

The Tailor of Freeland: Everyday Life, Labor, and Community in a Pennsylvania Town

By

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Abstract

In this thesis, Emily Pecora tracks social and economic change in Freeland, Pennsylvania, a non-mining (freehold) town in northeastern Pennsylvania, once the anthracite-mining region of the state. She grounds her study in the life and business of a single individual, Ralph Pecora (1887-1959), who owned and operated a tailor shop on the town's main street for more than fifty years. By looking at the specific ways in which his business changed in response to the multiple social and economic pressures that affected his trade and his community as the twentieth century progressed, she explores larger questions of community, identity, labor, immigration, and place. Pecora focuses her work on changes that occurred at the level of everyday life, and everyday lives, offering a complement to studies dealing with larger narratives.

Preface

*Hubbabub hullabaloo
Two hundred cars will do*

*Hoist away, every day
Claim the coal; make it pay*

*In Freeland so frisky
They sell ice cream and whiskey*

*So whack for old Woodside,
It's my darling old place.¹*

Without anthracite coal mining, Freeland wouldn't have existed, but Freeland wasn't a coal town or, as the locals said, "patch" town. (See Figure P.1 for a contemporary map showing Freeland's location within the state.) When this undated song was written, "darling old" Woodside, the site of a colliery, was. In patch towns, a coal company owned the land, the houses, and a company store, which was, by law, the only business in town. Patch towns were dry towns—no whiskey was sold in the company store. (Apparently, no ice cream was sold there, either). Just as the company store was the only place to shop in a patch town, the company-owned mine was the only place to work. Freeland, by contrast was literally a "free land." Land and home ownership were private, and small businesses and other non-mining forms of employment were prevalent. Freeland's name was intended to make a statement, the same statement made by "Independence Avenue," the main commercial street in the freehold community of Shamokin, 25 miles to the south. In New England communities, town and street names based upon "independence" and "freedom" reference the nation's liberation from its once

¹ George Korson, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch: Songs and Stories of the Anthracite Industry* (Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, Inc, 1964), 5.

colonial status. In anthracite counties of northeastern Pennsylvania, these names were direct challenges to the mining companies.

In the late nineteenth century, Freeland was one of only two freehold communities in Luzerne County, a county in which 65 percent of the housing was owned or rented by mining companies in 1900.² (See Figure P.2 for an 1873 map showing Freeland, at that time called “Freehold,” and its nearest patch towns.) The other Luzerne County freehold town, Hazleton, has been the subject of monographs by the anthropologist Dan Rose and the historian Harold Aurand.³ Freeland, a smaller and younger community, has been the focus of no scholarly studies and is rarely mentioned in regional histories or overviews of the anthracite industry. Freeland had likely escaped scholarly notice because it is such a small town—just 7,500 residents at its peak, and approximately half that population today; and because it enjoyed such a short-lived period of prominence and growth—the span from its founding to its current state of decline was only a hundred years. But Freeland’s past has not been lost. In the past two decades, a small group of Freeland residents and ex-residents have taken up the project of preserving the history of their hometown. In 2007, former Freeland policeman and YMCA Directory Tom Landers formed the Freeland Historical Society, which meets monthly and invites “Freelanders and Freeland friends” to attend.⁴ In 2006, Charlotte

² Dan Rose, *Energy Transition and the Local Community: A Theory of Society Applied to Hazleton, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 66.

³ Rose, a geographer, is the author of a 1981 monograph titled *Energy Transition and the Local Community: A Theory of Society Applied to Hazleton, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). Aurand has written several books on the history of the anthracite. The one dealing with Hazleton in particular is *Population Change and the Local Community: Ten Years in a Coal Town* (Susquehanna University Press, 1986.)

⁴ “News and announcements,” History of Freeland website, <http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/ct0u/news.html>, accessed May 19, 2009.

Tancin, who grew up in Freeland and is now a research librarian at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, created a “History of Freeland” website, which she regularly updates with Freeland documents and artifacts.⁵ The late Charles Stumpf published a series of articles on the history of Freeland in a local magazine called *Panorama* in the 1990s, and later republished the series as a 47-page illustrated, black-and-white booklet, which he sold for \$10 in local stores.⁶ These homegrown historians do not hide their personal attachments to their subject. As Charles Stumpf writes in a postscript to his work, “[I]t has been a labor of love.”⁷

My grandmother, Amelia Pecora, was a Freelanders for the first twenty-seven years of her life. She was the daughter of a tailor, Ralph J. Pecora, who was himself the son of another Freeland tailor, John Pecora, an Italian immigrant. Ralph J. Pecora has been characterized by one of his daughters-in-law as “very reserved.” My grandmother exhibited that same reticence. She rarely talked about what she had done earlier that day, let alone told stories about who she had been earlier in her life. Although we lived only twenty miles from Freeland, my grandmother never took us there. If she went back on her own to visit friends or relatives, she never talked about these visits with us. There were a few stories that were safe or comfortable for her, and these she told over and over: how she and her friend Harriet would sit on Harriet’s back porch on hot days and watch movies through the propped-open exit doors of the theater next door; how this same Harriet, whose mother always had her on a diet, showed up at the Pecora house at dinner

⁵ Charlotte Tancin’s site can be accessed at <http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/ct0u>

⁶ Although Stumpf’s booklet is no longer available at any retail outlets, many Freeland residents own several copies and are happy to share one with interested parties.

⁷ Charles K. Stumpf, *Freeland* (Hazleton: Panorama, 199?), reprint of articles that originally appeared in the pages of *Panorama* magazine, July 1991 through Dec. 1993, 47.

time so that she would be invited to eat with them; how, when my grandmother wanted to tan her legs, her mother would make her wear a skirt over her shorts to walk from the sidewalk-facing front of the house to the back yard. These stories didn't tell me much about who my grandmother had been as a child and young woman, or what her hometown had been like at its peak, but they did offer one very basic and very important lesson about Freeland: it was a place where people had lived.

I also knew, whether through things my grandmother or my parents said, that, for the most part, Freeland was a place where people no longer lived. There are dozens of these once-lively/now-dead towns scattered throughout the part of Pennsylvania where I grew up. When I got my driver's license, my friends and I began a series of Friday- and Saturday-night excursions to visit these places. We parked on what had once been bustling downtown streets and walked up and down crumbling sidewalks, laughing at the strangeness of another era's lawn ornaments and window knick-knacks, reveling in the frozen-in-time enchantment of empty storefronts and faded facades. We finished these evenings happy: pleased with ourselves for thinking of making these trips; pleased with these towns for giving us a sought-after, dream-like thrill. But then I went to Freeland, not with my friends but alone, and experienced no pleasure, no enchantment, no dreaminess, no thrill. In those other towns, as a complete outsider, I had been free to experience the "dead town" as a sensation, an abstraction, a prompt for a desired mood. In Freeland—looking at the parking lot which has taken the place of my great-grandfather's tailor shop, at the empty storefronts where my grandmother had once shopped, at the condemnation notices on the doors of houses that had once been homes—I first became aware of the human sorrow of so much emptiness and decay.

It is easy to diagnose what happened to Freeland and to the rest of these communities: the mines closed and the towns died. But a diagnosis is only one way of understanding, one which too easily becomes an excuse to look away; if we are searching only for causation, we can turn our backs as soon as it has been determined. A diagnosis provides a label and a category, but not that most basic and important lesson imparted to me by my grandmother: that these were towns where people lived. A diagnosis tells us nothing about the day-to-day and moment-to-moment existence of places that, at their peak, were vibrant and lively homes to their residents, or the day-to-day and moment-to-moment experience of decline.

Thomas Dublin has done an excellent job of documenting the rise and decline of the anthracite mining industry at this level of experiential detail.⁸ From his several books and articles on the experiences of miners and their wives, readers learn not only about wages, unionization, and strikes, but also about the physical processes and physical feelings of working in a mine or (as many miners' wives did) a garment factory; about the look and feel of patch-town streets and homes; about the many personal and interpersonal factors involved in decisions to stay after the mines had closed or to move away. In the introduction to his book of oral histories, *When the Mines Closed*, Dublin writes that his work has been motivated by the belief that miners and their families “were not simply objects acted upon by larger social and economic forces, but human beings with values and beliefs who made choices under difficult circumstances.”⁹ He acknowledges his own debt to the social historian Herbert Gutman who, Dublin writes,

⁸ Dublin's two most extensive works on the anthracite industry are *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) and, in collaboration with Walter Licht, *The Face of Decline* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.)

⁹ Dublin, *When the Mines Closed*, 4.

“took as his starting point the words of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: ‘The essential ... is not what life has done to people, but what people do with what life has done to them.’”¹⁰

Dublin’s work provides readers with an invaluable body of stories, but they are only half of the story of the decline of the anthracite region, for around patch towns, full of miners, arose freehold towns, full of small businesses. As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, small businesses were the reason for Freeland’s existence, and in turn the reason for the town’s importance—both economic and symbolic—to residents of nearby mining towns. Freeland’s small businesses were both places to buy things that were not available or were forbidden in mining towns, and proof that the mining companies did not own everything, that their power was not total. Independent store owners often appear as heroes in miners’ recollections of particularly tough times. During strikes and depressions, they extended unlimited credit to regular customers and, when work started up again, asked for no interest on what they were owed. For those who lived in Freeland itself, small businesses played a significant role in establishing the “hominess” of a home town. Independently-owned saloons, cafes, restaurants, and shops were places where people living in small and crowded houses could meet and talk; where newcomers could be introduced to their neighbors; where a community came to feel like more than just a collection of homes. The importance of Freeland’s small businesses is reflected in the work of the town’s homegrown historians. Although Charles Stumpf includes schools, churches, factories, and the coal industry in his history, the majority of his work addresses the rise and fall of various commercial establishments. By far the most actively updated and visited part of Charlotte Tancin’s website is the “20th and

¹⁰ Dublin, *When the Mines Closed*, 4.

Early 21st-Century Businesses” section, which is full of contributed pictures and recollections from various residents and ex-residents reminiscing about people like the proprietor of Mom’s Candy Store, who “had infinite patience with kids who couldn’t make up their minds about how to spend their nickels” or places like the “the wonderful private little rooms” in Belekanich’s Café, which was located in an old schoolhouse.

These chapters will focus on the life of just one of Freeland’s small business owners: my grandmother’s father, the tailor Ralph J. Pecora, who owned a shop on Centre Street, Freeland’s main commercial thoroughfare, for more than forty years. (See Figures P.3 and P.4 for images of Ralph as a young and older man). Although basing my narrative around the story of a single individual has obvious limitations, I believe that this approach offers a unique opportunity to explore the detailed, lived experience that I am seeking. A single person cannot be discussed as a mere “instance” of a generalization or a trend; he or she must be understood in terms of the day-to-day moments of his or her lived life. These moments can reveal aspects of the human experience that aggregate data cannot, and can keep the historian grounded in fact when he or she might be tempted to pursue a grand narrative beyond the evidence at hand. I take my cue from historian Barbara Tuchman, who based her 1978 study of the late Middle Ages, *A Distant Mirror*, on a single individual and offered this justification: “Apart from human interest, this [approach] has the advantage of enforced obedience to reality. I am required to follow the circumstances and the sequence of an actual medieval life, lead where they will, and they lead, I think to a truer version of the period than if I had imposed my own plan.”¹¹

I chose Ralph Pecora as the individual upon which to focus my narrative for many reasons. The first, quite honestly, is that he was my great-grandfather. This fact not only

¹¹ Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), xiv.

made me aware of his existence and of the broad outlines of his life story, it also allowed me access to a wide body of spoken and material evidence that would have been more difficult to obtain were he a stranger. I also chose Ralph Pecora, out of many possible other relatives, because he was a tailor. The process of making by hand what are now routinely mass-produced goods fascinates me, as does the nature of the interaction between such a craftsman and his customers, a very different relationship from that between the manufacturer and consumers of mass-produced goods. Ralph's story, I found, offered a rich opportunity to explore larger questions of human responses to economic and social change. The span of Ralph's life fits neatly over two peaks and troughs—one following the rise and fall of anthracite mining towns, and the other tracing the economic viability of the tailoring trade. Born in 1887, at the time one of less than a thousand residents of a town that had been christened just twelve years earlier, he was a child in a town that was still in its childhood itself. He started his own business in 1908, when the number of men working as tailors in America was at its peak.¹² He prospered during the 1910s and early 1920s, selling hand-made suits to the middle and upper-middle class residents of then-booming Freeland and other prosperous towns nearby. He struggled throughout the Depression of the 1930s, which affected the anthracite industry deeply, and continued to struggle until his death in 1959, by then a resident of a region and a worker in a cottage industry that did not enjoy a post-World War II boom. He was a tailor, during the years in which precisely-fitted formal menswear was being replaced by looser-fitting factory-produced clothing. He was a resident of a freehold town in the

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1910, Thirty-Third Number: Occupations, Labors, and Wages" and "Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1913, Thirty-Sixth Number: Occupations, Labors, and Wages," Statistical Abstracts 1901-1950, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab1901-1950.htm>.

anthracite mining region, during the years in which oil and natural gas became cheaper and more profitable sources of fuel.

While Ralph is the focal point of this narrative, I warn the reader not to expect to get to know him well. Even though I interviewed several people who knew him -- six of Ralph's grandchildren, his last living son, his employee's stepson, several of his neighbors, even his paperboy -- Ralph's personality, his specific way of being in the world, proved elusive. While all of these people remembered him, the things that they told me—that Ralph was nice, patient, dignified, well-respected, skilled, reserved—left me with only a vague impression of Ralph as a man. In photographs, as well, I found it difficult to read emotions or desires into Ralph's postures and expressions. At first, I found this opaqueness frustrating, but as I spent more time with the plethora of other evidence available to me—maps, census data, business records, notebooks, artifacts—his personal opaqueness came to seem part of a larger whole, further evidence of a world in which the individual was understood in relation to his trade and his community, rather than as an atomized being. I was reminded of another historical study which focuses on an individual, in which the character of the individual herself remains something of a mystery: Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale*. Although Ulrich's narrative is centered on the diary of Martha Ballard, who worked as a midwife in 18th-century Maine, the most "personal" thing we ever learn about Martha is that she had a propensity to fall off of her horse. Instead, we encounter Martha through the things she writes about in her diary: her chores, her journeys, her interactions with her neighbors, the items she barter, and the births she attends. Ulrich cautions the reader not to speculate too far beyond this

somewhat impersonal everyday evidence, for, she writes, “To understand Martha’s world we must approach it on its own terms.”¹³

Freeland’s historians provide a model for what the terms of Ralph’s world might have been. Although Charlotte Tancin’s website features some brief narrative passages explaining topics such as “Ethnic Groups,” “Transportation,” and “Early Accounts,” the site is primarily a repository of primary sources: scanned and uploaded maps, photographs, city directories, and gathered recollections from residents and ex-residents, who are invited (on the site’s home page) to contribute their own family memories and artifacts. Charles Stumpf’s history also favors particulars over generalized explanation. His story of Freeland is a sometimes dizzying series of business openings, new schools, and community celebrations during the years of growth; and business, school, and church closings during the years of decline. My own grandmother, unbeknownst to me while she was living, was a Freeland archivist as well. When she died in 2006, my parents found boxes in her house full of mementos of her childhood and young adulthood, and of the town in which she had grown up: school-play playbills, a napkin from her one-year high-school reunion, photographs of her childhood house and of her grandmother’s house, a time book from one of her father’s employees, scraps of paper on which Ralph had written notes on jobs completed and money owed. My grandmother’s saved objects, Charlotte Tancin’s community repository, and Charles Stumpf’s detailed record all have in a common a deep commitment to the particular, the everyday, the concrete. It is not that these collectors of information were or are blind to causal factors; they are simply interested in a specific dimension of history. They would rather collect, hold onto, and

¹³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 32.

keep alive—at least in memory—what has been lost. It would be easy to dismiss such an impulse as nostalgic. But I see something else in it. I see a reverence and a respect for day-to-day and moment-to-moment lived experience, and a reverence that can actually help us talk more objectively about human experience in human terms.

I undertook this project because I am myself both fascinated and troubled by change. To a certain extent, change is a fact of life: the seasons change; the weather changes; babies become children and then teenagers; as adults age, their bodies and faces change with the years; eventually, we all die. In addition to these changes, we are living with changes that are imposed by the “creative destruction” of a capitalist economy. In addition to the inescapable impermanence of our own physical bodies, we must deal with the added insecurity of income, of profession, of community, of identity, of place. There is, of course, excitement in change—the proverbial “opportunity for a better life” cannot exist in a static society—but there is also fear and sorrow, and, in our society, little communicative space for acknowledging them. The economic progress that we as a country pursue and celebrate with such vigor leaves in its wake eddies of often unacknowledged loss. Entire industries, whose workers are skilled practitioners, are rendered obsolete -- along with the workers. Entire towns die. As Thomas Dublin so succinctly puts it, “economic development and decline are flip sides of the same coin.”¹⁴ Often, as in the case of Ralph Pecora, economic decline is nested: a practitioner of a dying trade finds that he is living in a dying town. And yet Ralph Pecora—along with many others like him—did not abandon either his community or his trade. He stayed in Freeland and called himself a tailor until the day he died. We can call this commitment to a dying town and way of life foolish and sentimental. Or we can attempt to understand

¹⁴ Dublin, *Face of Decline*, 182.

what about his home and community, his trade and his business, was so valuable to him;
we can attempt to explain his life, and the life of his community, on their own terms.



Figure P.1: Contemporary map showing the location of Freeland (marked by the “A”) in relation to the nearby anthracite cities of Hazleton, Wilkes Barre, and Scranton, as well its distance from markets in New York City and Philadelphia.

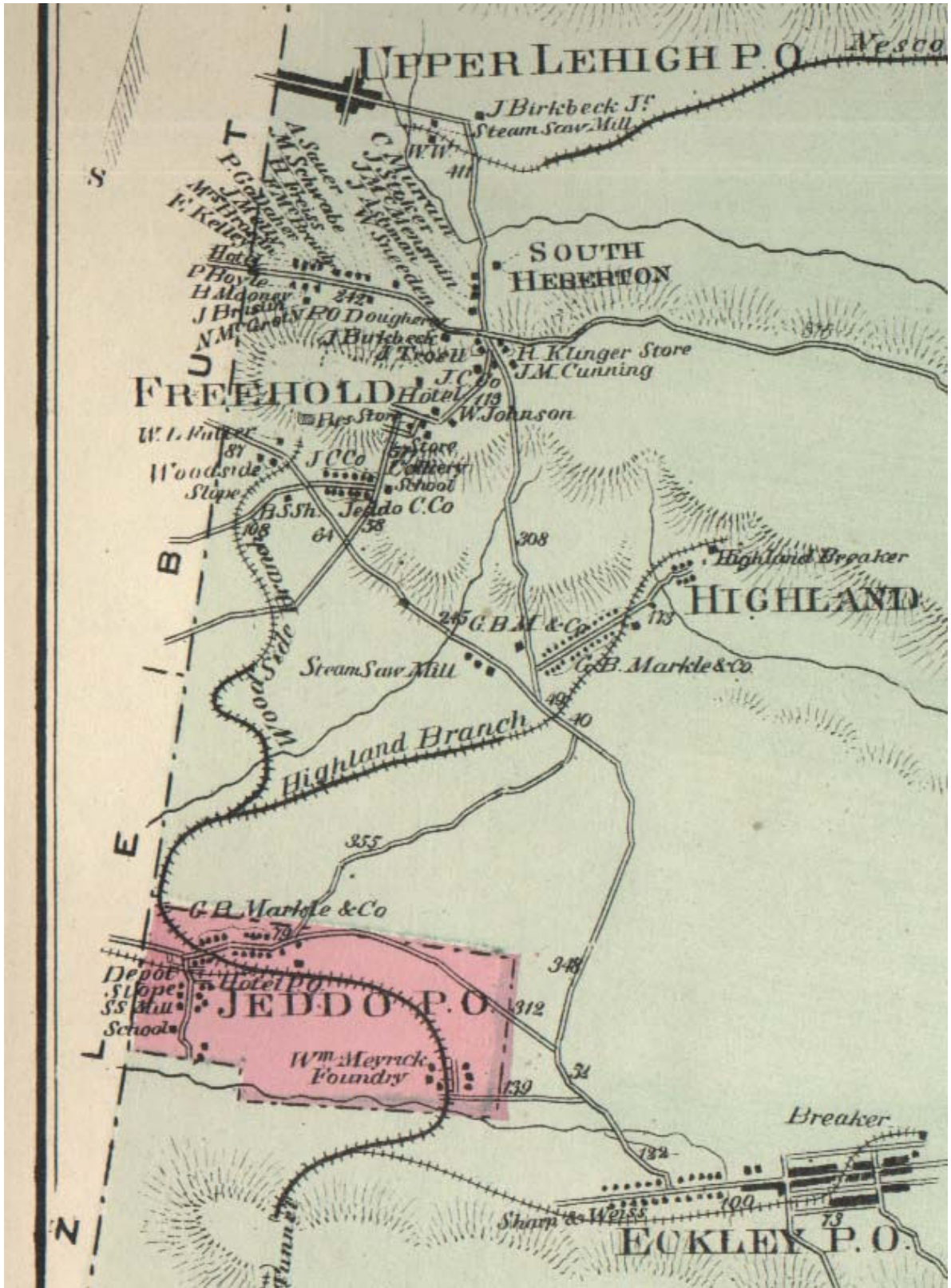


Figure P.2: 1873 map of “Freehold”, the original name given to Freeland, and of the nearby patch towns of Upper Lehigh, South Heberton, Highland, Jeddo, and Eckley.



Figure P.3: Ralph J. Pecora in 1915, when he was twenty-eight years old.



Figure P.4: Undated image of Ralph J. Pecora, likely taken in the late 1950s, shortly before his death at age 72.

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My first debt is to my interview subjects, who in addition to being generous with their time and their memories, offered me the hospitality of their homes, copies of items from their personal archives, and, often, home-cooked meals. I would also like to thank my parents and my friend Amy Connolly, who drove me to these interviews, as (after ten years of living in New York City) I no longer have a license.

To Freeland's local historians, I owe a huge debt. In addition to the wonderful resource of her website, Charlotte Tancin has made available to me photocopies of sources not currently posted online and has reviewed portions of this thesis for errors and misunderstandings. The Freeland Historical Society welcomed me to one of their monthly meetings and provided an admirable example of people working to preserve their own history. Historical Society member Bob Zimmerman was particularly helpful: offering me copies of old photographs, a perceptive analysis of the available archives pertaining to the anthracite region, and a tour of his beautiful old home. Although he passed away before I began working on this project, I also owe a debt to Charles Stumpf, whose booklet *Freeland* was such an important source for my work.

Outside of the anthracite region, I have benefitted from the guidance and generosity of a larger community of scholars. Thomas Dublin not only enthusiastically responded to an email from a stranger describing her anthracite-related project, but sent me every one of his interview transcripts in which someone mentioned Freeland. Stephen Paczolt, at the Library of Congress, took the time to scan and email me each of the 45 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Freeland, Pennsylvania. The numerous scholars

whose published works have inspired me with their careful research, astute analyses, and ability to craft their material into an approachable narrative are too many to name here.

Thank you especially to my adviser Joseph Entin, who read drafts of my work carefully and promptly, and provided specific, supportive, and constructive advice regarding both method and presentation. His dedication to his students and to the principles of academic inquiry is obvious. I feel lucky to have worked with him.

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