

OPINION IN THE KOEHLER CASE

SUSTAINS THE VALIDITY OF FOOT-FRONT RULE.

Says the Jurisdiction of the City Authorities Under the Admitted Facts Cannot Be Questioned—Their Assessment Must Be Regarded as Conclusive—If the Contentions of Koehler Had Prevailed the City Would Have Lost Thousands of Dollars—Full Text of Opinion.

The opinion of the Supreme court, written by Justice Potter, in the celebrated case of the City of Scranton, appellant, against H. T. Koehler, was yesterday forwarded to the prothonotary. The validity of the foot front rule is fully sustained, the conclusion of the court being expressed at the end of the opinion in the following language:

"The city engineer made the assessment in strict accordance with law, and, as a result, the proportionate value per foot front of the property in question, being in proportion to the number of feet which his property fronts upon the street. The jurisdiction of the city authorities under the admitted facts of this case cannot be questioned, and there being no allegation of fraud or defective workmanship, or mistake in the computation of the engineer, their assessment must be regarded as conclusive."

Former City Solicitor A. A. Voeberg, who represented the city both before the Superior and the Supreme court, in the successive appeals from Judge Archibald's decision, said to a Tribune man that if the contention of Koehler had prevailed, thousands of dollars would have been lost to the city, as assessments have been made for years under the foot-front rule, and many of them are as yet uncollected.

HIS POSITION SUSTAINED.

"I am glad to see," said Mr. Voeberg, "that my position is sustained by the Supreme court in every particular. I have always held that the assessments made by the city authorities were only subject to legal attack upon the ground of fraud or, possibly, for defects in the work. I believe, however, that the foot-front rule is not a tape-line rule. In other words, I am of the opinion that the proper authorities have a legal right, in their discretion, to allow for exceptional conditions. For example, if one side of a street was bounded by a public property not subject to assessment for municipal purposes, the assessing officers would have a right to apportion the cost among all the property owners along the improvement, which would have been assessed against the property which is exempt from assessment."

"This is upon the ground that the property owner is benefited, not merely by the little strip of paved in front of his own property, but by the entire improvement, treated as a whole. The exception of these exceptional cases is, however, to the discretion of the city authorities, and their wisdom, or lack of wisdom, in exercising this discretion is not open to attack in the courts."

This decision disposes of a long and protracted litigation, in the conduct of which Mr. Koehler was ably represented by Attorney L. H. Burns. The opinion follows:

THE OPINION.

The city of Scranton paved Mulberry street with sheet asphalt, and assessed its cost upon the property owners. The assessment was based, without regard to the number of square yards of pavement in front of any particular property, but was made upon a pro rata basis, which was ascertained by dividing the entire cost of the improvement in proportion to the number of feet of property fronting on the street.

Immediately in front of the defendant's property a street railway had laid its tracks, and paved that portion of the street so paved by it. The effect was to reduce the amount of paving required to be done by the city, at that point. For this reduction the defendant claimed he was entitled to credit. The city ignored this claim, and divided the whole cost of paving the street among the total property frontage.

Upon a case stated the learned court below held that the basis for the assessment thus adopted by the city was not correct. Judgment was accordingly entered for the amount admitted to be due by the defendant, and upon appeal by the city to the Superior court, this judgment was affirmed.

While the defendant in this case was not one of the petitioners for the improvement, it was asked for by a majority of the property owners along the section of the street so improved, and the petition was for the pavement as a whole, and the ordinance was based upon and followed the petition. The improvement was constructed as a whole from one end to the other.

WEIGHT OF AUTHORITY.

The learned court below found that the weight of the authority, outside of the state of Pennsylvania, was in favor of the "foot-front" rule of assessment, according to the benefits derived from the same, and that it was constrained to hold otherwise in the case by former rulings of this court which he deemed controlling, and, therefore, entered a judgment upon a basis of the supposed cost of the paving immediately in front of the defendant's property. We are, however, not able to draw, from the case cited, the same conclusion as that reached by the same court in this case.

In McCulligan vs. Allegheny, 4 Pa., 113, the improvement was upon a street bounded upon one side only by park property, the title to which was in the city, subject to the right of common in the owners of lots. The Act of Assembly under which that improvement was made, authorized "an equal assessment on each front bounding on said street." It will be time enough to decide those questions when they come regularly before us. In the present case, the affidavit set up a valid defense on the facts, and judgment was properly refused. Judgment affirmed and proceedings awarded.

D. L. & W. Board for Today.

Following is the make-up of the D. L. & W. board for today:

Scranton, Pa., July 24, 1901.

Wild Cats East—8 p. m.; F. E. Stevens; 10 p. m.; C. W. Dunn.

TUESDAY, JULY 24.

Wild Cats East—8 a. m.; F. E. Stevens; 10 p. m.; C. W. Dunn.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 24.

Wild Cats East—12:30 a. m.; F. E. Stevens; 8 a. m.; J. J. Costello; 10 a. m.; M. Pinner; 10 a. m.; H. Bishop; 11 a. m.; F. E. Rogers; 1 p. m.; T. Fitzpatrick; 2 p. m.; W. W. Miller; 6 p. m.; J. H. Masters.

Summits, Etc.—8 a. m.; east; J. Carrige; 8 a. m.; west; J. Fronmekler; 6 p. m.; east; W. J. Nichols; 8 a. m.; east; M. McDaniel; 10 a. m.; G. Young; Thompson; 7 p. m.; Ray Aug.; E. McAllister.

Fishers—8 a. m.; Hauser; 10 a. m.; S. F. McMillen; 8 a. m.; J. J. Costello; 10 a. m.; M. Pinner; 10 a. m.; H. Bishop; 11 a. m.; F. E. Rogers; 1 p. m.; T. Fitzpatrick; 2 p. m.; W. W. Miller; 6 p. m.; J. H. Masters.

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They are carrying on the work of the decision in that case too far to hold that it is authority for the proposition that the assessment upon each property must be limited to the cost of the work done immediately in front of it.

In the City of Scranton, Pa., No. 34, this court entered judgment for want of a sufficient affidavit of defense, upon the averments, which set forth that the work was not well done, nor according to contract, but which did not raise any question as to the manner of making the assessment.

ALLEGATIONS TOO VAGUE.

And in Pittsburg vs. McConnell, 130 Pa., 463, judgment was also entered for want of a sufficient affidavit of defense, upon the ground that the allegations were too vague and unsatisfactory to carry the case to the trial.

The case of Harrisburg vs. Baptist, the Pa. 634, was similarly decided. In some of these cases was the manner of making the assessment an issue, and the reasoning upon which the decisions

were founded is not applicable to the case now before us. In the opinion of this court, in Witman vs. Reading, 169 Pa., 375, the "foot-front" rule is sustained, as a general rule as can be found. Our brother Mitchell there says: "The learned judge below held that the 'foot-front' rule could not be lawfully applied as a method of assessment to the community's property, and that the conclusion must be, not exclusively on the difference in value per foot front of the property along the line of the sewer. From this result we are constrained to differ."

While the "foot-front" rule of assessment, it is true, does not express a uniformity of benefit, yet its foundation is as convenient a method of assessment to the community's property, and that the conclusion must be, not exclusively

HEAT AND DUST AT MT. GRETNNA

(Concluded from Page 1.)

Inspector of rifle practice. One team, consisting of the regimental team which shall make the highest total score for the two practice matches and the skirmish match at the annual competitions at Mount Gretna, to be augmented so as to consist of six men and one reserve. This team to represent the state of Pennsylvania in the interstate regimental match. One team of six men and one reserve, to be selected from the several troops of cavalry of the National Guard of Pennsylvania, the selection to be made by the general inspector of rifle practice, and this team to participate in the squadron matches.

Colonel Asher Miner, of Wilkes-Barre, former general inspector of rifle practice, has been assigned for duty by Adjutant General Stewart at the competition at Mount Gretna, and also at Sea Girt.

Rain fell steadily for over an hour Monday morning, and rubber blankets and boots were hurriedly unfolded as a result and the boys met the welcome shower, fully prepared. About noon the last drops fell, after which the sun blazed forth stronger than on any day since the beginning of the encampment.

The day was spent in active preparation for Wednesday when Governor Stone is expected to review the regiment and Thursday when the brigade inspection will take place. At 8:30 o'clock there was battalion drill in the field below the encampment. Lieutenant Colonel Stillwell drilled the First, Major Field the Second and Major Robling the Third battalion. The Second was the last battalion to leave the field remaining long after both the Scranton and Philadelphia battalions had retired.

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon there was a regimental drill and at 5 o'clock a repetition of the brigade drill of Sunday, all five regiments being put through the exhausting series of maneuvers.

Few Visitors in Camp.

There were few visitors in camp Monday. Captain Huff of Company H, of North Scranton was officer of the day and Lieutenant Daly of Company A, officer of the guard. Neither the guard house nor the hospital has more than a few occupants, and regarding this latter very pleasing fact, Major Keller, regimental surgeon said to the Tribune correspondent:

"During my entire experience in the guard, I must say that this has promised to be the healthiest camp I have yet been through. Up to date there have been very few cases brought to my attention and practically all of the accident cases have been of a trivial, minor character."

An enjoyable innovation of Monday was the arrival of Fred Stuber of Philadelphia, reputed to be the second best banjoist in the country. He was brought here by Major Robling, and several other officers and will remain here during the entire encampment. During the morning he and Assistant Atherton, who is something of a musician himself rendered a duet in Major Robling's tent, and at noon Stuber played while the headquarters staff were at table.

Governor Stone and staff are expected here Wednesday, and the inspection is slated for Thursday. Had it not been for these facts it is likely that a large detail would have been sent up to Scranton to attend the funeral of Dr. Blanchard.

PROCEEDINGS ORDERLY.

In the case now under consideration, the whole procedure seems to have been as orderly one, conducted from beginning to end, as any I have ever seen. The Act of Assembly of May 23, 1889. The initial step was a petition by a majority of the abutting property owners. This was followed by the enactment of an ordinance of the city council, authorizing the work to be done by the engineer, and the specifications, the engineer, and according to plans and specifications. The city engineer was instructed to make the assessments for the cost of the paving according to the "foot-front" rule, against the abutting property, giving notice to said owners of the cost of the paving to be done, and specifying that it was to be done in accordance with the ordinance.

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It is, therefore, ordered that the judgment of the Superior court be reversed; and judgment is now entered against Mrs. Hannah Levers, a sell to collect for a sewer laid in Lafayette street. Mrs. Levers owns a property at Lafayette street and Drexel's court. The opinion follows:

NOTES OF THE ENCAMPMENT.

Private Edward Maycock, of Company F, was today appointed orderly at the guard house.

Companies C and D started a base ball game Monday, but it was stopped at 2 o'clock on account of rain. Company D was far in the lead from the start. Simon and Finken made up the victorious battery. In the mean time, both Connell and Simpson made long drives for four bases.

The boys of Company F are feeling rather sick over the fact that Major Keller compelled them to go to the extent of telling the rest of the company about the misery and discomfort were the boys in camp.

Private Nestor, of Company F, is a rather weighty young man, tipping, as he does, the scales at 190 pounds. He was recently tossed in a blanket and sailed high through the air. When he struck the ground again he went clean through it, tearing the digests and leaving in most picturesquely forcible language.

The Thirteenth's hospital corps took full place last evening inspection and exhibition drill, and has a squad this year especially well drilled for the purpose of keeping up last year's fine record.

For Captain O'Brien, Richard J. Bourke presents, and George on parade. It is his first exterior in the position and he is proving a splendid successor to Lieutenant Gunter, as Lieutenant Colonel Stillwell's right hand man.

Private Fred Davis, of Company L, is the owner of this outfit. It is "Bully," the same energetic youth which was his pride last year.

The men of Company F have indulged in a good deal of good natured quizzing of Corporal Fred and Sergeant Bailey, who were "lost" in the "mud" Sunday afternoon.

It was agreed that there was a long arduous brigade drill in the sun about the time of the

private's arrival.

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