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Johnstown: A City of the Past Looking Towards the Future

By Kaison Wills

A White Paper to encourage the youth of Johnstown, PA to work towards improving the city and its community instead of leaving it behind.

It is common to hear the youth of Johnstown, Pennsylvania complain about the lack of activities to do or places to go within the city. One may also hear older generations talk about the lack of business or opportunities there, encouraging their children to leave and find things bigger and better than Johnstown. Why is it that no one wants to stay in Johnstown? This white paper will address how Johnstown witnessed its downfall, has attempted to rebuild itself, and why the youth of Johnstown should step up and become more involved to improve the city that they reside in.

History of Johnstown

Johnstown, also known as the “Flood City”, was founded on the principles of “The American Dream”. It started as a city abundant in steel, coal, and iron. The Cambria Iron Company was founded in 1852 and was purchased by the famous Bethlehem Steel Corporation in 1923, creating many innovative strategies in their mills and supplying thousands of jobs.¹ The coal industry grew alongside iron and steel, becoming the main source of smelting as charcoal was phased out after the second World War.² Unfortunately, the city experienced mass devastation more than once due to three separate floods that occurred in 1889, 1936, and 1977. After the last flood, the mills and other businesses struggled to rebuild, and thousands of jobs were lost.³

Struggling Economy

Ever since the Johnstown flood of 1977, Johnstown’s economy has struggled. The mills closed, many people were forced out due to lack of jobs, and nothing was brought back in order to rebuild all that was lost.⁴ For example, the population of Johnstown spiked in the 1920’s, seeing over 60,000 people living there. 100 years later in 2020, the population sat at just over 18,000 people.⁵ According to the 2023 county population estimates released by the Census Bureau, migration rose in rural communities across the United States with the population mostly being fueled by 25- to 44-year-olds.⁶ However, the previous data shows the exact opposite happening in Johnstown.⁷ World Population Review expects Johnstown to have less than 17,100 people by the year 2029.⁸ Along with the decline in population, Johnstown has also seen a low average

¹ Johnstown Area Heritage Association, *History of Steel*

² Johnstown Area Heritage Association, *History of Coal*

³ Johnstown Area Heritage Association, *1936 & 1977 Floods*

⁴ Johnstown Area Heritage Association, *1936 & 1977 Floods*

⁵ World Population Review, *Johnstown, Pennsylvania Population*

⁶ Cooper Center, *Since the Pandemic*

⁷ World Population Review, *Johnstown, Pennsylvania Population*

⁸ World Population Review, *Johnstown, Pennsylvania Population*

salary over the last few years. Currently, the average salary sits at a little over \$50,000 a year.⁹ Due to the declining population and low salary, many people have turned to alternative ways to make ends meet. The crime rate has increased over recent years, making Johnstown much less safe than it once was. For example, chances of becoming a victim in property crimes such as burglary, theft, or motor vehicle theft are 1 in 34, versus the rest of Pennsylvania where property crime rates happen to 1 in every 64 people.¹⁰ All of these factors play a large role in the economic decline of Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Rebuilding and Reforming

Despite these defining factors of a struggling economy, many officials have begun an attempt to revitalize the city of Johnstown. In September of 2024, U.S. Senator Bob Casey enacted a neighborhood planning grant of \$500,000 to transform two housing complexes in Johnstown.¹¹ The Coopersdale and Oakhurst neighborhoods are the main focuses of this grant, in which Senator Casey plans to improve facilities and businesses in the surrounding areas. This will hopefully bring in more jobs and create new opportunities, specifically for the residents of these homes.¹²

On a more local level, a team of individuals have created a non-profit organization under the name “Vision Together 2025”. This organization strives to create a better community overall within the city of Johnstown. It has very definitive plans that are laid out in different categories such as the following: People Priorities, Economic Priorities, and Governmental Priorities. Under each of these priorities, there are goals and objectives the organization hopes to attain to better Johnstown such as the following: Develop Our Current and Future Leaders by Mentoring and Investing in Our Youth; Improve Health and Wellness; Improve the Economic Vitality of Greater Johnstown; Good Leadership Supporting Public, Civic and Private Systems and Processes; Invest in and Grow Regional Recreational Amenities; Sustain and Leverage Arts and Cultural Organizations; and Promote Johnstown as a Desirable Place to Live, Work, and Visit.¹³ Although Vision Together 2025 maps out their future plans and goals in a way that seems very productive, none of their plan will be feasible without the help and support of the young people of Johnstown.

For the Future

Children that grow up in eastern Pennsylvania are not often taught the rich history of Johnstown. Many students go through school without even knowing of the circumstances that caused the city to be the way it is today. However, knowledge or not, the youth are the ones that will take over businesses, government offices, and change the world as we know it. It is essential that the younger generations are the ones who spend more time learning about Johnstown and creating opportunities for the future, to rebuild the economy and community.

A great way to start gaining knowledge is to explore and understand how Johnstown became the city it is today. There are numerous historical sites in Johnstown, such as the Johnstown Flood National Memorial, the Johnstown Inclined Plane, Staple Bend Tunnel, and so much more. It is

⁹ ZipRecruiter, *What is the Average*

¹⁰ NeighborhoodScout, *Johnstown, PA Crime Rates*

¹¹ Casey, *Casey Delivers \$500,000*

¹² Casey, *Casey Delivers \$500,000*

¹³ O'Reilly, *Vision Together 2025*

common to find plaques at these sites that indicate their importance and provide more background information on their history. Not only this, but there are a few different museums, such as the Johnstown Flood Museum or the Heritage Discovery Center, that serve to educate the community on the history of Johnstown. Visiting these locations is not only educational but can also be fun and engaging for younger people who are looking for something to do.

While history may not always be the most exciting pastime, education is only one of many things that younger generations can do to start working towards the future of Johnstown. Most younger people in the Johnstown area are students. These students typically have opportunities to get involved with their community through their school. Students should make an effort to attend assemblies or presentations that may be presented by local community members or go with a specific club to work on a community service project. For example, on Friday, February 23rd, 2024, local community members went to Conemaugh Valley Jr/Sr High School for a demonstration on the importance of being involved in community service.¹⁴ Members from the local police department, fire department, and EMS personnel came with their vehicles for students to have the opportunity to engage in and ask questions about their livelihoods as local emergency workers.¹⁵ This was an amazing opportunity for so many students to understand and have the opportunity to become involved in community work. Not only did this give students the ability to ask questions and learn about their community, but it was also a way for them to express interest in these careers. On Thursday, April 4th, 2024, the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown hosted the first annual Democracy Bowl in which students gathered to participate in different events that centered on civic engagement.¹⁶ This was another great event that allowed students to explore a different kind of community involvement while also involving themselves in a fun, competitive environment.

If people are not interested in working for their community, there are plenty of other ways to be involved. East Conemaugh Borough in Johnstown often hosts activities and other events to bring the community together. In November of 2024, the borough hosted different events such as a turkey raffle and a music bingo.¹⁷ This is a great opportunity to volunteer or even spend some time winning prizes and getting to know other people in the Johnstown community as well as other projects that may be happening in the area.

While all of this may seem daunting, even the simplest of actions can aid in the overall goal of bettering the community of Johnstown. If more young people make an effort to stay, learn, make real changes and progress in Johnstown, the city could begin to flourish as it once did so many generations ago.

Johnstown is Not Alone

The things that prevent Johnstown from thriving are not only seen in Pennsylvania, but also all over the region known as Appalachia. It is easy to overlook these issues, especially when it isn't impacting an individual directly. However, many cities in the Appalachian region are in the same situation, and sometimes face even worse conditions. For example, the average poverty rate in

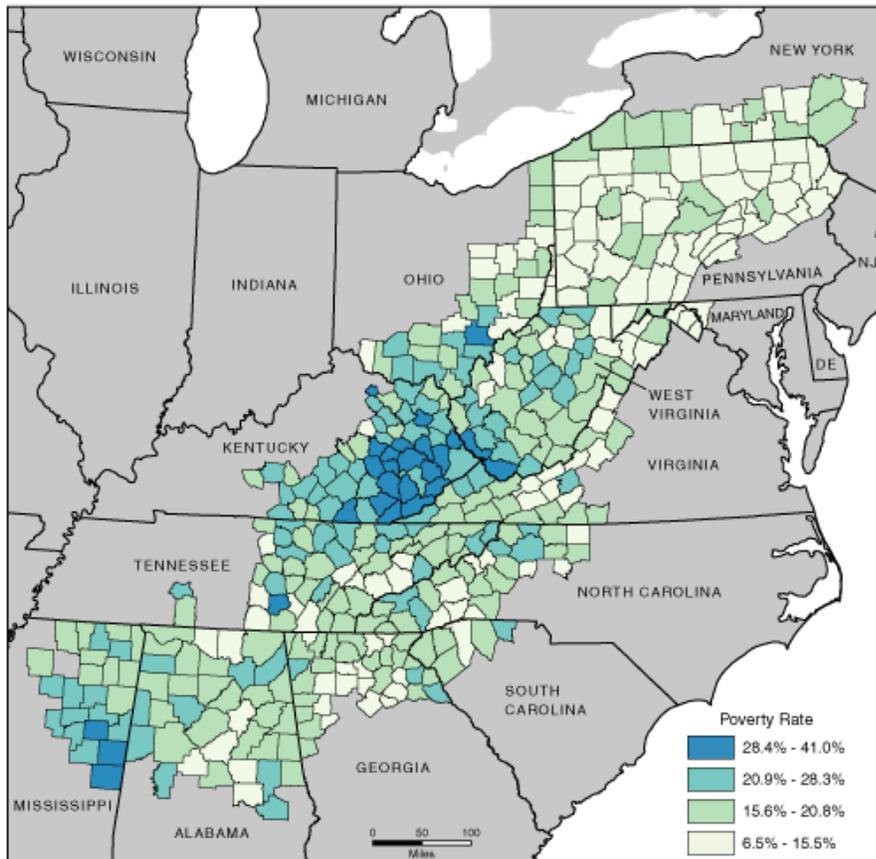
¹⁴ Byers, *Opening of that door*

¹⁵ Byers, *Opening of that door*

¹⁶ Byers, *UPJ's Inaugural Democracy*

¹⁷ East Conemaugh Borough, *Activities*

the Appalachian region is approximately 16.3%, with the highest being about 41% as shown in the graph below.¹⁸



Created by the Appalachian Regional Commission, August 2019
 Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2013–2017
 Data Classification Scheme: Natural Breaks

U.S. average = 14.6%
 Appalachian average = 16.3%

Not many people are familiar with this information, which is another reason why it is so crucial that especially the people of Johnstown become more knowledgeable on the subject. The improvement of Johnstown could serve not only the betterment of the Johnstown community, but also communities all over the region. Involvement is so very important for the youth across the United States. Youth need to try to rebuild so many of these communities that face many economically challenging issues. The betterment of our nation can start with Johnstown and can only get better from there. Until then, nothing is going to change unless people take the steps to revitalize Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

¹⁸ Appalachian Regional Commission, *Poverty Rates in Appalachia*

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When I See You Smile

By Anonymous

When I see you smile,
I forget we aren't stars.

For a moment,
we sit in a bed of cosmos,
holding each other
in a radiant brilliance
of alabaster hues.

I forget we aren't celestial bodies,
cursed to float adrift
in a longing for each other
that spins us together for eons,
always bathing each other
in a deep radiance of warmth
that would set ablaze
even the coldest heart.

I forget that grabbing your hand
would split the universe itself asunder,
the quasar of love
would outshine the ethereal planes'
brightest bodies,
a uniquely shining moment of bliss
never before seen
by the macrocosm
holding us in a stillness unknown.

I live and die in a moment,
reborn anew
in the luminescence
of that bewitching smile.

The beautiful joy radiating from you,
melting the pain of my past
and dredging me
from my own pitiful sorrows.

Descriptions of love,
not told in truth by Shakespeare,
unknown by Dickinson or Poe,
held as secret from every soul,
could not compare.

A feeling, impossible to write,
for the words
they themselves don't understand.

When I see you smile,
I see infinity in a moment.

I see you, perfect.

I love you.

Cum Te Ridentem Viderem: A Latin Translation of “When I See You Smile”

By Luke Godsey and Lilly Haave

Cum te ridentem viderem,
Obliviscor nos sidera non esse.

Ad tempus
in lecto cosmorum sedemus,
inter se complexi in splendorem radiosum
album colore.

Obliviscor nos corpora caelestes non esse,
damnatos seorsum ut fluitarent
in cupiditatem inter sesei
nos simul diutissime nectentem,
semper inter se in splendorem profundum caloris lavantes
qui cor frigidissimum incenderet.

Obliviscor tuum manum capere
mundum ipsum separatim scinderet.
Explosio amoris
corpora luculentissima planitierum aetherearum praeluceret
in momento felicitatis unice lucens
nunquam visus antea a orbe
tenente in nostrum quietem ignotam.

In momento vivo et morior,
renascitur
In candorem
illius risi dulcis.

gaudium pulchrum a te fulget
dolorem mei praeteriti dissolvens
et me cribrans ab meis doloribus miserabilibus.

Descriptiones amoris
in vero ab Shakespearo non narrati
ab Dickinsone aut Poea ignoti
ab omni animo occulte tenti
non contendant.

Est sensus qui scribi non posset
enim verba
illa ipsa non intellegunt.

Cum te ridentem viderem
infinitatem in momento video.

te video, perfectum

te amo.

The Bell Witch's Curse

By Jonathan Gilliam

In the hollow, deep and wide,
Where restless spirits lurk and bide,
A voice was heard, a curse was laid,
The Bell Witch wakes where debts are paid.

A whisper low, a cackle bright,
A shape that moves without the light,
It stalked the Bell house, cruel and bold,
A breath of ice, a hand so cold.

John Bell stirred, his chest grew tight,
A voice had found him in the night,
“You stole from me, and now you’ll see,
The price of what you took from me.”

The walls would shake, the doors would groan,
The fire dim, the floorboards moan,
The children cried, too scared to sleep,
As something laughed—low, dark, and deep.

She tore at skin, she pulled at hair,
She slashed at throats with empty air,
No prayers could break her iron spell,
No preacher strong enough to quell.

One by one, they felt her wrath,
Until old John lay in her path,
His breath grew weak, his limbs fell numb,
And still, she whispered, “Time has come.”

Now, when the wind howls past the trees,
Her laughter rides upon the breeze,
And those who dare to speak her name,
May find they’ve stepped into her game.

So heed this tale, don’t take it light,
For some things wake when called at night.
And once she’s whispered at your door,
She leaves you whole, but never more.

The Soul of These Mountains

By Jonathan Gilliam

These mountains stand, so old, so high,
Their peaks still whisper to the sky.
Through mist and pine, through rain and sun,
They tell of all that's come and gone.

The rivers run, so cold, so deep,
Through hollow dark where secrets keep.
The laurel bends, the red oak sways,
As they have done since ancient days.

The hands that built, the hearts that stayed,
Still linger here in earth and shade.
By fire's glow, by harvest moon,
Their voices hum a fiddle's tune.

The wind knows well their work and song,
Their calloused hands, so rough, so strong.
They sowed the land, they forged their way,
And left their stories in the clay.

Oh, those who go, yet long to stay,
Who hear the hills call far away,
Come home, come home, the voices pine,
These mountains made your blood, and mine.

Celery

By Anthony Babeaux

Everyone has a phobia
An irrational fear which when said aloud
Can come across as puzzling
Driving is currently my crux
An Achilles heel so to speak

Whether it is newfound confidence or lesser fear
Driving is where I fall short

In the 1st grade Diana was hired as my babysitter
When both my parents worked Diana stepped in
A 17 year old stuck with a 6 year old is far from fun
Through miracle Diana made it work

In my booster seat cruising in a Toyota Yaris
September 9th, 2010 is quite hazy How glass would spider-web
Hearing a crunch or two is quite harrowing

7 stitches later I am right as rain An unfamiliar woman at a podium with a letter in hand
I also learned what the word lesbian meant that day

Assorted Photography by Zach Godsey

