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Preservation & Conservation

Public Law 100-699, enacted by the 100th U.S. Congress on November 19, 1988, called for studies “to determine the feasibility of protecting and preserving certain significant cultural, historic and natural resources associated with the coal mining heritage of southern West Virginia,” beginning with “specific sites and points of interest...” In effect, this legislation made the cultural inheritance of the coalfields a prospective target of the historic preservation movement. This movement has steadily broadened during the 20th century to embrace ordinary structures and “cultural landscapes” as well as sites associated with well-known individuals and celebrated events. Guiding this expansion of interest are two principles: that the historical and cultural resources involved can be connected with important developments in local, state or national history; and these resources remain substantially intact—that is, that subsequent alterations have not destroyed or damaged severely the features that underpin their historic importance. Experience has shown that these principles of preservation can best be realized when one of two conditions can be met: when the resources involved come under the ownership or control of public agencies whose specific missions include historical and cultural activities, or when the resources involved lend themselves to adaptive reuse by private or joint public/private organizations.



Coal-related sites and structures are being lost to neglect, removal and vandalism. Derelict mining equipment, southern West Virginia.

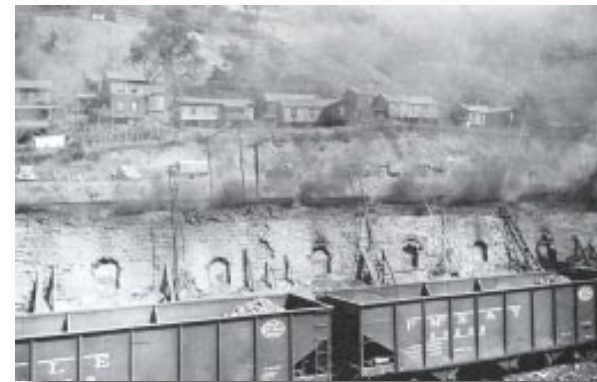


5.1 Endangered Sites

Southern West Virginia has an abundance of specific sites that meet established criteria for preservation, but the enabling conditions that make for success in such endeavors have been difficult to achieve. As a Marshall University study noted in 1989, “Coal mining has been the core of cultural and economic development, but little has been done to preserve this industrial heritage.”¹ Among the region’s preservation successes, the railroad depot at Thurmond, the Kaymoor mine complex in New River Gorge and the Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine are under the control of public bodies. The Eastern Regional Coal Archives, preserving an important cache of coal industry records, represents an expanded role by a major public library in the region, while the success of preservationists in Bramwell and Matewan in saving and restoring entire historic districts is due in large part to their access to adequate sources of private funding, augmented in both cases by public funding available in the form of subsidies and grants from state historic preservation and community development authorities. In the area of cultural conservation, successes include an oral history project at Matewan mounted by West Virginia University and one in New River Gorge undertaken by Library of Congress American Folklife Center personnel with National Park Service funds. Adaptive reuse of the sort that encourages self-sustaining private enterprise to locate in appropriately restored and maintained historic structures—a common feature of “gentrification” in cities such as Charleston, Huntington and Wheeling—is still comparatively rare in the coalfields, private residences in Bramwell being a noteworthy exception.

Fostering an adequate level of public acquisition and funding and the formation of viable private and private/public partnerships must therefore be a critical goal of the NCHA.

NCHA leadership should collaborate with West Virginia’s State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and other interested agencies to update the 1992 survey and should be prepared to assist community preservation organizations to obtain funding for surveys and predevelopment planning for specific sites through SHPO grant programs. Updating the SHPO Comprehensive Plan began in November 2000 and opportunities for public input into the planning process will be available through February 2001. It is critical that NCHA’s influence be felt in this important planning process.



Once numbering in the thousands, coke ovens have virtually disappeared in the heritage area. LC





Almost lost to fire and neglect, the memorial to WWI African-American veterans is being stabilized by a local organization. Kimball, McDowell County.

While the 1996-2001 SHPO Comprehensive Plan expressed grave concern over the disappearance of coal heritage sites, the priorities set forward by the office's 2000-2001 work plan make no specific reference to the threats to coal heritage. Although grant moneys available to the SHPO doubled during FY 2001, grant

funds must be made available to qualified constituent groups and "certified" local governments under SHPO regulations. While NCHA funds that are federal in origin cannot be used by preservation projects to complete the forty percent match required by SHPO regulations, NCHA can provide technical assistance in grant writing and management to constituent groups that pursue NCHA objectives. It is essential that active collaboration between NCHA and SHPO takes place if preservation action is to follow upon the handwringing of the past decade.

5.1.1 Historic Sites Survey

Pursuant to the objectives of Public Law 100-669, the West Virginia Division of Culture and History undertook, with National Park Service funding and technical advice, a survey of historic sites associated with coal mining heritage in the NCHA region. The results were

published in 1992. Of 150 properties surveyed, the Division identified sixteen sites having specifically to do with mining production facilities, and four associated with the labor history of the region, including the site of the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain, the only site in the region deemed to be of national significance, according to established preservation criteria. Interpreting the survey more broadly—for example, counting company stores, service centers, and miners' and operators' houses as mining-related—the number of sites associated with coal rises to 64, with all but two located in McDowell, Logan, Mingo and Wyoming counties. In the State Historic Preservation Office's "Comprehensive Statewide Historic Preservation Plan," adopted in 1996, it was noted that of the 570 West Virginia sites enrolled on the National Register of Historic Places between 1966 and 1994:

- only 73 (thirteen percent) were located in the NCHA area;
- of these, nearly half (35) were in the two counties of Cabell and Fayette;
- the "core counties" of the NCHA area (Boone, Logan, McDowell, Mingo and Wyoming), have 24 places (four percent of the statewide total).

In 1997 the Matewan Historic District, listed on the National Register in 1993, became a National Historic Landmark.



The 1996 SHPO Comprehensive Plan identified developmental pressures and public indifference as threats to statewide preservation activities generally and pointed out that historic sites in the NCHA were particularly at risk. In terms of specific threats, the Plan placed the threat to coal mining heritage at the top of its list, noting that “the coal industry, responsible for a substantial part of the state’s history since at least the 1870s, is perhaps the leading force in the removal of the physical remains of its own historic past.” Yet it cannot be said that much progress has been made in arresting these threats during the intervening five years.

In preparing this report, members of the project team evaluated 114 sites or attractions in the NCHA area, categorizing them based on the following terms:

- breadth or narrowness of their potential appeal to visitors;
- access to visitor services;
- relationship to the interpretive themes of coal mining heritage; and
- status vis a vis threats to their structure and/or historical integrity.



*One of the few remaining wooden company stores in the heritage area.
Whipple Company Store, Fayette County.*

Some 54 of these sites or attractions, located mostly in the core counties, were directly or indirectly related to coal mining heritage; of these three were found to be endangered: the coke ovens at Gary, the memorial to African American veterans of World War I in Kimball, and the Itmann company store. However, a more detailed examination needs to be made of the current conditions and potential threats to the physical heritage of the area.



5.2 Building Condition Survey

A detailed building condition survey also needs to be made of the potential uses of important coal heritage sites and structures in the region. The typical new use for a historic structure is as a museum or as a museum element in an outdoor assemblage of structures, such as a museum village or disused industrial site. The need for new museums in the heritage area is finite, as is the number of industrial, commercial and residential sites that can be made subject to the full array of preservation and interpretive techniques. In addition to identifying urgent preservation or stabilization needs in the cases of specific structures, a competent survey can provide NCHA leadership with information on numerous other questions:

- Which structures and sites in the region best lend themselves to adaptive reuse as interpretive centers such as museums or museum villages?
 - What structures can be adapted to the region's need for additional visitor services, such as restaurants and lodging places?
 - Which sites and structures can be adapted to serve community needs, such as housing, a critical factor in improving southern West Virginia's quality of life?
 - Which structures require repair, renovation, alteration or reconstruction in order to complement a program of heritage tourism?
- Which structures and sites can safely be left as they are, or enhanced by simple and inexpensive steps such as cleaning and the addition of signage or other interpretive devices to incorporate them into self-guided tours?
 - Which demolished structures need to be recreated, perhaps as "ghost structures" whose structural outlines or foundation traces enhance visitors' fuller understanding of the significance of a particular site?

A building condition survey is based on visual inspection only, without physical probing or disturbance of any components of the building. Photographs to show deficiencies as well as building components observed to be in good condition should be taken to help document the condition of structures and the degree to which preservation and rehabilitation efforts must take place. An initial evaluation of conditions of historic structures may be a first step toward a cost estimate of renovation or nomination for the National Register of Historic Places. Examples of survey instruments can be found in Appendix L.



5.3 Rehabilitation and Renovation Strategies

Successful preservation requires the establishment of priorities that take into account multiple consideration:

- the unique importance of the site;
- the effectiveness of community support groups;
- the likelihood of public funding or privately-financed adaptive reuse; and
- the enhancement that the site gives (or fails to give) to the NCHA's overall program of heritage tourism.

The NCHA is the logical organization to provide guidelines for constituent groups and local governments that undertake preservation programs in the region.

enrollment. This is not simply a matter of placing a site on the National Register list. Eligibility, whether listed or not, is often a criterion for public funding or other recognition, such as variance from building code requirements in a rehabilitation plan. For example, structures that have been moved from original locations or which have been altered in ways that have compromised their historical integrity are not eligible, even though historic in the conventional sense of the term. NCHA-developed guidelines will enable constituent groups and governments keep such distinction in mind when planning preservation activities.



Pocahontas Fuel Office, Elkhorn, McDowell County. NCHA

It will be important for guidelines to assist constituents in distinguishing between properties that are identified as historic in the community vis a vis those that are eligible for National Register



5.3.1 Cost Factors

One factor that inhibits historic preservation is the cost of rehabilitation, particularly when the building materials and systems involved no longer meet uniform construction codes. In West Virginia, as in most states, building codes and their enforcement procedures are designed for new construction. The special requirements of historic structures—especially the infeasibility of incorporating modern systems into older structures and the threat to historical integrity posed by building code materials requirements—lead to requests for variances that in turn introduce elements of uncertainty into preservation plans and budgets. The state of New Jersey has recognized that “Existing building that were built to comply with an earlier building code or with no code at all are often still safe and sound.”² This consideration applies to many coalfield structures in West Virginia, for as the State Historic Preservation Office has pointed out many coalfield pioneers built for “permanency,” resulting in “a feeling that the early generation of mine builders believed that the supply of coal in West Virginia was unending, that each mine would be forever active and the company owning the mine forever profitable.”³ At the same time, other coalfield structures, notably miners’ housing, were built quickly and cheaply, with no planning horizon beyond the immediate future; other structures now disused are valuable as scrap metal and are at risk on this score notwithstanding their historical potential. An accurate inspection of each structure’s current condition and adaptability for other uses is needed, but with this information established, preservation efforts could profit from the adoption in West Virginia of a version of New

Jersey’s code as modified for existing buildings.⁴ The revised code simplifies and standardizes requirements for fire and other safety features; electrical, mechanical and plumbing system requirements; and accessibility issues for existing structures, with special provisions for historical structures that are eligible for National Register enrollment. These changes in turn make budgeting for preservation and adaptive reuse more predictable by reducing the need for variances. In the interest of advancing preservation in southern West Virginia beyond its current plateau, NCHA leadership can work with other interested agencies to secure the adoption of similar modifications to West Virginia’s uniform construction codes.



5.4 Cultural Preservation

Preservation of the physical environment is not the only preservation challenge confronting the NCHA. As Donald E. Briggs of the National Park Service wrote of southern West Virginia in 1991, cultural conservation in the context of heritage tourism presents officials and others with moral as well as practical issues: “To what extent are we part of a process which is mining heritage—turning the past into another commodity for export, regardless of the consequences—rather than conserving certain elements of mining heritage which provide a focal point for community-based economies...Local ownership of the process and products is key to heritage conservation.”⁵⁵ A related NPS study concluded, “it is the stories and culture of

this area, rather than sites, which are most important.”⁵⁶ Public Law 100-699 seems to have recognized this in giving “cultural values” equal standing with historic and natural resources in its directives to the Park Service. And NPS responded with a final report that called for “a community-based approach to heritage conservation,” based on the assumption that “it is within community

groups that local knowledge is passed from generation to generation and that concrete steps are taken to forge new directions.”⁵⁷

Cultural conservation takes on increased importance from two additional facts:

- first, the promotion of heritage tourism through NCHA is seen as a tool of economic development in southern West Virginia communities.
- second, the interaction of local people with visitors is recognized as a useful asset both for community control and visitor satisfaction, for the existence of a friendly and informed host population in the NCHA area will serve as one of the resources that distinguish it from competing attractions in other states and it will serve to assuage local concerns that tourism development will exploit the negative image of the region that mass media and popular culture have broadcast in the past.



“It is the stories and culture of this area, rather than sites, which are most important.”⁵⁶ NA



5.4.1 Oral Histories and Folklife

The most effective strategies for cultural preservation are oral history and folklife and ethnographic fieldwork. These are the only ways to capture and preserve activities and traditions that pass among community members by word of mouth rather than formal means of transmission. For example, until the training requirements imposed by law and by the growing technological complexity of mining equipment necessitated formal training of new miners after 1969, miners learned their jobs informally, through on-the-job training and through the examples and verbal instruction of older miners. Thus historian Keith Dix, in his history of mine mechanization, relied not only on archival records, but also on interviews with retired miners to learn how the new equipment was introduced and the effect that it had on work relations.⁸ The eyewitness account of Dixie Accord to the Matewan Massacre, recorded by West Virginia University oral historians working for the Matewan Development Center, led documentary filmmakers to interview her on camera for the 1995 series, West Virginia. A Film History.⁹ Her account provides both a supplement and a correction to the more

widely distributed image of the event recorded in the fictional film Matewan. The latter film has inspired visitors to come to Matewan, but the oral history and on-camera interview help them to understand how the real Matewan differs from the imaginary one (which, after all, was actually Thurmond in the fictional film.) Folklife research carried out under Library of Congress auspices documented the cultural landscapes of New River Gorge and the Hazy Creek area in the Coal River headwaters. In both cases, this research uncovered informal patterns of behavior that linked communities in ways that research focused solely on work-related activities could not have done.¹⁰ Photographic

resources are also vital in cultural conservation, since they provide documentation for the preservation and restoration of structures and landscapes.



Members of the Kingston Pocahontas Coal Company baseball team, McDowell County, NA



5.4.2 Guides to Cultural Conservation

People who discover the value of interview-based research and photography are often tempted to “reinvent the wheel,” but in fact existing repositories should first be searched before new research is commissioned. Both West Virginia and Marshall universities have maintained oral history programs since the 1960s and they have also served as repositories for the interviews of researchers such as Dix. The Eastern Regional Coal Archives in Bluefield has a large collection of photographs. The National Archives and the Library of Congress in Washington DC house the archives of photographers who traversed the southern West Virginia coalfields on behalf of the Farm Security Administration of the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the 1930s and the federal “Boone Commission” on bituminous coal during the 1940s. Ben Shahn’s images of the Williamson freight yard and Russell Lee’s portrayal of the vibrant streetlife of postwar Welch are two examples of the resources to be found there. The American Folklife Center’s archive of its New River Gorge fieldwork during the early 1990s can be searched electronically, as can the interviews conducted at Matewan. George Parkinson’s Guide to Coal Mining Archives in the United States, although badly in need of updating, is still a useful guide to other repositories. Thus while NCHA should encourage the collection of stories and images that amplify understanding of the informal practices and nomenclature of cultural landscapes, it should first create and make available guides to existing resources, guides which are tailored specifically to the requirements of cultural conservation in the NCHA.

