

The *Avella* Story

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By
June Campbell Grossman

The AVELLA Story

The Alexander Wells Saga

The first white permanent settler, in what is today known as Avella, was a man of English descent named Alexander Wells. Mr. Wells is reputed to have been born in Baltimore County, Maryland, in 1727. Prior to 1772, when he was in his early forties, he came to the howling wilderness of the Avella region and purchased a large area of land lying in today's Cross Creek, Independence, and Jefferson townships.

There were limits to the amount of land to which one person could lay title, so Alexander solved the problem by entering the names of other members of his family when he acquired over the limit. Records show that he eventually had to his credit over 2,000 acres. These lands lay in the valleys of the main stream and the north fork of Cross Creek, with approximately 500 acres in the vicinity of what would one day become Cross Creek Village. Before leaving Baltimore County, Alexander had purchased soldiers' rights to much of the land he intended to buy, thus making it possible to secure them on his first trip to the west.

History writers have consistently insisted that Alexander Wells was totally illiterate. Some writers gave his wife, Leah Owings Wells, credit for taking care of the paper work involved in his acquisition of the land. Other authors, however, seem to believe that Alexander was a shrewd man who ran his boundary lines to permit access to all of the favorable mill sites on the streams. The late A.D. White, in writing about the Wells role in the settlement of the Avella area, refuted the popular idea that he was a total illiterate. A.D.'s reasoning was based on a document dated 1805 that Mr. White had in his possession. This document had been signed by Alexander Wells, himself.

Circa 1775, Alexander established his first grist mill at the junction of the north fork with the main stream of Cross Creek. In discussing this issue, Mr. White once added this observation to the writing: "If this is really the exact location, it would be on the point of land in Avella where the former Economy Store Building now stands." He then went on to say that at a somewhat later point in time, Alexander built another grist mill that he later transformed into a sawmill farther downstream in what is presently known as Browntown. It stood to the rear of the store operated for many years by Mrs. DePaoli, and later by her daughter. All that is left of that old mill is one of the stone burrs that is embedded in concrete in the front yard of what was once the old store building.

Alexander's mill became an important trading post as proven by an advertisement dated October 25, 1795, and known to have been in the possession of Mr. White. This ad stated: "John Kerr and Company have opened and are now selling at Alexander Wells' mill in Cross Creek, a neat assortment of merchandise for the season, for cash or country produce." Although most products of the mills such as flour or lumber were probably consumed locally, some grain and flour were shipped down Cross Creek at times of high water. When they reached the Ohio River, they

were reloaded on larger ships and shipped farther down stream, as far as New Orleans.

The following narrative was found in one of Mr. White's "First Families" popular stories of a number of years ago. It reads like this.

"The writer has in his possession an old news clipping, the information of which was furnished to Mr. James Simpson by Eliza Wells Patterson, daughter of Richard Wells, telling of her father having built a boat at his mill which he loaded with flour, put it in charge of an Irishman, not named, and sent the cargo down Cross Creek and the river and on to New Orleans for sale. The Irishman was a long time absent, and no communication being possible, he was given up for lost. Finally, one evening he appeared back at the mill, leading an old skeleton of a horse carrying saddle bags full of silver. He had sold the flour for a good price, taking it all in silver. He had hired someone to help him get away from the city at night, and then he had walked, and led the horse all the way back home. When asked by Mr. Wells why he had not taken his pay in paper money which would have been more easily carried, he said, "Oh, I just wanted to bring you good Democratic money."

Author's Note: "The unnamed Irishman in the story is, no doubt, George Plummer, who, it is known, had this exact experience when a young man of about 20 years of age circa 1806. When he returned to Cross Creek after this episode, he married Richard Wells' daughter, Leah. (Richard was a son of Alexander.) The Eliza Wells Patterson who, according to A. D.'s news clipping told the story to James Simpson, was a sister of Leah and most certainly would have been privy to all of its interesting details."

When Alexander first brought his family to the area to make it their permanent home, they probably lived in a log cabin that he would have constructed, just as did other settlers who came later. It is not known to this writer where A.D. White unearthed the information, but in one of his writings he emphatically stated that Alexander had built and lived in the first frame house ever erected in Washington County.

It is also known that for the protection of his family from Indian raids, he built a fort "on the hill just north-west of the present town of Avelia. Near the site of this fort is the old Wells family graveyard where Alexander and a number of his descendants are buried." (Although most of the stones are now gone and the graveyard is not well-kept, there is at present an unidentified benefactor who has laid plans to enclose this sacred plot with fencing and recreate it into an historic landmark of which Avelia may justly be proud.)

in another article about the early days of the Wells family, Mr. White stated that the Wells Fort was situated so that after the forest had been cleared from the hillsides, a good view could be seen from the Fort both up and down the Cross Creek valley, and also for a distance up the valley from the North Fork. In times of danger from Indian raids, settlers gathered in the Fort for protection, and men of the community would form the garrison for the Fort. Alexander would send to Fort Pitt or to Redstone for additional soldiers if the Indians were particularly troublesome.

After 1794 when "Mad Anthony" Wayne defeated the Indians permanently at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, the old fort was dismantled and no trace of it can now be found, but an old map of the area shows its approximate location.

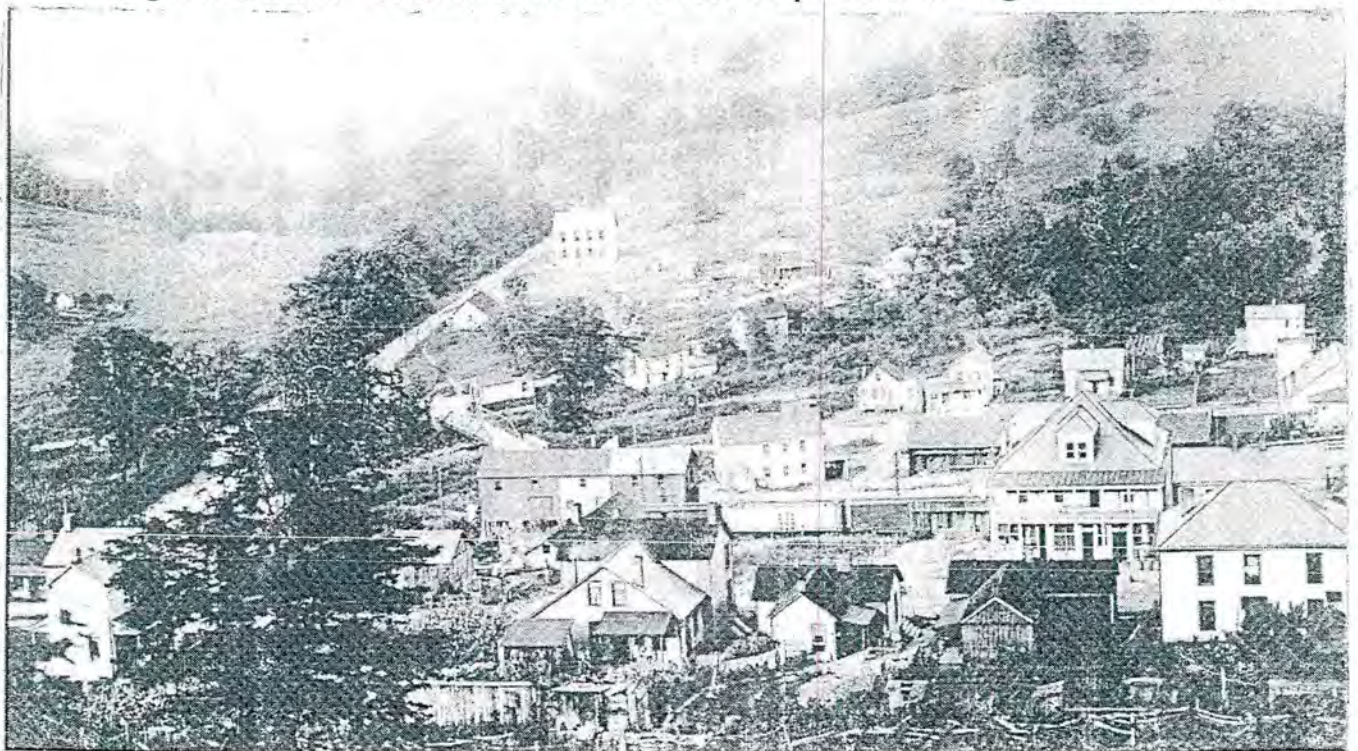
The stone house believed to have been built by Alexander's son, Richard, stood at the rear of the Browntown School Building, later the location of the Pentecost Lutheran Church. The stone house was used as a residence by members of the Wells family as long as any of them lived in the area.

As Alexander grew older, he sold his properties, or gave them to his children, and moved to Charlestown. There he built the first flour warehouse ever erected on the Ohio River. From it, 50,000 barrels of flour were shipped yearly to settlements along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers - even as far away as to New Orleans.

After the long, unique life he had lived, Alexander died on the 9th of December in 1813 at Wellsburg where he was living. His body was returned to the Avella area and interred in the family graveyard. His wife, Leah, died two years later and was buried beside him. They each lived to be 86 years of age.

During his lifetime, Alexander Wells was responsible for clearing the forests, ridding the area of dangerous wild life, developing trade and making it safe from Indians. Although some of his children moved rather far from the Cross Creek region, others remained at the place they had learned to call home. They may not carry the Wells name, but many of his blood descendants living today still think of the Cross Creek area as being part of them.

It has been well over 230 years since this ancestor of theirs made his lonely trek across the Allegheny Mountains to search for a new home in the midst of that howling wilderness. Avella's residents should be proud of their glorious heritage.



AVELLA'S EARLY DAYS. The "new" Buckeye School sat near the road that leads from Cedar Grove to Avella. It is shown here as the farthest building up the hillside.

The Days After Alexander

Records show that Alexander Wells died in December of 1813. Since this writing is intended to be the Avella Story, it might behoove us to visualize some of the important things that took place during the next 90 or so years. Those years were between the Wells family domination of the area and the laying out of lots for residential living in the new village of Avella circa 1904. This part of the story will deal with what became of the Wells family after the passing of Alexander.

It has been stated previously that Alexander left the Avella area and moved to the Wellsburg area of the Panhandle of Virginia in 1796. After this move, his son, Richard, was the leader of the Wells clan in Avella. But Richard lived only until 1830. This gave little over 30 years for the family to continue the pattern of living to which they had been accustomed.

For a time after Richard's death, Alexander's son, Bazaleel, who had inherited the mills after Richard's death, continued life in the area much as it had been when his father was alive. But deep in his heart, this son of Alexander had other dreams brewing within him. One day he decided to follow his heart.

Bazaleel sold the mills to Thomas Patterson, of the Patterson Mills family, and moved across the Ohio River where he created the town of Steubenville. In undertaking this act, he developed a whole new lifestyle for himself.

With the westward movement of this young man, life in the area began to change. The old days were now only a memory of a glorious past, and a whole new world began to come into existence.

The Coming of Schools

As soon as homes were established in the Avella area, families began to first make plans for creating a place to hold public worship. Their second priority that followed closely on the heels of the desire for churches was the dream of having a place for public education of their young.

As structures began to be built to serve as churches, those buildings very often doubled as schoolhouses. Typical of this trend was in Cross Creek Village where the old log church that had been erected in 1779 was used on week days for school sessions. Most of these were Subscription Schools where parents who could afford it, "subscribed" to meet the expenses of the school in return for permission to send their children to be educated. The teacher was scantily paid and often was a local student home from some state college while taking off time to earn some money for his own education.

The passage of the first Public School Law in Pennsylvania took place in 1834. It provided for a school district to be set up in each township with a tax on real estate to support the project. Each township had the option to accept or reject the law.

When the vote was taken, Cross Creek Township, which at that time included the present Jefferson Township, voted in favor. But Hopewell, which included the present Independence Township, rejected it.

William Patterson, of Patterson Mills, was the most prominent advocate of the Public School Act and devoted countless time of his life in the effort to convince the people of its importance. Eventually, after making alterations on a few unpopular items, all townships in the state approved the bill.

Because the Cross Creek valley was largely very rural, one-room schools were its first attempt to comply with the law. The first such structure in Avella was the "Old" Buckeye Valley building, built where Alexander Wells had placed his first grist mill – where the North Fork flows into the main stream of Cross Creek. This was, of course, where the Economy Store Building was later built.

When the area became more populated, a two-room structure was built a short distance away. Pupils from both sides of the creek – both Cross Creek and Independence townships – attended this school. There were, of course, no actual bridges, so Independence kids crossed on a log foot bridge over the creek for the final segment of the walk to school. It is said that some of them followed their Dad's thinking and did as the adults did. There were no bridges on the roads where people had to travel by horse or buggy either. So the general solution to this problem was one of plain common sense. They forded the creeks wherever the water seemed to be the lowest.

Building the Wabash

The single most important event responsible for the creation of the village of Avella was the coming of the Wabash Railroad through the early years of the twentieth century. And with this prestigious happening, tremendous change in the ethnic population of the area took place.

Alexander Wells, the founder of the first settlement here, was of English descent as were many of the first settlers. Close upon the heels of these Englishmen were the Scotch-Irish who bore such names as Vance, Patterson, Campbell, Brown, Liggett, Buxton, and Scott. By the nation's centennial celebration in 1876, these families were well established in the present Avella area. After the passing of the first generation of settlers, their descendants who had stayed on the land, continued to live where their ancestors had established themselves. But the building of the Wabash Railroad changed all of that.

Those persons responsible for arranging for the railroad construction recognized one very vital point. If the railroad were ever to become an actuality, immigrant labor was necessary.

An account of this operation as written by A.D. White in 1976 in honor of the nation's bicentennial, says it best.

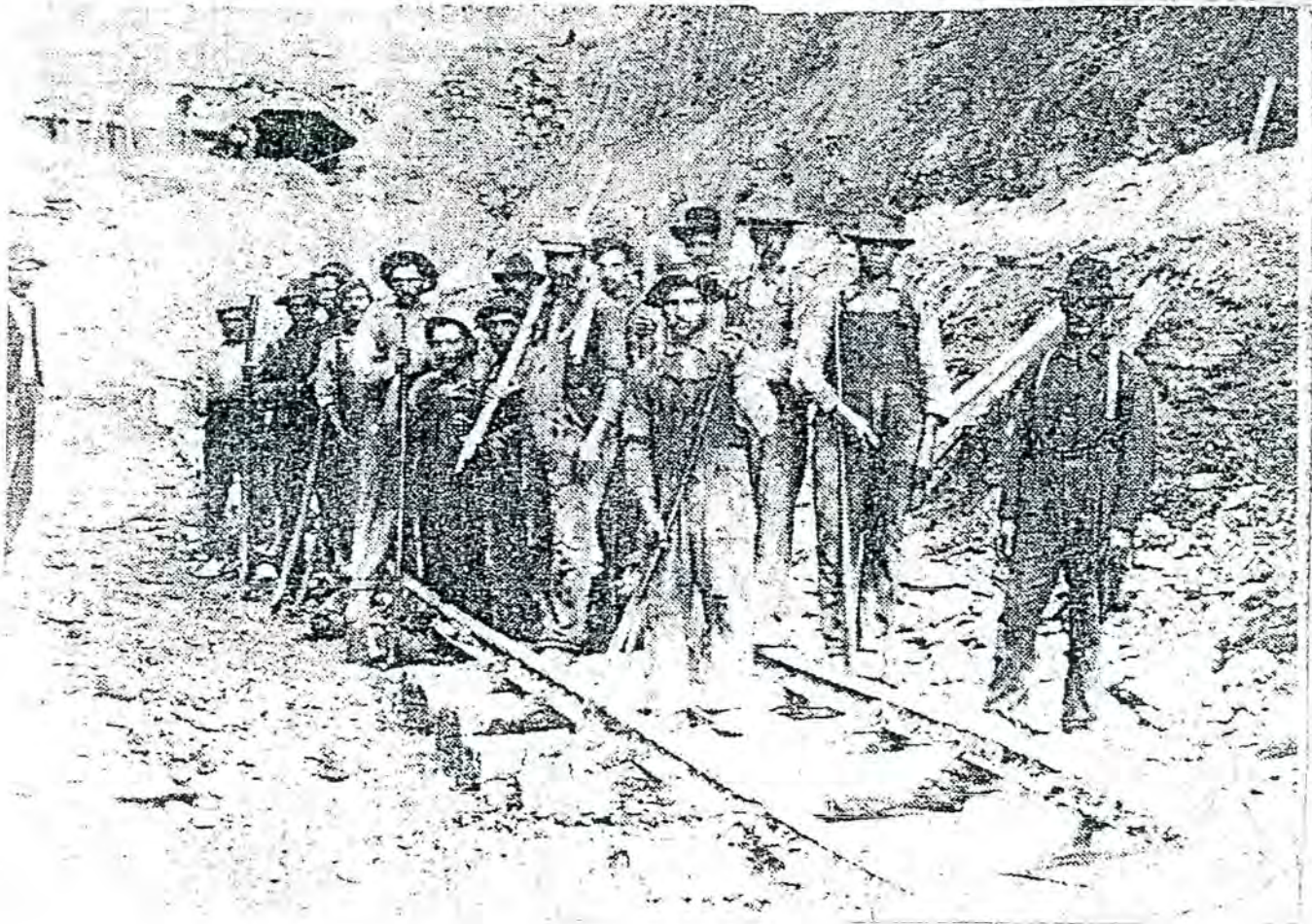
" The railroad bed was built by what would now seem to be very primitive methods, since actual horsepower was used in operating the plows and scoops in moving soil since cuts and fills were made as the roadbed was being prepared. Also, this involved much hand labor in 'pick and shovel' work, so there was a demand for cheap manual labor. This was supplied to the contractors by the importation of laborers from southern Europe, mostly from Italy. Agents would be sent to the 'old' country to enlist these men, and they would be brought by ship to New York City,

then by rail to either Burgettstown or Wellsburg, and then 'walked out' to the various labor camps along the railroad right-of-way.

Wages for this work were not high and part of the pay was in board and lodging supplied at the camps by the contractors. Sanitary conditions were not of the best and sickness among the laborers was frequent. In the midst of the railroad building, an epidemic of smallpox broke out in the camps near Avella, and the mortality was high, with the victims being quickly buried near the right-of-way.

These men, we suppose, were, for the most part, single, or if they were married, their wives and families could not accompany them here under such conditions. After the railroad was completed, those who had survived, moved on to other construction jobs or, in some cases, returned to their native country."

In discussing this situation with the author many years ago, Mr. White stated that these laborers died by the dozens, with no proper burial attempted. The high level of contagion of smallpox at that time was such that any person who came near the body of one of the victims was playing with death. They were buried with large numbers of bodies thrown together in one grave. These so-called graves were made



Building the Wabash

right along the tracks, or on the tops of the tunnels that were in the process of being dug, or wherever they could get the bodies into the ground and covered as quickly as possible. No records were kept of the number of persons buried or of the location of their final resting places. No one even stopped to write down their names. Most of their families back in Europe never knew what had become of them in the New World. What a tragedy! They gave their young lives in the creation of the area's greatest engineering feat in the 230 + years since Alexander Wells first laid eyes on the spot where the North Fork of Cross Creek emptied into the main stream. This master undertaking stands alone in its importance to the Avella area's survival over all of this time period. But at what a terrible price was this mammoth accomplishment created- this building of the Wabash Railroad.

The Coal Mining Story

In the days of the early settlers, the log homes in which they lived were heated by wood from the surrounding forests, which was, of course, free and very plentiful. Every log cabin or log house had a large fireplace, and in addition to providing heat, this operation also assisted in clearing the land of trees, enabling them to grow crops and graze cattle and sheep.

As frame houses came into existence, kitchens eventually had cast-iron stoves, and each of the other rooms of the better frame houses also had its own fireplace. Settlers soon realized that regardless of the abundance of forests available, cutting trees and splitting wood for fuel was not an easy job.

Most farms had coal located on the property near enough to the surface to be accessed without undo difficulty. If not, a neighbor's country coal bank could be tapped for a few cents per bushel. As time went by, just about every family switched from burning wood to heating with coal.

Although business-minded men must have mulled over in their minds the possibility of creating coal-mining businesses, the chore of getting the coal from the mines to the markets presented a major problem. Thus it was that the construction of the Wabash Railroad was an answer to their prayers.

Persons having capital to invest began buying up land where coal veins were known to exist. When the first through train west passed through the area on July 2, 1904, it put the growing little village of Avella "on the map".

A.D. White had the following to say about the coming of the coal mines. "With the opening of the mines, a more stable and dependable type of labor was required. This called for the use of "family men" who began coming into the valley in increasing numbers. It was the usual procedure for the operating coal company to provide housing for their employees, resulting in the construction of "blockhouses" in which the miners might live at the mining camps. If the immigrant miner could afford to bring his family, they arrived "bag and baggage" as the miner sought employment and a place for him and his family to live. These families often provided board and lodging for fellow countrymen who were either single or had left their families to come later. In this way, the valley became quickly populated with these people in the various mining camps."

The Role of Samuel Stewart Campbell

Before the town of Avella was laid out shortly after 1900, the land on which it is located was comprised of two farms. The part which was one day to contain the Avella Lumber and Supply Company and the Lincoln National Bank was the farm of Samuel Stewart Campbell. The entire surface of what would become the village was at that point entirely agricultural.

Samuel S. Campbell descended from the Campbell family who came to the area from York County as one of the area's first pioneer settlers and took up property on what is known today as Serenity Farms. This Samuel was the 4th generation of the family in the area. The late A.D. White who knew Sam personally during their lifetimes, had this to say about him:

"I remember Mr. Campbell very well. He was a large man, well built, and of commanding appearance. After selling his farm out in lots, he had a competence in life and was a sort of country gentleman, although always plain and affable, and NEVER pretentious. He had a good singing voice and belonged to a male quartet which sang at many community gatherings in his day. He helped organize the Lincoln National Bank and served as its president. He was part owner of Avella Lumber and Supply Company which he passed later to his son and then to his grandson. He established the Campbell Theatre in Avella and helped organize the Presbyterian Church. To Mr. Campbell's interest, foresight, and industry, we may attribute the planning of this end of the town of Avella."

The original farmhouse of the Campbells stood about where the railroad tracks were later laid. When the railroad went through in 1902-1904, the house was moved farther up the hill with the use of logs, skids, and horsepower. Later, this Sam Campbell built, on what was then bottom land, the beautiful mansion house now known for over a century as the Campbell Homestead. With the coming of the railroad, he had laid out his property in building lots that sold at top prices. He was, in actuality, the founder of Avella.

During his lifetime, Sam Campbell had his share of heartaches. His first wife died at the age of 30, leaving him with a son aged about three years and a daughter not quite two. Ten years later, he married again. But after seven more years, this wife was tragically killed by lightning during a thunderstorm. Samuel lived until the age of 83, dying in 1932.

William J. Brown - His Part in Creating Avella

When plans were laid for building the Wabash Railroad through the area now known as Avella, the owner of the second farm where the village now stands was William James Brown. This land lay to the west of the farm owned by Samuel Campbell. On this land once stood the second grist mill built by Alexander Wells. It was later converted into a sawmill and operated many years after the grist mills had

become a thing of the past. The big stone house built by Richard Wells dominated this area until the 1940s when it was dismantled.

William Brown had been born in Cross Creek Township in 1840 near Walkers Rocks, the second of six children of Irish immigrants who had come to the Cross Creek area in 1837. Sometime before 1850 they moved across the creek to Independence Township. On the "old" road, no longer open, between today's Browntown area and Avella Heights, they bought 126 acres that remained as the Brown Homestead for about four generations of Brown descendants. It was in the old log house on this farm that the last of the Brown children were born.

Inasmuch as the youngest of these children, Joseph Ray Brown, spent his entire life in the Avella area, the following information about him is included here. He helped establish the Avella Lumber and Supply Company, conducted a hardware for many, many years, served as postmaster, operated a country coal mine from which he sold coal for a long time, was an excellent musician, and a highly respected prominent citizen all of his life. He and his wife survived a terrible tragedy when a daughter of theirs died at the age of 30, leaving two small children. This sadness was followed less than 30 days later by the death of their youngest son who died at the age of 25 of pneumonia. He had been married but five months at the time. Their remaining children always felt that it was a sorrow from which they never recovered.

William Brown, for whom Browntown was named, at the age of 16, learned the carpentry trade at which he worked for 30 years. It was written of him that he was an expert workman. As he approached the age of fifty, however, he became afflicted with rheumatism. What he did not know was that this affliction was a blessing in disguise. To cope with his problem, he decided to change his occupation for something requiring more outdoor work. Since he had been thrifty during his working years, he had accumulated enough money to purchase a farm of 40 acres, located not far from the old homestead of his parents.

When coal was discovered under this purchase of William Brown, the Wabash Railroad extended its line to tap the region. It was then that he and his neighbor, Sam Campbell laid off their farms in lots that sold for excellent prices. Practically overnight, W.J. Brown became what was termed in those days, a wealthy man. It was thus, in his honor, the area was given the name of Browntown.

As time went by, William became a leader in public affair, a school director and a highly respected member of the Avella community. His streak of bad luck in the form of a rheumatic affliction eventually was the making of him, for through that event he made the choice to buy the land on which Browntown stands today.

William Brown and his wife were the parents of eight children. The last three grew to adulthood and married but remained childless. The stories of their lives are rooted deeply enough in the Avella saga that a brief resume of what transpired is given here.

Anna Mary was a pretty girl with a quiet, reserved temperament. She married a man considered to be one of the most promising young men in the area. The son of a prominent doctor, he worked his way up in the business world and at an early age achieved a coveted position with the Lincoln National Bank at Avella. Life looked rosy for the young couple, but fate had other plans. In 1929, the unforgettable

"Crash" of the stock market sent out shocks that reverberated across the nation, sending even the little isolated village of Avella into total turmoil. From the perspective of the passing of time, most persons today offering opinions about the tragedy, exonerate the chief executive, L.M. Irwin, of any real misdoing in the affair. But the bank never reopened and the citizens of the area lost their entire life savings in one moment of time. For many, it was the end of their world. For some, it was too late to start over. Others struggled to stay alive but never really recovered financially. Some who could not face the reality of their loss simply took their own lives and ended it all. The bank was not solvent and could not withstand the effects of the speculation engaged in by those in charge. Mr. Irwin was disgraced for life and served time in prison for his part in "misdirecting" funds. For Anna and her beloved husband, it was the end of the rose covered pathway they thought they had foreseen for themselves.

Those who knew Anna long after her husband's death, told this author the consistent story that she always maintained that it was not his fault. She returned to the old home of her parents in Browntown to live out her life, stopping anyone who would listen to her tell "the other side of the story". Anna died a heartbroken woman in her 93rd year.

A couple of years after the birth of Anna, the last son of William and his wife was born. George Leonard Brown married Jane Pence, a highly respected teacher and active participant in church affairs. But in her fifties she died of a severe illness, leaving George alone. He had been born in the William Brown homestead and had lived there with his wife until her death. Thus he determined to continue to live there after Jane's passing.

Those who remember George today report that he was a quiet man who minded his own business, but seemed friendly enough if you met him on the street. He was the first person in town to have a radio when radios were the newest thing out, and he would bring it out on the front porch and turn it up loud enough for his curious neighbors to share the enjoyment of his latest treasure. He had no children and was much of a loner. At the age of 75, he tragically took his own life in a moment of great despondency. He was buried with the rest of the family at West Middletown.

According to senior residents of Avella, the Brown children they remember today were always "very proper", fulfilling the expectations of their parents and doing exactly what the children of W.J. Brown would be expected to do. But after the birth of their last child, Mary Alice, it became evident that she was definitely not cut from the same mold as her seven older siblings.

Alice grew to young womanhood and dated the eligible men of the area until she was near the age of 40. At that time, an interesting event took place.

The town physician at the time was Dr. Harry Stunkard, who not only served the town but the mines as well. His obituary at his death had this to say of him:

"Dr. Stunkard was one of the old type country physicians, as no night was too stormy, no mud too deep, or no distance too far for him to answer a call whether the patient was rich or poor. He was considered the friend of the poor man, and his books show thousands of uncollected bills."

He came to Avella in 1905 and after many personal misfortunes, he married Alice Brown. Although 16 years her senior, he was considered a good catch. But in December of 1931, he died unexpectedly of peritonitis following an appendectomy. His wife, Alice Brown Stunkard, never married again.

Alice's lifestyle was not the "Sunday-go-to-meetin' " routine of her older sisters. Quite to the contrary, Alice was what one might label " a party girl". Her favorite hangout was the German Beer Garden down on Buffalo Creek where it was reputed that she maintained a cabin for "entertaining guests". There were those interviewed who told that these shenanigans took place even when Doc Stunkard was still alive. Those who told this story would then state that this did not disturb the doctor in the least because he was inclined to be a little "partyish" himself. Alice died in 1969 at the age of 85, and was buried with the other Browns at West Middletown.

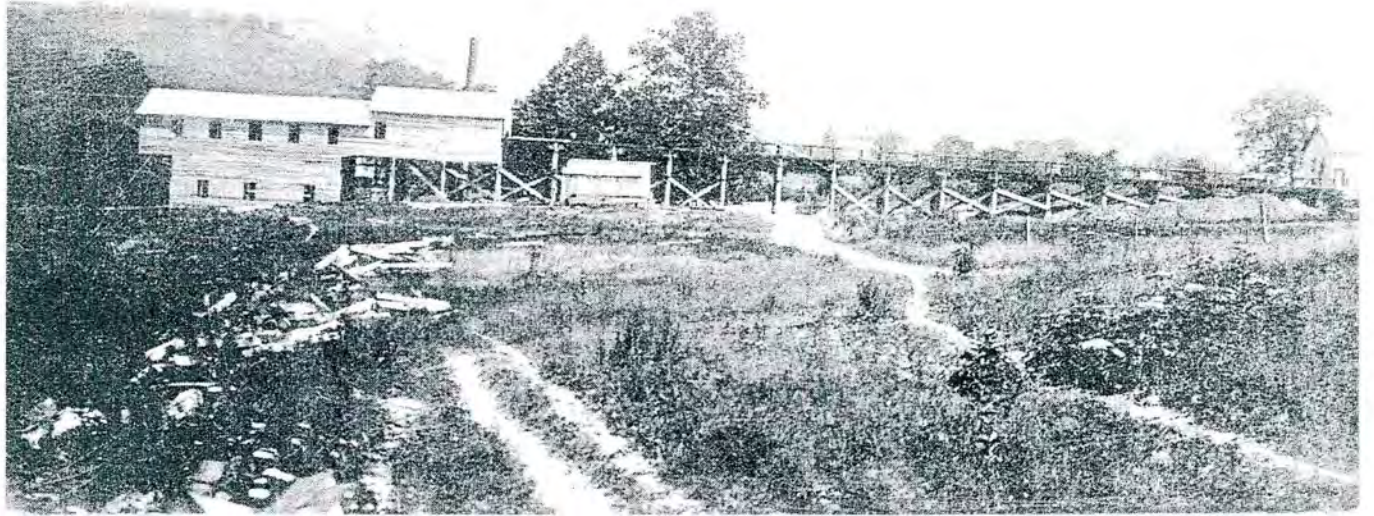
These last three Brown children had lived out their lives in Browntown in the family house. After their deaths, it was sold and later dismantled.

The outbuildings and the barn where George Brown took his own life in 1957, have all disappeared. Well kept houses line the quiet street that was one time the barnyard, orchard, and fields of W.J. Brown. No one living today appears to know for certain where the old log house of William's parents once stood. But the name of Brown is far from gone. Residents point with pride at the sign on the sharp bend of the road from Avella to Meadowcroft Village. It stands just within what was once the shadow of Richard Wells' stone mansion house. Below it, in a vacant lot, is the grinding stone from Alexander Wells' old mill. The Brown family, it is true, is gone from Avella. But the story of their lives should remain forever a part of the history of the village. The memory of them should be prompted by the sign at the end of the road that says it all in one word - BROWNTOWN.

Browntown - 1941



Donohoe Mine

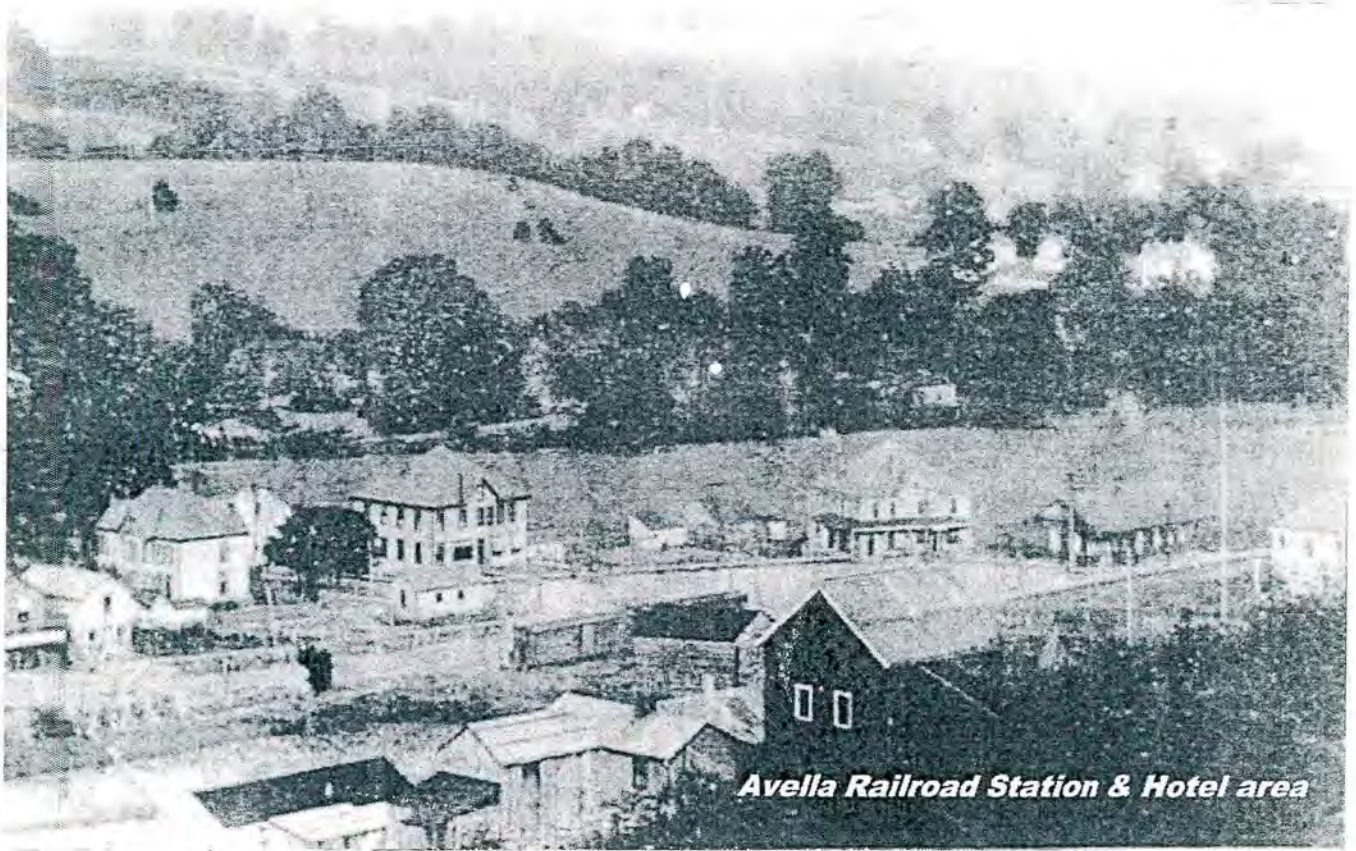


Main street Avella about 1920



1375

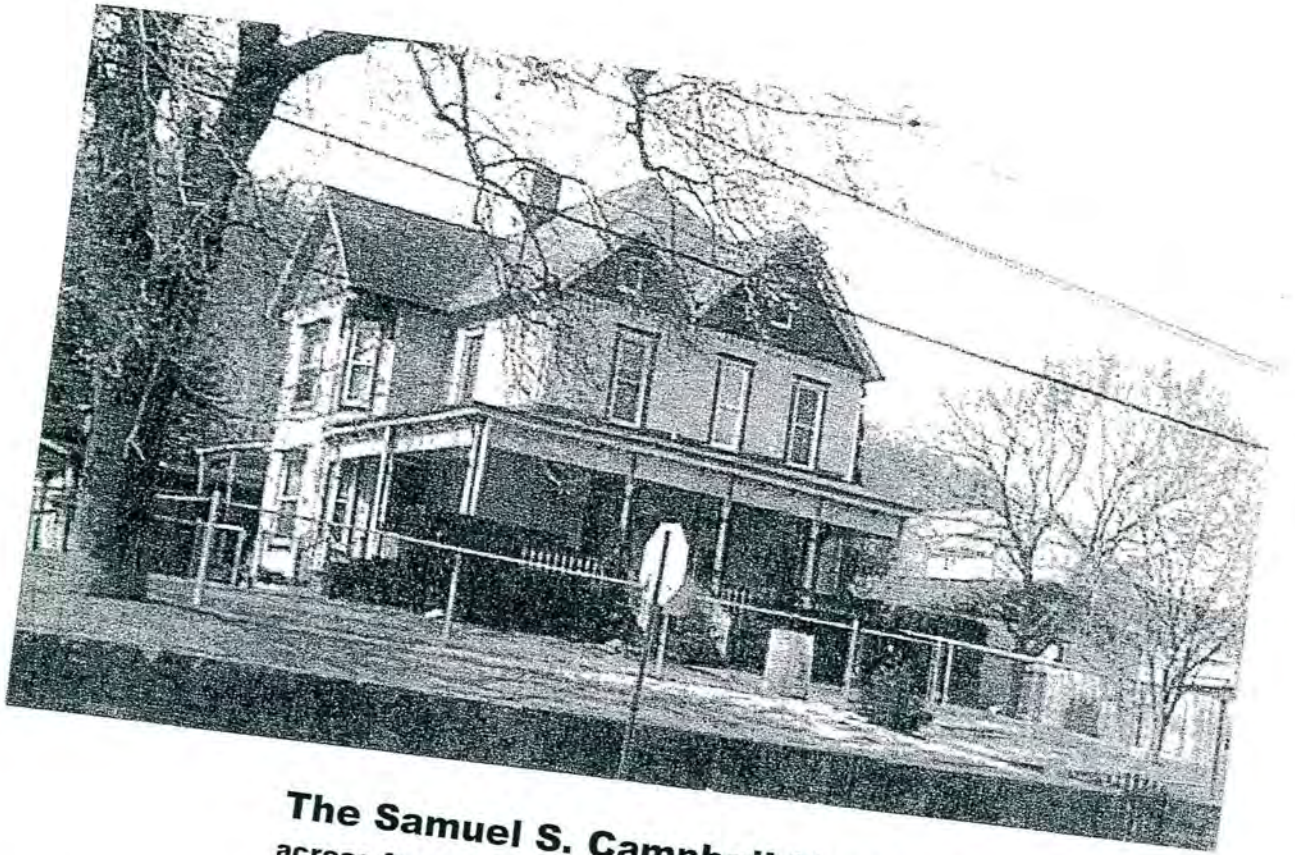
MAIN STREET, AVELLA, PA.



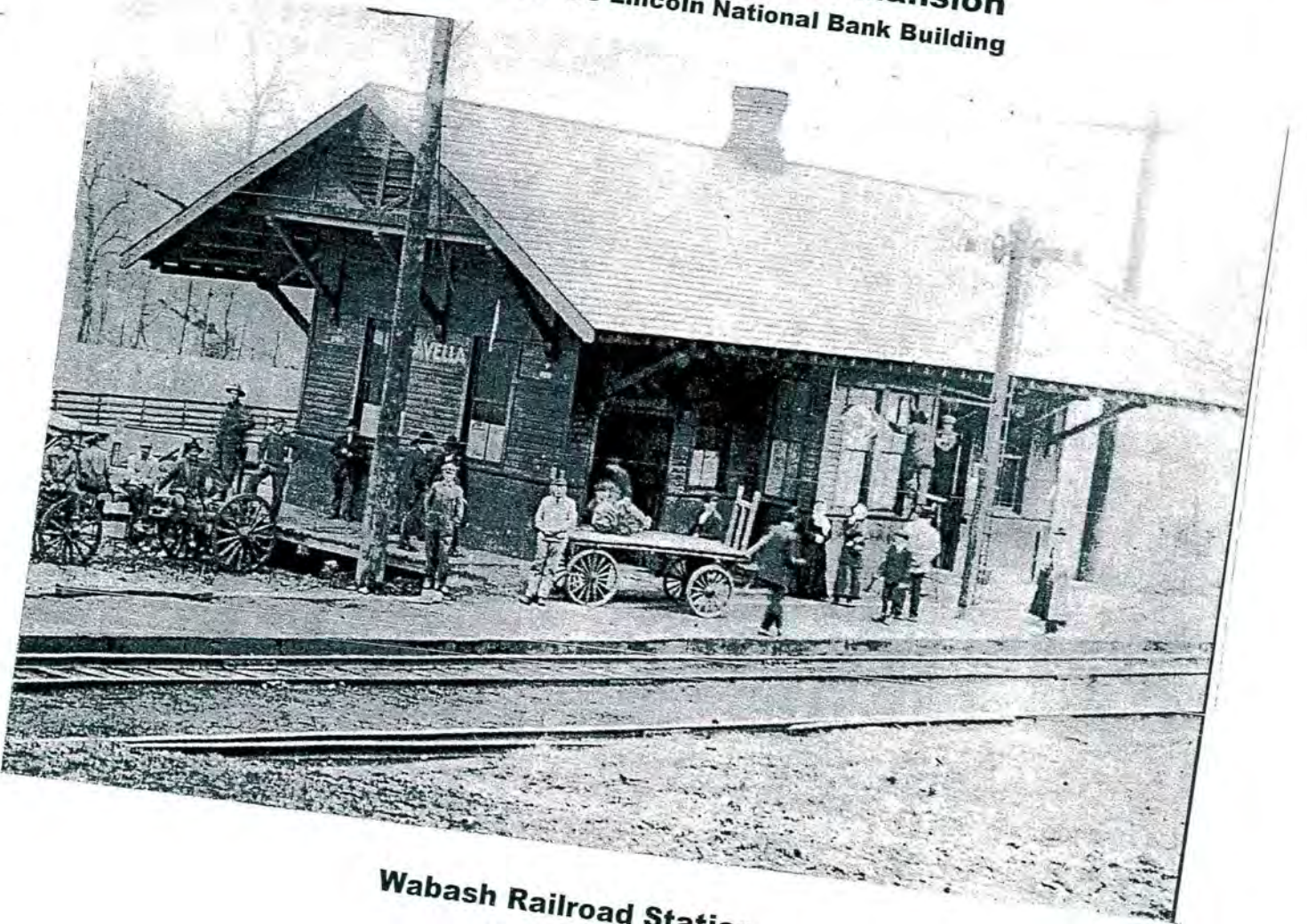
Avella Railroad Station & Hotel area



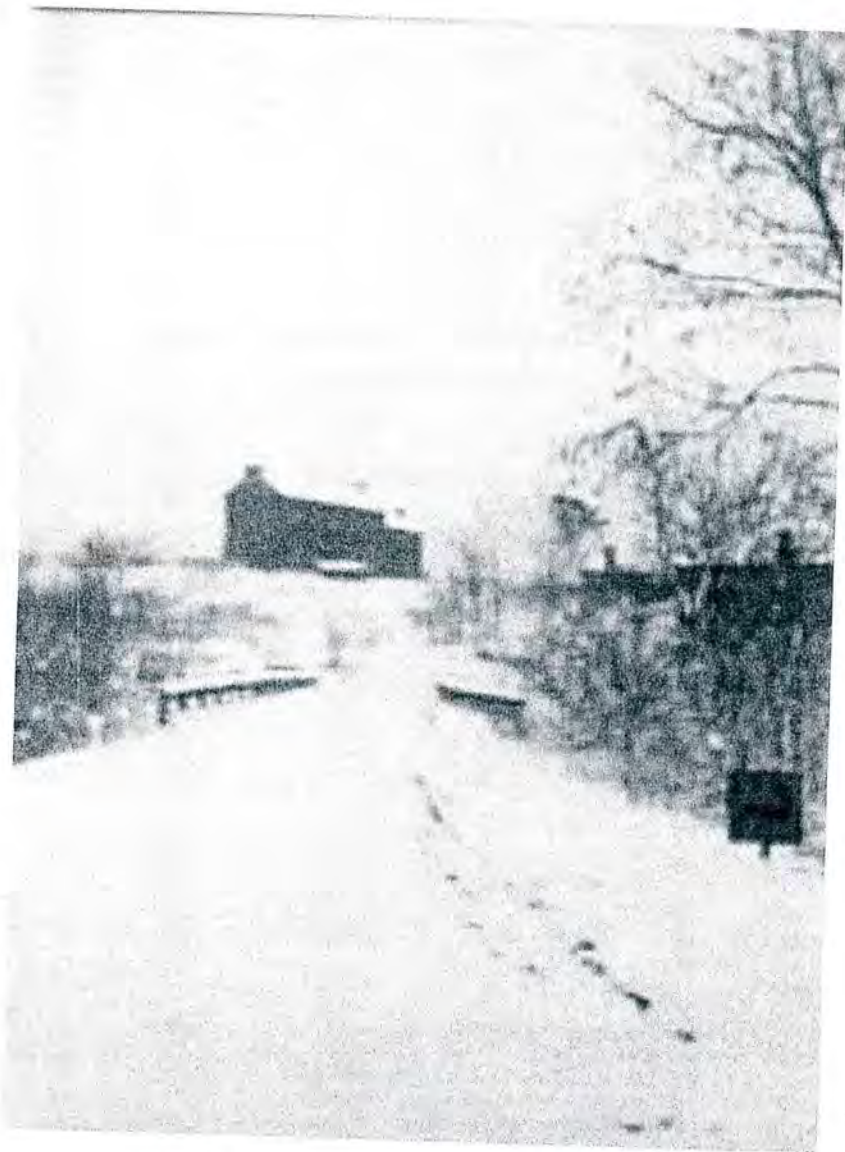
AVELLA IN THE days of activity at the railroad station along the Wabash, and when Samuel D. Majors operated the "General Merchandise" store. The Campbell house is seen between the two buildings, in the distance. Railroad action began in 1904. No date is available for this post card picture.



The Samuel S. Campbell Mansion
across from the Lincoln National Bank Building



Wabash Railroad Station
Avella, PA



Richard Wells stone mansion
taken from near Browntown
by Elio Cecchini



Elio Cecchini
front of Duquesne Mine Office
rail line to tipple behind it