

African American Coal Mining Heritage

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Monthly Commentary

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the inaugural issue of the African American Coal Mining Heritage newsletter. The goal of this publication is to complement the African American Coal Miner Information Center webpage. In these pages you will find a wider range of material related to the African American coal mining odyssey, presented with much more detail, and accompanied with insightful analysis. It is my mission to make these pages an invaluable source for historians and family researchers alike in the quest to uncover and promote the lives and experiences of the

African American coal miner.

There are several features you can expect to see in each issue: Monthly Commentary, a Feature Article, Book/Article Reviews, Coal Camp/Town Spotlight, and Peas 'N Nuts. The Book/Article Reviews section will actually cover reviews of material beyond books and articles, such as theses, dissertations, and government documents. It will provide you with a useful assessment of print material from my website, along with other documents that may contain a significant amount of information relevant to coal mining but whose scope is much broader. A good example of this would be a county history. Peas 'N Nuts, two names commonly assigned to smaller pieces of mined

coal separated and sold by coal companies, is a section that will consist of a potpourri of interesting and useful information lacking in size to merit a full length article.

Numerous other features will make periodic visits to issues of the newsletter to include one titled "In the News". This exciting feature will consist of complete or partial transcriptions of newspaper accounts involving African American coal miners. I am totally confident that you will find an annual subscription to the African American Coal Mining Heritage newsletter a worthwhile investment of time and money. If at anytime after subscribing you come to the decision that this is not the case, I want to be the first to know!

Training Ground cont from page 3 was expended by the Black Heath Coal Company for African American labor in 1837 alone. Leasing slaves was a very common practice in Virginia and became even more so during the Civil War when manpower was at a premium. It is safe to assume that inbetween 1861-65, thousands of agricultural slaves unwillingly received some on-the-job-training in the finer techniques of coal mining courtesy of military essential companies such as the Tredegar Iron Works, one of the largest in the Confederacy. Slaves who were hired out to do industrial labor, such as mining, did not *Cont on back page*

Now Reviewing...

Around Muhlenberg County, Kentucky: A Black History is a book by Leslie Shively Smith. It was such a pleasure to find someone with the drive, focus, and commitment to gather their local history and put it on paper as a counterbalance to standard county histories that so often leave us out. For those familiar with the coalfields of western Kentucky, you can surely testify to the fact that one cannot read a general history of Muhlenberg county without finding the subject of coal mining interspersed throughout. Ms. Smith's work is no exception as the topic permeates the chapter on Muhlenberg communities. The author states that African Americans have inhabited, at a minimum, thirty-four communities in the county since the introduction of slavery in 1795. As you go through this chapter you will routinely find town after town whose African American populations

cont on page 3

Coal Town Spotlight: Thurber, Texas

The coal mining town of Thurber, located roughly seventy miles west of Fort Worth in Erath county, sprang to life when two brothers, William and Harvey Johnson sank a shaft and hit a twenty-six inch vein of coal in 1886. Many in the initial mining contingent were laborers from the nearby community of Coalville, where for the past few years the Texas and Pacific Railroad Company was having difficulty conducting effective mining operations. There is no evidence known to exist that identifies any of these initial miners as African American.

After only two years of existence, the undercapitalized Johnson brothers sold out to the Texas and Pacific Coal Company. In addition to property, the new company inherited the labor problems of their predecessor; the miners were on strike. The president of the company, Colonel R. D. Hunter, took a tough stance with the existing miners and quickly realized he would have to bring in new men. Several attempts failed, including a proposed contract with a hundred Mexicans. In 1889 the company was able to successfully bring in miners, a large percentage of them African Americans, from numerous locations. Brazil, Indiana provided the most miners, and in addition others came from Grape Creek, Illinois, Lexington, Missouri, Arlington, Kentucky, Carbon, Indiana, Glen Mary, Tennessee, Leavenworth, Kansas, the vicinity of Knoxville, Tennessee, and the Ayershire mines in Indiana, situated about eighty miles south of Brazil. Hunter and his associates made multiple trips over a five month period, securing nearly five hundred individuals, including roughly three hundred fifty from Brazil. The Brazil figure included women and children. The entire population of Thurber in 1890 according to the federal census was 978, which indicates that the African American mining population of the town was quite substantial. By 1900 the population had soared to over 2,500 people, and 75% of those working listed their jobs as miners. However by this time the African American coal mining population had dwindled down to one hundred seven. In 1919, fifteen mines were operating in the town, African American miners were still employed, and it can be safely assumed that they remained, albeit in small numbers, until the coal mining operations ceased in 1921.

An enduring landmark of the town's vibrant coal mining era is the cemetery. It is segregated, with three separate entrances for African Americans, Protestants and Catholics. There are over 1,000 individuals buried there, most in unmarked graves. A beautiful monument was constructed and placed near the center of the cemetery, etched with the names of many of the residents without markers.

Training Ground: Virginia's Role in the Development of the African American Miner

Virginia's total bituminous coal production for 1902 as reported in the Special Reports on Mines and Quarries issued by the United States Department of Commerce and Labor, was 3,182,993 short tons. To give this figure some perspective, Pennsylvania produced over 98 million to lead the nation, and Illinois, Ohio, and West Virginia each contributed over 20 million. What lies hidden below the surface however, is the human contribution by Virginia to the African American coal mining workforce of these states.

The process began almost a century and a half earlier according to author Ronald Lewis of the book *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*. Lewis notes the mining of coal by African American slaves near Richmond, Virginia in 1760. Many of the earlier reports of slaves in coal pits came from foreign visitors, primarily British, who had mature mining operations in their homeland, and were sought out for investment, advice or both by American companies. In Lewis' article, *The Darkest Abode of Man: Black Miners in the First Southern Coal Field, 1780-1865*, he discloses the sale of a large coal company to English interests. The company was renamed the Chesterfield Coal and Iron Mining Company, and in an unusual move for the time, it chose to hire free African Americans as opposed to slaves, employing one hundred and thirty in number.

The number of mines in the eastern Virginia coalfield, principally in the area of the state capital, expanded rapidly into the middle of the nineteenth century. In a communication on the Geological and Statistical Notice of Coal Mines in the vicinity of Richmond to the editors of the *American Journal of Science and the Arts* in 1842, A. S. Wooldridge, President of the Midlothian Mining Company, remarked that the coal being mined around Richmond extends into six outlying counties, namely Amelia, Chesterfield, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, and Powhatan. In addition to the aforementioned mining companies, other prominent ones that existed during this era included the Black Heath Pits, Dover Pits, Clover Hill Company, Tuckahoe Coal Company, Maidenhead Pits, and the Creek Coal Company.

The mines in this region were worked primarily by slaves, and large percentages of these workers were not owned by the companies, but were leased or "hired out" from their owners. The extent of this is illustrated by Robert Starobin in his book, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, when he revealed that over \$11,300 *cont on front page*

Review cont were tied to coal mining. The section abounds with family surnames, the identification of the local coal companies, cemetery locations, descriptions of where the African American population lived within the community, the churches, and timelines of arrival and departures. The chapter contains seventy-seven footnotes, many of them recollections of former residents. As a bonus, there is a separate chapter on major accidents, which includes several coal mine disasters, one on United Mine Worker activists, and an appendix on the church histories of some of the larger congregations.

Spotlight Sources

(1) William Preston Powers, Jr., "The Subversion of 'Gordon's Kingdom': The Unionization of the Texas and Pacific Coal Mines at Thurber, 1888-1903", (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1989),

sources cont (2) Marilyn D. Rhinehart, "'Underground Patriots': Thurber Coal Miners and the Struggle for Individual Freedom, 1888-1903", *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 92:? (April 1989):509-542, (3) Dick King, "'Rascals' and Rangers", *True West* 22:? (March-April 1975):6-13, 40, 44, (4) *Texas & Pacific Coal Company v. Thomas Lawson*. Case no. 346, Supreme Court of Texas Records, 1838-1945. Trial transcript. State Archives, Texas State Library, Austin., (5) Personal recollections of the author from a trip to Thurber in the early 1990s.

Training Ground cont necessarily come from urban settings or farms in close proximity to the work. Many companies engaged labor agents to secure the workers they needed and the agents went far and way in their quest to locate willing owners. According to Slave Era Insurance Registry, published online by the California Department of Insurance, Elias Burnette of Albemarle county had his slave, Dabney, working for the Midlothian Company over seventy miles away in Chesterfield county. Burnette however, like many of his fellow slave owners, sought out companies like the Nautilus Insurance Company to insure their valuable property against loss. During the closing months of the war, the probability of loss escalated dramatically. Lynda Morgan in her book *Emancipation in Virginia's Tobacco Belt, 1850-1870*, recounts the helplessness of the company officials of the Dover Pits as they encountered scores of slave miners escaping within the city limits of Richmond upon learning of General Lee's withdrawal. This movement of African Americans expanded to all sections of the state and the flow into the capital grew in intensity until the African American population reached nearly half in a few short years.

It is from this beautiful mass of African American humanity that many coal miners emerged and took their places within the mining communities across the United States. As the general economic condition of the country turned downward in the early seventies, the railroad boom was unstoppable and many rode that opportunity to the state borders and beyond. As they progressed from state to state they joined one of the many mining operations opening up at a rapid pace to fuel America's growing transportation network. Between 1870 and 1890, others, in Richmond and throughout various regions of the state, would be enticed to leave the state by mine operators and become immersed in the bitter struggle between capitalists and labor that would grip the industry to the present day. These Virginians battled for the respect and right to earn a living wage in the coal fields of eastern and southeastern Ohio, eastern Iowa, southern and northern Illinois, and western Indiana.

Despite the story that the 1902 coal production figures appear to reveal about Virginia's coal mining future, to truly assess her coal mining legacy, you must peek into her past. When you do, you will clearly see that the reason the commonwealth seems to lack abundance is because she unselfishly shared her human wealth.

Peas N' Nuts

A Research Jewel. If you are ever in the Nashville, Tennessee area or if you are blessed to live within a few hours of the city, I highly recommend a visit to Vanderbilt University. I found myself in Nashville, Tennessee on a Saturday in search of a place to check some tasks off my genealogy To Do list and discovered that the university libraries were treasure troves of coal mining related materials. The Heard (Central) Library, along with the Science & Engineering Library, contain a wide range of hard to find, turn of the century documents, books, periodicals, theses, state coal mining reports, newspapers, and government documents. This place cracks the top five libraries I have found for coal mining research. So log on to the library website and plan to stay a few days to reap the full benefits. Many items are in a storage annex and will take time to retrieve; some the next day. (web address is <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/central/>)