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Sheffield Avenue at the turn of the 20th Century, now a major downtown Aliquippa street.

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A Tale of Two Logstowns

(Photos courtesy of B. F. Jones Memorial Library.)

Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, emerged at about 1750 as an Indian village on the back-channel of an Ohio River island. There, French settlers traded with Delawares, Iroquois and Shawnees. It would later be called, "Logstown," by the British after Logstown Run that ran past the village to the river.

After the French and Indian War (1754-63) and the takeover of the region by the British, the Indian people lost title to the land. Logstown was virtually deserted. It was the first of a series of "ups" and "downs" the town would experience under any name in its 250-year history.

A separate Logstown had developed across the Ohio River in what is now Harmony Township. That Logstown would figure prominently in early American history in the mid 1700s as a major center for trade and diplomatic relations between the English and the Indians while the Logstown across the river languished.

But white settlers came again to Logstown Run in the 1770s, developing industries in saw milling and grist milling.

'Aliquippa who?'

It is popularly believed that Aliquippa was named after Queen Aliquippa, a staunchly pro-British Iroquois leader who ruled over what is now Greater Pittsburgh in the mid 18 th Century. But that may not be altogether accurate.

In the late 19th Century, Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad developed an amusement park on Crows Island just offshore from Logstown, and droves of Pittsburgh residents would take the train to the park to picnic and enjoy the weekend.





Aliquippa Park on property now flanked by West Aliquippa and downtown Aliquippa.

Aliquippa Station building, shown here in the 1950s, remains unchanged outside when used as a terminal for amusement-park visitors. It was last used as the front office for a baby-beam fabricator in the 1980s.

In keeping with its policy of naming stops on the line for prominent Indian leaders of the Colonial era, the railroad named it, "Aliquippa Park" and the adjacent railroad terminal, "Aliquippa." So, by 1892, part of the village of Logstown incorporated itself as the Borough of Aliquippa.



Demolished park gives way to new Jones & Laughlin Steel Works about 1903



Tunnel entrance to steel mill under construction, ca. 1908

Big Steel comes to town

In the late 1800s, when the Pittsburgh region was emerging as a major steel making hub, population upriver in Pittsburgh exploded with new European immigrants to fill steel working jobs.

By 1900, Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp., which had established itself on Pittsburgh's South Side, sought expansion downriver. The company bought the Ohio River island and by 1909 had demolished the amusement park, filled in the back channel and began erecting what would become the largest, integrated steel mill in the world, stretching seven miles along the river. In the process, J&L expanded Woodlawn, an unincorporated village in neighboring Hopewell Township. It was incorporated as a borough in 1908, and homes and businesses were erected to accommodate a new immigrant influx of steel workers.

The new Woodlawn was in every way a company town. J&L laid out the borough in a series of "plans" identified by number such as "Plan 6," "Plan 11," etc., and settled people from various racial and ethnic sources separately in each plan. That arrangement discouraged people of varied backgrounds and languages to integrate into the American society, but it was an efficient way in the short run for the company to reduce language and social conflict among neighbors. For example, Serbs and Croats were settled in Logstown which by the early 1900s had been absorbed into Woodlawn.

In 1910, Woodlawn was the jewel of Pittsburgh-area communities, according to an article in a Pittsburgh newspaper:

"There is no more active place in the Pittsburgh district today than Woodlawn with its hundreds of pretty homes, its clean paved streets, its dozens of modern stores, its churches, schools, lodges, clubs and ample transportation facilities," the article said.

"Its streets are paved with brick in the business section and macadam in the residence section, concrete sidewalks, shade trees, sewerred and electric lighted," the article continued. "It has



Inexpensive housing -- made durable by J&L-made I-beam construction -- quickly dotted the hills of Woodlawn as immigrants poured into the territory to fill jobs and settle in their new company homes.

every modern utility such as natural gas, electric light, a pure and potable water supply and ample police and fire protection. Its school system is splendidly organized, and its opportunities for delightful home and neighborhood life are not equaled in this end of the state.”

Pete Muslin was one of those immigrants, having come to southwestern Pennsylvania in 1912. He and his brother joined his father who had traveled ahead to get a job in a Pittsburgh mill. His father then took a job with the J&L plant in Woodlawn. His family of Slavic descent had been assigned to housing in Logstown. Pete went to work himself at the J&L plant around 1920 just as union movement had begun.

Politics and borough administration was controlled by J&L management, Muslin wrote in an essay of his experiences. Almost everybody in town was a Republican.

“At that time, to be a Democrat, you had to be either brave or nuts,” Muslin said.

“When they would have balloting, Jones and Laughlin used to bring people from the mills in trucks to the voting place. They weren't even naturalized citizens, but they'd all vote the straight Republican ticket. Out of maybe several thousand votes, there would just be a half a dozen of us Democrats. J&L couldn't lose.”

An era of prosperity

With a steel workers' union in place at the mill and with improved wages and working conditions, Woodlawn flourished. Franklin Avenue, the borough's main street leading down to the mill, bustled with economic activity, and stores bulged with shoppers. The railroad station had been relocated to a spot at the bottom of Franklin Avenue near the plant's main gate, but it's railroad moniker, “Aliquippa,” remained. Aliquippa and Woodlawn consolidated in 1928, and the Woodlawn name was dropped to conform with the name of the railroad depot. Curiously, the former Aliquippa became known as the neighborhood of “West Aliquippa,” although it is located at the northeastern tip of the community.

As the local political influence of J&L management waned in the late 1920s and 1930s, party registration gradually changed in favor of the Democratic Party. Politicians were elected on their own right rather than by any affiliation with J&L.

The company maintained control over the community even during the Great Depression of the 1930s. While millions were displaced by unemployment, the company kept its skilled workforce until better times by reducing work hours rather than wholesale layoffs. To help workers' families deal with the tough times, the company promoted a system of vegetable gardens on unused company property, farmed by the under employed workers' families.

Demand for steel to fight World War II dramatically improved the economy of the area as the Aliquippa Works pumped out millions of tons of rolled steel to build ship hulls and tank armor among other weapons needs. Steel workers boasted with justified pride that the Aliquippa Works led the nation in the logistical job of winning the war.

During the middle of World War II when demand for steel was highest to feed the victory effort, as many as 9,000 people were employed at the J&L Works, and Aliquippa had a population of 27,000.

The economy of the town became more broadly based in the mid 1900s as service businesses grew, nourished by increased workers' wages. New middle-class and upper-middle class housing developed west of the downtown section with second-generation members of steel workers' families taking on professional and management jobs to support the area's economy.

There also, a community hospital was built largely by joint leadership of J&L and the United Steelworkers of America. Along Brodhead Road at the west end of the borough, retail businesses expanded, creating a second commercial district.

It was hard for anyone in Aliquippa to believe this prosperity would ever end.



Aliquippa Hospital dedication.



Franklin Avenue serves as route for Golden Jubilee Parade in the summer of 1958.



J&L Aliquippa Works going full blast in 1956.

The End of Big Steel

The collapse came one day in 1984 when LTV Corp., the corporate successor to J&L, issued a statement that it would close most of the Aliquippa Works, almost immediately laying off about 8,000 workers.

As sudden as it was, the action was not unexpected. J&L was gone, and LTV was already in reorganizational bankruptcy. Big Steel plants all along the Monongahela and upper Ohio river valleys already had fallen like a line of giant dominoes. The Aliquippa Works was the last and greatest one to fall in Pennsylvania.

The impact was almost immediate. With the flow of workers' daily traffic gone, downtown Aliquippa became a near ghost town. Stores along Franklin Avenue were shuttered in rapid succession as customers disappeared.

The effect on the borough's tax base soon followed as J&L obtained drastic tax revaluations of its real-estate holdings including much of the vast plant itself. The deterioration of Franklin Avenue did nothing to improve the downward spiral of employment and local tax receipts. Budgetary woes increased to such an extent that, at one point in the mid 1980s, Duquesne Light Co. threatened to shut off service to the street lights in the borough for payment delinquency.

With forced retirement of older steel workers and out-migration of younger families, Aliquippa's population began its drop to 11,734 as recorded in the 2000 Census. The final blow came in 2000 when LTV Corp., the corporate successor of Jones & Laughlin, sold the tin mill, the only remaining section of the plant that still operated, to U. S. Steel Corp. That Pittsburgh-based steel maker announced it would close the tin mill, resulting in the layoff of 400 steel workers.

One day in the late 1980s -- in one of the most poignant moments of the city's history -- veteran steel workers who had lost their jobs and then their retirement benefits gathered at the railroad tunnel at the entrance of the old plant to demonstrate their frustrations. Dubbed the "Tunnel Rats," the group of steel workers were arrested by local police for disorderly conduct. There were tears in the eyes of some of the arresting officers as they were forced to handcuff their own family members who were among the Tunnel Rats.

At about the same time, Aliquippa Borough Council in 1987 re-chartered the borough as a city, giving the community broader tax powers under Pennsylvania municipal law. Nevertheless, the new City of Aliquippa continued to plunge into depression with the rest of the former Big Steel towns of the Midwest and Northeast into what would be called the American "Rust Belt."

Recovery

The road back has been long and rocky. But indications of better days to come continue to pop up.

Perhaps the single most important early step came from LTV itself which scrapped idle sections of the giant Aliquippa Works in the late 1980s, making space for new plant sites. Working with other real-estate interests, the company helped prepare the former island property for new industrial development, making the site among the largest available sites in the United States waiting for industrial relocation.

Over the following decades, Aliquippa's second commercial section along Brodhead Road continued to serve the southern communities of Beaver County, generating employment and helping support tax revenues for the city. Aliquippa Community Hospital – one of two medical centers in the county -- reopened under new management, encouraging construction of office and medical buildings to support doctors and medical personnel.

Another boost came in the 1990s with opening of a new Greater Pittsburgh International Airport less than 15 minutes' drive from the city along state Route 60, a four-lane, limited access highway that grazes past the city's western border. Other transportation features could not be better for an American city of Aliquippa's size:

- Route 60 links the city to the Pennsylvania Turnpike at one end via Pittsburgh and at the other end near the Ohio line.
- A main railroad line continues to service Aliquippa along the Ohio River.
- The Ohio River continues to serve as a conduit for heavy barge traffic from Pittsburgh to New Orleans and shipping overseas.

Aid is also coming from other sources. Aliquippa in 1987 was declared a “distressed community” by the state and federal governments, a status that remains today. It has opened the city to special grants and loans to encourage economic development.

With all its ups and downs over the centuries, Aliquippa is definitely on the “up.” (For more information on economic-opportunity developments, click on the [Business Section](#).)

But what of the old Indian village of Logstown and the creek which was its namesake?

The town still exists as part of the City of Aliquippa, a few blocks lined by homes well kept by old-country pride of its residents. It is nestled in a deep gully overlooking the Ohio River, virtually isolated from the rest of the city.

And what of Logstown Run, the creek that drew settlers to the area to power their sawmills? Ironically, it was diverted during construction of Woodlawn at the turn of the 20th Century, and it is believed to be flowing through a storm sewer deep under concrete and blacktop beneath Franklin Avenue.

By Gabriel Ireton



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