

COMPANY STORES OF THE HOCKING VALLEY COAL FIELD: FADING MEMORIES FROM A BYGONE ERA

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the coal producing regions of Appalachia, one can identify and relate several classes of structures to specific eras in the settlement history of the region. Mine buildings, tipples, company houses, and company stores are the most readily identifiable classes of structures that form a distinctive imprint on the cultural landscape, mainly because they are interrelated and uniformly date back to a specific time frame, and they occur in close juxtaposition (Palka, 1988a). The most celebrated of these coal mining artifacts are the company stores.

From the late nineteenth century through World War II, the company store was a common feature of mining camps throughout the Appalachian Coalfield. Significant not because of its form, but because of its function, the stores played an important social and economic role in rural mining camps. The role of the company store has historically been a hotly debated topic of discussion between miners and operators, yet its role as a focal point for the mining community is irrefutable.

This paper examines a segment of the Hocking Valley coalfield in Southeastern Ohio around the turn of the century, and specifically focuses on the company store as an integral com-

ponent of the "typical" coal mining community in Athens County, the state's leading coal producing county. I briefly recall the mining history of the study area, the role of the company store in newly established mining towns, and discuss various aspects of the store's form and function. I also identify several of the relic structures which have survived long after the decline of mining activities in the region, and continue to remind residents and visitors of the region's coal mining heritage.

THE STUDY AREA: HEART OF THE HOCKING VALLEY FIELD

Although large-scale mining activities have been abandoned for more than a half century, the cultural imprint on Athens County, Ohio, remains clearly visible. Athens County is situated well within the region of Ohio that is underlain by coal (see figure 1). Moreover, a portion of the county (the northwest quarter) is located within one of the major coal producing regions of the state, the Hocking Valley coalfield.

From 1885 to 1927, the Hocking Valley field was one of the most productive coal fields in the world, with Athens county being its chief contributor. Prior to 1885, coal production in the county never exceeded one million tons in a year.

Between 1887 and 1900, however, the county averaged more than 1.5 million tons annually. By 1897, Athens County had become Ohio's fourth leading coal producing county, steadily climbing to third rank by 1888, and moving into first spot by the end of 1899 (Harris, 1957). At the turn of the century, the county was easily producing more coal than any other county in Ohio, and continued to be the state's leading coal producer until 1906 (Peters, 1947). From 1907 until 1915, Athens County ranked second in production, yet it had increased its output by more than 30 percent above the peak production levels achieved during the height of the previous period (ODNR, 1976). After a short depression that preceded World War I, coal production increased dramatically during the war (Palka, 1988a). By 1927, however, Athens County's production declined from a peak of almost seven million tons in 1920 to about 1.2 million tons (ODNR, 1976). The 1927 production level was the county's lowest in forty years, and essentially marked the end of the era when "coal was king" in Athens County, Ohio.

It would be a gross understatement simply to state that the coal mining industry made a significant impact on the physical, economic, social, and political development of Athens County. From a geographic perspective, one can recognize that many of the settlement patterns, transportation networks, and industrial complexes evolved specifically to exploit the economic value of coal. By 1910, no less than twenty-five mining camps had evolved within the county (see figure 2). I have established elsewhere (Palka, 1988a) that there was a direct correlation between the increase in coal production and population growth in Athens County, Ohio, between 1885 and 1920. During this era, an extensive amount of development occurred in support of the evolving underground mining industry in this region, which previously hosted a sparse rural population. Deep or underground mining, which was prevalent during the study period, required extensive construction of buildings and facilities for its producing and supporting activities. In addition, a significant amount of development was required to provide homes and services to support those who migrated into the area and were subsequently employed by the labor-intensive activity. This

construction and development served to create a unique cultural imprint that still persists as an integral part of the area's landscape.

THE COMPANY STORE

Perhaps the most colorful, yet least recognized remnant of the mining era is the company store. Initially, the rationale for organizing a company store was to meet the basic needs of the coal company's employees (Lantz, 1912). Cohen (1984) notes that in the coalfields of nearby West Virginia, most of the early developments which began in the 1880s occurred in relatively isolated areas of the state, where accessibility to food, clothing, and other daily goods was a problem for the earliest miners and their families. The same problem prevailed throughout the Hocking Valley field in Ohio, where the earliest mines were accessible by rail only. A logical solution to the dilemma in both states was for coal operators to establish company stores to sustain the miners and their families.

The stores were usually large, general merchandise types that included everything from grocery products to clothing, mining tools, and, occasionally, liquor. Their inventories were designed to sustain all of the miners and their families within the mining camp. An article in *Coal Age*, published during the area's mining boom, indicated that a company store was almost as necessary from an operating standpoint as the mechanical equipment required for production of coal, because a mining company without a store was often without men to work in the mine (Lantz, 1912). While such an assertion may have been over-simplified, it did contain an element of truth. It was essential for operators to develop the means to sustain the miners and their families, particularly when mining operations were established in remote rural areas, such as those in Southeastern Ohio. Moreover, the concept of a company store was designed to help integrate new miners into the camp as well as to meet the needs of their families once they were settled.

The role of the company store and its method of operation have been subjects of much debate throughout the Hocking Valley coal field. Operators regarded the store as a convenient ser-

vice for their employees. It was their contention that the store was strictly designed to supply the demands of the miners and their families, and not to make a profit (Ong, 1985). Moreover, many operators considered the company store to be a burden that they would have preferred not to undertake if other commercial businesses had been available (Ong, 1985).

On the other hand, miners have contended that the company stores were additional money-making enterprises designed by the operators to maintain strict control over the company's cash flow. The practice of paying employees in scrip instead of cash meant that the money owed in wages never had to leave the company's bank account. Further discontent resulted from the beliefs that the company charged higher prices than did other commercial stores in the area, and that employees were forced to patronize the company store. Miners also believed that the use of scrip served to reduce the real value of their wages, since inflated prices at the store effectively reduced their purchasing power (Deecore, 1985). In almost all of the area's former company stores, credit was extended to every employee, and scrip was used more than often than cash (Finney 1985). Cohen (1984) recalls that in West Virginia, a few companies abused the system by paying their miners in scrip only, essentially leaving the employees with no alternative but to purchase goods at the company store.

When the mines were idle for short periods of time, credit was usually extended to all the employees (Hunter, 1985; Finney, 1985; Cohen, 1984). The operators regarded this policy as a charitable gesture. Many of the miners, however, believed that this system essentially transformed them into indentured servants, forcing them to work weeks at a time with little or no pay in order to pay off the debt. It was during these financial dilemmas that many miners felt that they "owed their souls to the company store."

Examinations of coal company records throughout the Hocking Valley indicate that company engineers/architects were usually not involved with designing the company store. Their responsibility was limited to providing a recommendation for the store's location, and an estimate of the size of the population which the

proposed store had to accommodate. This information was passed on to a local contractor, who designed and constructed the store. Consequently, architectural floor plans for company stores differed from place to place. A commonality however, was the significance of the "site" selected for the store. Richard Francaviglia (1991) notes that "the company store was often situated in a prominent position" within the mining community. In support of his contention, "centrality" and "accessibility" were fundamental concerns for selecting the location of a company store within the Hocking Valley coalfield.

If a company store was to be located in an urban area and intended to support a long-term operation, then it was usually constructed of bricks, if they were readily available. In such cases, coal operators were generally assured of a good return on their investment since after the termination of mining operations, a building in an urban area could be sold or put to other uses.

Building in brick was further enhanced by the proximity of several large brick plants throughout Athens County. The company store in Glouster was constructed with bricks that were produced at the Trimble plant, located less than a mile away. Similarly, company stores in Canaanville and Chauncey were constructed of bricks from the plant located in nearby Athens.

Company stores constructed in rural areas were generally built of wood. Coal companies planned to operate stores to sustain their workers only as long as the mine was in operation. Therefore, the stores were regarded as short-term facilities, which in the long run would probably be abandoned. Consequently, building in wood was an ideal way to minimize construction costs. Moreover, the wood structure could be built more rapidly than a store made of brick. In the case of the company store in Millfield, which was owned and operated by the Poston family, the wood came from local trees which were cut and processed through the family's own sawmill.

The size of a coal company's store corresponded to the size of its mine. If a single mine operated in a remote area and employed approximately fifty miners, the store was only as large as a small neighborhood grocery. Conversely, if the store was centrally located to serve several large mines,

it took on the appearance of a large "general store," which may have included a staff of ten to fifteen people. In either case, the type of goods sold at the store was basically the same; only the size of the inventories differed. Out of necessity, stores were general merchandise types and were stocked with a variety of groceries and foodstuffs, individual miner's equipment, basic items of clothing, and some hardware.

Unlike company houses which tended to bear striking resemblance from one town to the next, company stores generally blended well with their surroundings. Since the idea of company housing coincided with the "catalog house industry" which flourished during the early 1900s, it was possible to see the same style company houses appear in three or four different states throughout the Appalachian coal region (Palka, 1988b). Company stores, on the other hand, were built by loyal contractors who frequently used local building materials. As a result, the stores varied in style from place to place.

Company stores were established in virtually all of the mining settlements located in the county's rural area. In many cases, a company store was aligned with a particular mine and only served employees of that mine. At other times, when a large company (such as the Sunday Creek Coal Company) operated several mines in close proximity, single store was established at a central location. In the former case, buildings were usually constructed of wood, of basic design, and blended well with the other structures of the mining camp (see photograph 1). In the latter situation, the structure displayed the appearance of a large urban business, employed a large staff, had a much larger inventory, and reflected a style similar to the other buildings along the main street (see photograph 2). On other occasions, companies elected not to operate stores when the mine was located within the confines of an existing town which offered a variety of commercial establishments.

RELIC STORES: MONUMENTS TO THE BOOM PERIOD?

The current distribution of relic company stores reveals several different styles and con-

struction materials. Large multiple-storied wood structures still remain in the Plains (within the settlement formerly named "Hocking," corresponding to the Hocking Mining Company, and in Millfield (see photographs 3 and 4). Both remnants exhibit similarities in design with the surrounding buildings and appear well suited to serve sizable mining communities.

Remains of the George M. Jones Company stores in Modoc and in Sugar Creek include only the foundation at the former site and the brick vault at the latter. Both were smaller than the two previously mentioned structures, were built of wood, and catered to smaller mining camps.

Like the Sunday Creek Coal Company's former store in Glouster, the New York Coal Company's store in Chauncey is a large, two-story, well constructed brick building that reflects an urban design (see photograph 5). The remnant of the company store in Canaanville is also a large two-story brick structure (see photograph 6). It is still the most dominant structure in a town that was in the midst of transition from a rural community to a developing town when the store was built.

Large structures were often designed to house other activities in addition to the company store. Some buildings (such as those at Millfield and Chauncey) contained administrative offices for the company. In Canaanville, the headquarters of the Canaan Coal Company was established in the same building as the company store (see photograph 7).

It is not difficult to determine the origin and function of those structures which housed company stores, provided that they were abandoned relatively recently and are not in a poor state of repair. Some of the structures, however, have been converted to different uses in recent times. Conversion to other uses or a "change in function" is often the fate of relic structures (Hart, 1975). Such a transition serves to disguise the former company store as a more recent addition to the cultural landscape. For example, in Chauncey, the former company store houses a game room in the front and a garage in the rear. The company store in Glouster became a furniture store, and more recently, has been converted into a fruit market. In Canaanville, the company store has served as a

community grange hall for a number of years. In all cases, people tend to incorrectly relate the structure's present role with its origin. Consequently, such forms are not then appreciated for their age and origin and for the contribution that they made to the mining industry and the earlier growth of the community.

Throughout the Hocking Valley field in general, and in Athens County in particular, a distinct pattern has emerged regarding whether former company stores have been converted to other functions, or whether they have been abandoned. Simply put, where alternative employment was available after the cessation of mining activities, the company store buildings were converted to other uses. In areas that lacked employment opportunities, the structures were abandoned and remain relics on the landscape. This pattern parallels an earlier finding by Chester Zimolzak (1973), who discovered that where alternative employment opportunities are available in the areas of former mining camps, one can frequently correlate mine abandonment with housing condition improvement as the dwellings pass from operators to private individuals. Conversely, where alternative employment is not available, one can expect to witness a decline in maintenance standards and eventually, abandonment (Zimolzak, 1973). Zimolzak's findings serve well to describe the pattern of surviving company stores in Athens County.

CONCLUSION

Although the area's mining industry thrived from fifty to a hundred years ago, a number of company stores have survived the years of weathering, uncontrolled vegetational growth, reclamation, modernization, and conversion to other uses. They are still integral parts of the cultural landscape, providing subtle clues to the central role they previously played within the community. As Kohn (1954) asserted, once established, settlement ensembles and their distribution are more or less fixed, in that they often remain relic features when the way of living they represent is changed. In support of his contention, a variety of such relic structures continue to be an integral part of Athens County's landscape, forming a distinctive

imprint which was superimposed during the days when "coal was king" (Palka, 1988b).

The buildings which once housed company stores are among the most significant artifacts of the mining era. They were more than distinctive structures. They were institutions which functioned to help create stability for the typical mining camps which thrived from 1885 to 1927. Although they occasionally differed in style because of changing times, cultural attitudes, local building materials, and technology, they were the principal forms which dominated each of the county's mining camps, and served as a focal point for the community. Now, the former company stores are far removed from their previous role, and they only offer subtle hints of their enormous contribution during the "gilded age" of coal mining in Athens County, Ohio.

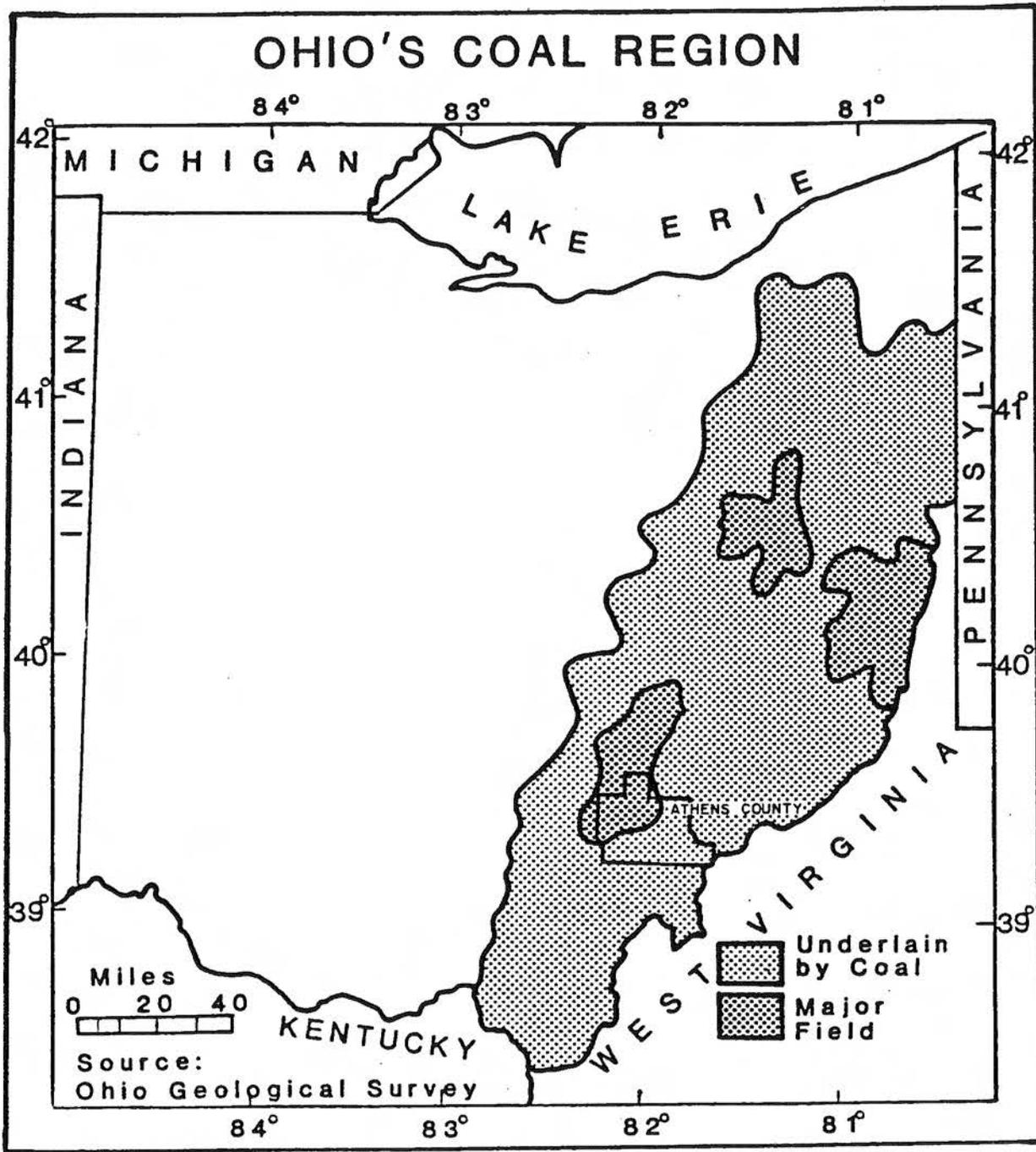


Figure 1: Ohio's Coal Region.

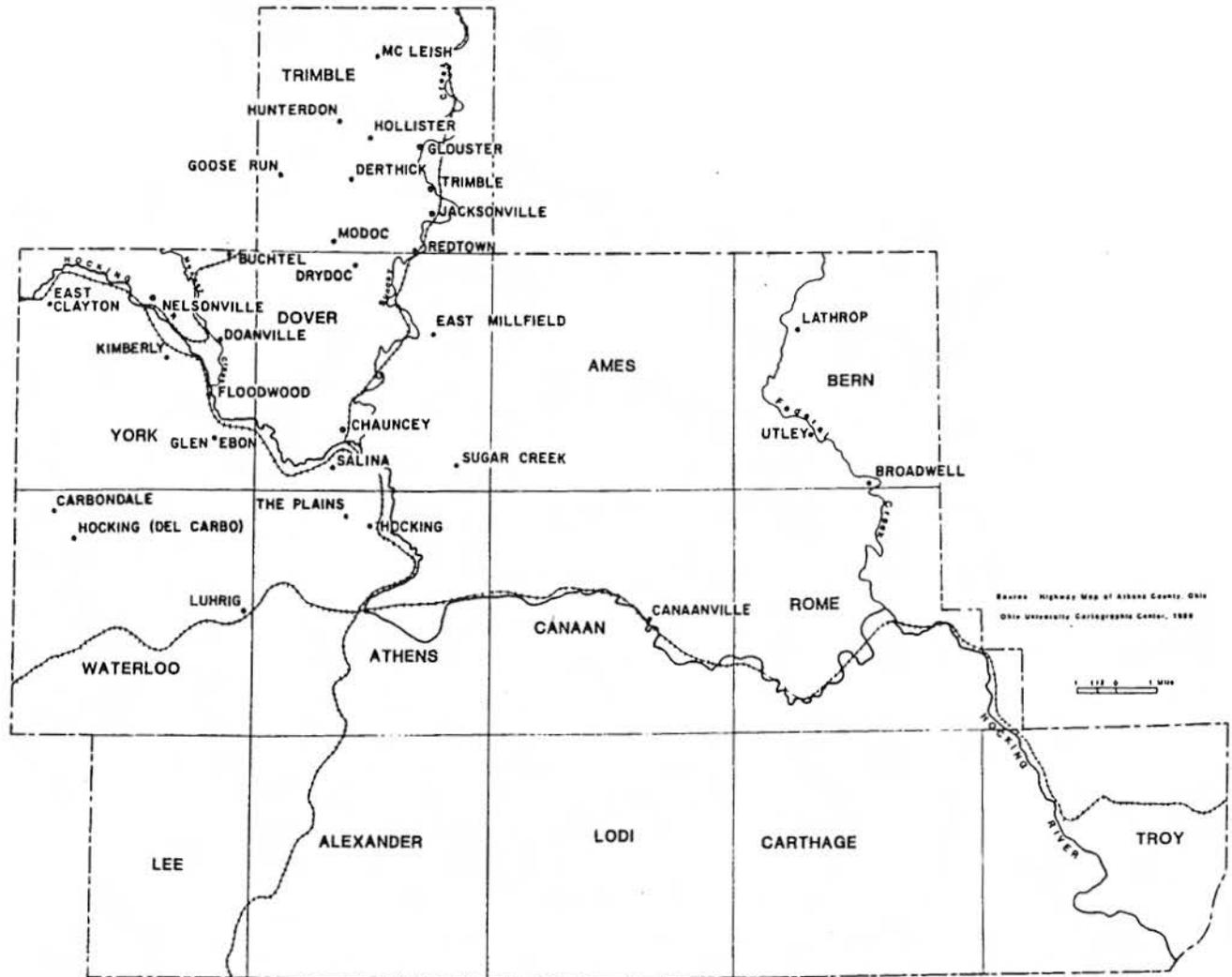


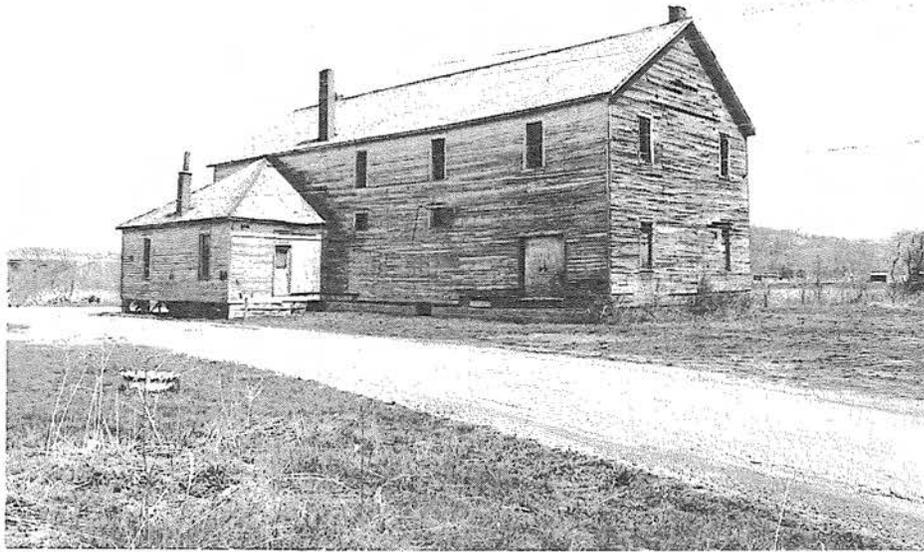
Figure 2: Mining Towns in Athens County in 1910.



Photograph 1: Sunday Creek Company's store at Modoc in 1912. Source: Courtesy of Athens County Museum.



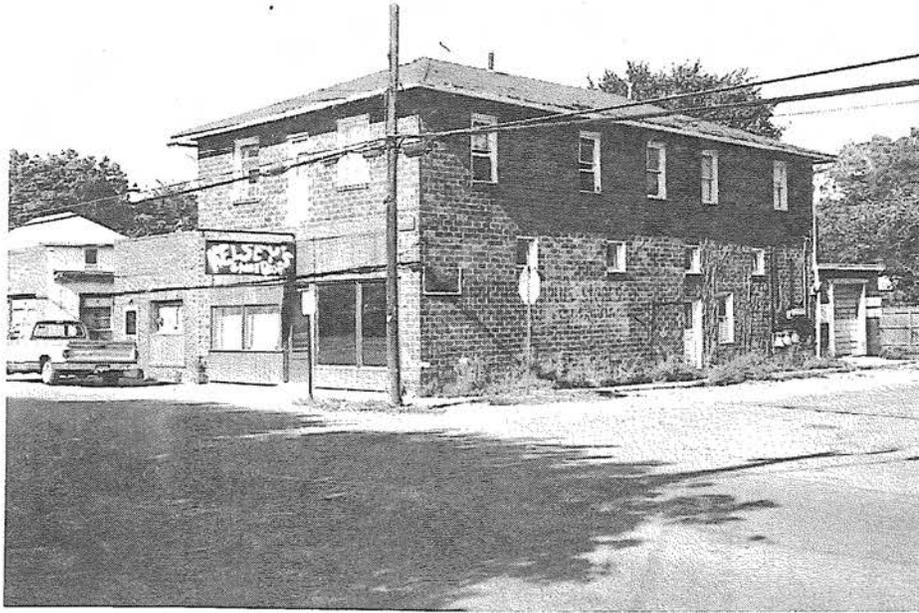
Photograph 2: Former company store in Glouster. Previously owned and operated by the Sunday Creek Coal Company, the building currently houses a fruit and vegetable market.



Photograph 3: Former company store at Hocking. By far the most dominant structure within the settlement, yet it has been abandoned for many years. People continue to reside in the adjacent company houses.



Photograph 4: Former company store at Millfield. The building was constructed around 1909 and catered to the employees of Mines 6 and 7.



Photograph 5: Former company store located along the main street of Chauncey. Previously owned and operated by the New York Coal Company, the structure now houses a garage and a game room.



Photograph 6: Built and operated by the Canaan Coal Company around 1906, the former company store in Canaanville was constructed of brick materials furnished by producer in nearby Athens.



HEADQUARTERS OF
The Canaan Coal Company

Photograph 7: Headquarters and company store of the Canaan Coal Company. Source: Courtesy of the Athens County Museum.

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