Sunbury, PA

Self-Guided Historical Walking Tour

Exploring how natural resource use and development in Sunbury and the surrounding region shaped its history

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Sunbury: At A Glance

Use this map for reference as you complete the historical walking tour. Each stop is highlighted to indicate the era during which the stop held or still holds significance.
PRELIMINARY STOP

Fort Augusta

Fort Augusta and the Hunter House Museum is less than a mile north of the first stop on the walking tour. This historical site sets up the pre-industrial context of Shamokin, the Native American name for modern-day Sunbury. Currently, the Hunter House Museum provides visitors with information on local Native Americans including the Shawnee and Lepane tribes who occupied Sunbury and Packer Island. Fort Augusta, erected in 1756, was the original stronghold of the Susquehanna Valley from the French and Indian War until the close of the American Revolution.

As you drive south to the first stop on the walking tour, be sure to notice the large concrete flood wall lining the river on the right.

STOP 1

The Susquehanna River Flood Wall

Since the founding of Sunbury, the river has played an essential role in economic development, transportation and infrastructure in the area. In 1932, a devastating flood destroyed most of downtown Sunbury, causing structural damage and claiming lives. The flood wall was erected in 1951 as a means of protection against future natural disaster of this magnitude. It saved Sunbury just twenty years later during Hurricane Agnes when the Susquehanna River rose to the level of the wall. This barrier is both a protective measure and isolating boundary, underlining Sunbury’s unique position as a fragile river community.
The Maclay House

William Maclay laid out the City of Sunbury just one year before commissioning this house in 1773. Maclay was an integral part of Sunbury’s physical plan as well as America’s newly found independence. He served the country as an officer in the Continental Army and became one of the first two Senators from Pennsylvania in the United States’ First Federal Congress in 1789. Maclay’s diary is one of the only written accounts of the Senate debates during the ratification of the Constitution.

The Clement House

The Clement House was home to Ira T. Clement, who constructed the first steam saw mill in the area in 1847. These mills were used to produce goods out of local lumber from Williamsport during the booming lumber era. Clement also ran a ferry business to help ship lumber south, further evidence of Sunbury’s contribution to the lumber boom. The wealth from the lumber boom encouraged industrialization in Sunbury which led to more prosperity for the area. The city was home to distilleries, tanneries, brick-making factories, textile mills, and foundries among other industries.

Other industry came in the form of the Silk Mill (right) and the Iron Works (left).
STOP 4
Northumberland County Prison

Sunbury’s fifth and most recently constructed prison was completed in 1877 and is still in use today. An earlier prison, built in 1776, also served as the county courthouse until both institutions were separated in the early 1800’s. following the turn of the 19th century. The prison was built in the style of a medieval fortress by Ira T. Clement (mentioned above). This impressive stone fortress may remind visitors of a time when public hangings and corporal punishment were still widely accepted practices before the turn of the 18th century.

STOP 5
Northumberland County Courthouse

The Northumberland County Courthouse was built in 1865. The building itself was modeled after a Lancaster courthouse designed by architect Samuel Sloan. The Courthouse is a symbol of the new life in Sunbury following the Civil War and the anthracite coal boom that brought wealth and fortune to the area. The building is still used today as Sunbury is the county seat of Northumberland County.
Starting in 1876, the Packer House provided a place for railroad travellers to rest. John Packer was one of the organizers of the Susquehanna Railroad Company, founded in 1861. The Packer family was closely connected to the coal boom of the region and ultimately used their wealth to found Lehigh University. The Packer family remained in the area for years to come and the legacy of the Packer family can be witnessed throughout Sunbury. The prominence of the Packer family name in the Pomfret Cemetery, located on the Hill, is a testament to the families devotion to and legacy in the area.

The Penn Central Railroad station was built in 1872 by the Northern Central Railroad. The line transported both passengers and freight between the coalfields of Eastern Pennsylvania and Baltimore, Maryland. Because of its prominence during the railroad era, Sunbury was an important stop for six central Pennsylvania lines. As a result, Sunbury received wealth from not only the booming coal industry, but also from the visitors that stayed in the many hotels lining its streets. Trains were constantly running through the center of town so pedestrian bridges were constructed to allow citizens to move from one side of the tracks to the other.
On July 4th, 1883, the anniversary of Independence Day, Thomas Edison illuminated his first commercial building. This hotel, located right in downtown Sunbury, was originally known as the City Hotel and was later named the Edison hotel in a ceremony honoring Thomas Edison. Thomas Edison returned to the city to attend this ceremony in 1922. The Edison Electric Illuminating Company was incorporated April 30, 1883. Edison selected six Pennsylvania towns based on local sources of fuel and local capital. Sunbury was chosen, along with Williamsport, Shamokin, Mt. Carmel, Bellefonte and Hazleton, which were all near coal fields, a perfect source for fuel. Edison recognizing Sunbury’s potential is testimony to the city’s prime location in terms of utilizing the rich supply of natural resources in the region. Sunbury was a popular shopping and vacation destination, with hotels running up and down the bustling Market Street.

The Neff Hotel (left), famous for its rooftop garden restaurant, was another popular spot for visitors to rest.
The tiny Squeeze In hot dog restaurant has been in Sunbury since 1945. It holds a record in the Guinness Book of World Records. The current owner of the Restaurant bought it because he had such fond memories of eating there, at the faded orange counter, as a child growing up in Sunbury. Several Sunbury residents recall their first trip to the Squeeze In and also their children’s’ and grandchildren’s’ first trip. The Squeeze In has fans in Sunbury and across the country.

Side trip: If you’re interested in a walk up the hill, you’ll find the Mary Packer House which once served as the home for the Packer family. The house now serves as a nursing home.

First Evangelical Church

On the corner of Fifth and Chestnut, First Evangelical Church is a stunning example of Sunbury’s wealth during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The breathtaking architecture, imitating the Pantheon of ancient Rome, recalls a time of prosperity for the city. You probably noticed several other magnificent churches along your walk through the downtown area. Wealth from the coal industry in the area supported these numerous, impressively built, large churches.
The Chestnut Street Opera House opened on September 12, 1901 and was the home to over 400 vaudeville acts in the early 1900’s. Traveling shows would perform in the house, which seated one thousand people, until it closed in 1936 due to the flood and increasing popularity of motion pictures. The opera house is currently owned and operated by Cole’s Hardware but the unchanged exterior is a tribute to the building’s former glory. As trains were replaced by automobiles, Sunbury’s coveted location and rail lines could not support the bustling downtown it had created. Many Market Street businesses were forced to close their doors. When the Susquehanna Valley Mall was built in 1978 several more businesses closed in response. This opera house turned hardware store is evidence of the changes that have taken place in Sunbury but also demonstrates pride and a stronghold to the town’s lucrative past.

In 1912 two Sunbury residents, Harry and Sigmund Weis founded Weis Markets on Market Street. There are currently 159 stores throughout Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, West Virginia and Maryland. Sunbury remains the corporate headquarters of Weis and also houses one of their largest warehouses and shipping centers. For the past 100 years, Weis Markets has stood as a testament to the work ethic and passion present in the city of Sunbury.
Back to the River

Within the last several years, there has been a desire to re-connect Sunbury with the river that was once visible from most of the town. Every year on the third weekend of August, Sunbury celebrates the river with a River Festival. The festival is a community development initiative that includes arts vendors, a car show, Civil War encampments and cardboard regattas. Currently, the Sunbury Riverfront Project is stabilizing the wall and improving facilities to encourage citizen use of the river and riverfront area.

"My great grandparents, grandparents, parents, wife and I all have enjoyed Sunbury as a wonderful place to live, practice law and to raise and educate our children. Jane and I came back to Sunbury to give our children the enjoyment of the same life I had growing up here - and they really appreciated it."

John A. Carpenter

Sunbury’s relationship with the resources of the area have been crucial to the development of Sunbury’s rich history. From the river to industry, and from railroads to modern day, the city has certainly been through its share of booms and busts, but all the while it has remained a great place to be.

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