the afternoon of his death, Van Wickle's wife had been packing for the family's summer move to Blithewold. After burying her husband, Bessie departed Hazleton and seldom returned. In 1901, she married

Van Wickle's old sailing friend and they lived full time at Blithewold. The original mansion was destroyed by fire in 1906, but its grand replacement is a modern-day tourist destination, nationally recognized for its extensive gardens.

Van Wickle's legacy is also celebrated at Brown, where ornamental gates named in his honor stand as the university's main entrance. At the beginning of each school year, the center gates are opened inward to admit students during convocation. The gates are re-opened outward at the year's conclusion, when the senior class participates in the commencement procession.

But Van Wickle's life is just a fading memory in the city that produced his wealth and fame. His original homestead, which remains on Church Street, has seen better years. Affixed in blue siding, the property has been deprived the upkeep and preservation that would serve as a proper tribute to its first owner.

Throughout Hazleton, an unfortunate number of historic homes were demolished, while other structures are quickly falling into disrepair. Neither Van Wickle nor his father-in-law could have foreseen the challenges that underlie this decline.

### **Historic district**

The tree-lined neighborhoods bounded by West Diamond Avenue and Broad Street to the north and south, and North Wyoming Street and the Vine Street Cemetery from east to west, are crowded with beautiful homes displaying eclectic architectural styles. The pleasantly named side streets within this district — Tamarack, Holly, Magnolia — sleepily contain enchanting structures from the pre-World War II period.

The small blocks include tudors and bungalows, Victorians and haciendas, craftsman and colonial-style homes. The residences are dressed up with decorative features that once alluded to the neighborhood's exclusivity. They were inhabited not only by Pardee's social orbit, but also doctors, lawyers, businessmen, contractors and department store owners.

Included among this medley is the S.Y. Frederick mansion, a tall and handsome, stone and stuccoed residence at the northeast corner of North Laurel Street and West Diamond Avenue. Built in 1906 by Frederick, who was a local contractor, the Victorian-like structure required over 1,200 loads of stone for its completion.

Across the street is the enduring elegance of Israel Platt Pardee's mansion, which is the city's only residence listed on the National Register of Historic Places. On the same compact block is the John R. Dershuck residence, largely concealed by leafy trees and shrubbery. The late-19th century home was built by Dershuck, who was publisher of *The Plain Speaker* and oversaw that newspaper's merger with the *Standard-Sentinel*. Reminiscent of a dollhouse, the cream-colored structure features an arched front porch with engraved rose petals.

On North Church Street, residences of varying style, size and condition lead to downtown Hazleton's civic buildings and religious institutions. Among the structures is the J.M. Fey Mansion at the northeast corner of North Church and Fern streets. Standing across from the Van Wickle homestead, the home is the only Georgian-style residence in the city.

As the product of Irish immigrants, Fey represented a new class of homeowners in Hazleton. He owned a lucrative grocery store on South Wyoming Street, and the completion of his home in 1914 signified an upgrade from the South Side. Encased in yellow brick, the symmetrical home retains its original features, including a centered panel door with fanlights. The property has been revived by Brandon's Forever Home, a charitable organization created to raise awareness about children in foster care and their need for permanent loving homes.

Just a few blocks south is the flagstone tudor of Calvin Pardee III, which later became a nursing home. Near City Hall stands the W.A. Deisroth Mansion, a stately tudor that houses law offices. The building's original owner was an heir to the storied Deisroth family, which owned a department store in downtown Hazleton until the late 1980s.

New charities, established businesses and committed homeowners exemplify an enduring appreciation for this historic neighborhood. Many taxpaying property owners have preserved the character of their homes through a balanced effort of preservation and renovation. But a lurking apathy among an inordinate number of neighbors, whether absent or present, leads to a stark contrast between gentrification and blight. Apathy accelerates urban decay, which usually results in rising crime. Criminal or nuisance behavior creates a negative perception of the residential area. A negative perception only leads to depreciating home values. This juxtaposition — urban investment and decline — creates an uncertain future for a neighborhood with tremendous potential, a dense residential district within walking distance of a downtown undergoing major revitalization projects.

The neighborhood is a microcosm of the residential crisis that Hazleton currently faces. In 2014, the Standard-Speaker's Kent Jackson reported that the city's residential neighborhoods had a 14.8 percent vacancy rate. This is a staggering statistic for a city with an approximate total area of six square miles and an estimated population of over 25,000. Unfortunately, Hazleton's housing supply doesn't match demand. As Jackson noted, 44 percent of Hazleton's homes were built before 1939, one year before the city's population peaked at nearly 40,000.

Reviewing such daunting numbers can engender skepticism and discourage hope for any positive outcome. But historic preservation could play a critical role in the future of Hazleton's residential neighborhoods. Preservation is a critical component to smart urban growth. Compared to other residential sections, the blocks that comprise North Laurel Street, North Church Street and West Diamond Avenue are fairly stable. This stability, however, is rapidly changing. Establishing a municipally regulated historic district within this section could protect rich housing stock, increase community pride, and improve neighborhood-level sociability. This would complement the successful work of the Downtown Hazleton Alliance for Progress, which has contributed to a business corridor that has experienced a level of commercial activity unseen in over 20 years.

A historic district would have a high-value, positive impact on city residents. Local historic districts typically enjoy higher property values and rates of appreciation. In one study, Philadelphia's Econsult Solutions found that historic districts traded at a premium compared to non-historic district homes. Homes within a district also enjoy an increase in values compared to a citywide average. Properties within proximity to the historic district also experience increased values.

By creating a historic district, the city would encourage residents to partake in restoration investments that may not have otherwise occurred. Taxpaying residents in the district could qualify for state-level tax credits. Restoration projects would spill over into the local economy through the hiring of contractors and purchase of materials. The historic district would also fulfill a key recommendation made by Zogby International, a polling firm, in 2007. At the time, Zogby described the proposed district as a "splendid blend of historic inner-city architecture."

Hazleton would join Scranton and Wilkes-Barre in embracing its architecture heritage. Scranton's Hill Section and Wilkes-Barre's River Street Historic District strengthen civic pride and promotion opportunities. The city's historic district would include a vast range of housing options, from apartments and cottages to houses and mansions. Of course, efforts must remain to ensure that this diversity of dwelling spaces doesn't result in a concentration of affordable housing. Section 8 housing is a reality in any city, but large pockets only encourage more blight.

Hazleton's future depends on the city government's financial capacity to hire more police and enforce robust municipal codes. In an age when young college graduates prefer urban living, attracting white-collar jobs is

also critical to checking blight. But when reflecting upon Hazleton's storied homes, one cannot help but wonder what the original owners would think of their city. The industries that delivered their fortunes have either disappeared or exist at a smaller scale. Crime was present, but an organized drug trade wasn't devastating families with addiction, overdoses and even death. It is a strikingly less innocent time. Amidst turbulent change, however, is a common longing for the past. Contemporary Americans now fondly remember the tranquility and prosperity of the 1990s. Nearly a century before, their forebears similarly ached for the 1890s, a time without war and devastation.

We cannot predict what the future holds for the Mountain City. We can only continue efforts to make the city a better place. A spruced-up Victorian, trimmed shrubbery, or repaired iron fence helps make this possible. An aesthetic display of concern and pride can prevent criminal activity. Ivy League schools and faraway tourist attractions celebrate Hazleton's past. It is time for the community to do the same. Establishing a historic district in the heart of Hazleton is one small step forward, but a step that can change the direction of the city's present path.