



Mining History News

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mining History Association

A Publication of the Mining History Association

Summer 2022

Presidential Pickings

Black Coal Miners in Alabama in the Gilded Age

Our 2022 MHA conference in Birmingham, Alabama, was a great success despite the residual, and now increasing, effects of COVID that limited our attendance. More importantly, the presentations and field trips brought to light much of the little-known history of Black miners, among many other salient topics, in the coal belt of the state. This story resonated with me because of my recent research on Rock Van Winkle, a former slave and freedman, who like the African American coal miners played a noteworthy role in building modern America. As historian Quintard Taylor has suggested, more research and writing is needed to tell this history to reveal the central role Blacks have played in the rise of the U.S. to world preeminence. Van Winkle, in fact, was a pioneer industrialist who as a sawmill engineer produced the lumber to literally build northwest Arkansas. Once granted freedom, he rose above societal obstacles, going on to deliver millions of board feet of lumber for hundreds of businesses, homes (maybe our own), and public structures, including the colossal Old Main at the University of Arkansas. If interested, email me for a PDF of his biography I recently published with colleague Jerry Harris Moore in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*.

Like Van Winkle, Black coal miners helped to build industrial America, yet with far fewer benefits and rights than the Arkansas builder. From the 1880s to the 1920s, most of the African American miners in Alabama were forced to work in the coal fields through the convict-lease system, which was not outlawed until 1928. Incarcerated mostly for petty “crimes”—like vagrancy, “obscene” language, and talking to White women—thousands of Black men worked in prison mining camps, Pratt City being among the most infamous. Tennessee Coal & Iron, Sloss & Sheffield, Pratt Coal & Coke, Newcastle Coal & Iron, and other companies paid to lease mostly Black miners. Each miner was ranked from first to fourth class based on their abilities with the top miner’s quota for production at four tons a day and the lowest ranked at a single ton. The cost to lease each prisoner varied over time with the higher, more productive classified workers having more value. These imprisoned workers, who experienced ungodly working and living conditions, were preferred over free workers. They were more “reliable,” in that they were forced to mine and had no choice in the matter. Escapees who were captured were at times murdered, given they were easy to replace, unlike in slavery, which placed a much higher price on individually owned workers. The horrors of the system have led some scholars to argue it was “worse” than enslavement.

Regardless, Alabama’s Black coal miners dug up and delivered hundreds of millions of tons of the fossil fuel to manufacture the iron and steel used to expand the nation’s rail system, shipping fleet, city skyscrapers, and, generally, the manufacturing sector of the so-called second Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, these questionably imprisoned men earned millions for the state and millions more for the companies. They produced so much profit that those miners who exceeded their quotas were paid

“overtime” wages that, although issued as scrip, could be used in the company stores to buy snacks, clothes, shoes, cigarettes, and other amenities denied most of the prisoners. Similarly, enslaved Blacks in the antebellum period and freedmen after the Civil War, who had built and maintained the docks of New York City, had garnered millions of dollars of profits for Anglo businessmen in the North, as Clint Smith shows in *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (2021), a *New York Times* #1 best seller (see chapter 7: "We were the good guys, right?" New York City).

Though Rock Van Winkle experienced racism, he became affluent and earned status among elites. Contrarily, Black miners, as our host in Birmingham James Sanders Day reveals in his book, *Diamonds in the Rough: A History of Alabama's Cahaba Coal Field* (2013), were subjected to depraved injustices from purposeful malnourishment to being chained together for months on end to being whipped to death, without legal recourse. Similarly, Mary Ellen Curtin's *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900* (2000) uncovers snippets from this sordid story. As Day shows, perilous working conditions led to the Banner Mine disaster in 1911 when a mine explosion killed 128 men, 123 of whom were Black prisoners. And unsafe living quarters in Lucile led to twenty-seven deaths in a 1910 fire in notorious prison housing referred to as a “wooden stockade” where the shackled miners were “living.”

After incarceration, thousands of Black miners preferred higher paying coal mining jobs to work in the cotton fields where they were subjected to more direct supervision. Many of them had forged reputations with their former coal camp wardens while prisoners and, like other experts, could ask for the wages of skilled craftsmen. Despite Apartheid conditions, they also worked to subvert oppressive “Black” laws or codes by voting Republican (under assumed names due to voting restrictions on convicts). They also joined the Knights of Labor, the United Mine Workers, and masonic lodges to create solidarity within the Black community and among immigrant and White miners. Jack Bergstresser, Paul Spyhalski, and James Day in their MHA presentations in Birmingham offered us insights into the history of Black miners, a field that is begging for far more attention. Furthermore, the images they shared also gave us clear visuals of these Black miners in action operating modern equipment. They brought to our attention in vivid photographs their role in building industrial America in the Gilded Age.

My visit to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute with my wife Kay Pritchett and fellow historian Liping Zhu helped me to place their story in the larger context of Alabama history and their ongoing struggle for equality in America. Like Rock Van Winkle, Black builder of northwest Arkansas, these individuals deserve credit for being significant players in building our nation despite odds that most of us could never have imagined much less endured. Candidates for biographical accounts, although difficult to re-create from the records for often illiterate Americans like Van Winkle, can be unveiled with diligent research. Their stories can then be incorporated into mining history as well as our broader national narrative to enrich our understanding of our shared past. In the next newsletter, I will briefly examine the history of Black coal miners of West Virginia comparing their experience with their African American counterparts in Alabama.

Chris Huggard, MHA President 2022-2023
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Membership

The MHA is now using Square to process our online membership renewals. You can now use any credit card or Google Pay to pay for your membership. Check the label on this newsletter. If it says 2021, this will be your last newsletter and you will not receive the 2022 MHA Journal. Visit the membership page on the MHA website to renew your membership today!

Convention Highlights

Thank you to Jim Day and the Birmingham organizing committee for planning a great conference. The weather was certainly warm, and it was not a dry heat. Our tours allowed attendees to coin the phrase “Sloss Hot.”

Our introduction to Alabama pig iron manufacturing kicked off with a tour of Birmingham’s Sloss Furnaces on Thursday.



The Sloss site interprets the iron making process utilized by in the City Furnace. Tour attendees also had the opportunity to watch an iron pour demonstration on one of the hottest days we experienced in Birmingham.



The Program Committee once again did a great job of organizing varied and interesting presentations including presentations by some first-time attendees. That you to Erik Nordberg, Jo Holt, and Chris Huggard for serving on the Program Committee.

Our Awards Banquet was held at Birmingham’s Vulcan Park. Jameson Pressley gave an excellent presentation on the Vulcan statue and the eventual development of Vulcan Park.



Saturday morning included our two final educational sessions before we moved into the Presidential Luncheon. The luncheon included the passing of the pick and the annual meeting.

Attendees had the opportunity to take park in tours of Red Mountain Park or Company Towns on Saturday afternoon. Participants on the Red Mountain tour had the opportunity to visit Red Mountain Mine #10 (shown below) and



Woodward Iron Company’s Mission style Songo hoist house (below)



Sunday's tours allowed attendees to visit Sylacauga Marble or two early iron furnaces, an iron and steel museum, and a coke oven site.



Tannehill Furnace

The furnace tour group visited the Tannehill Furnace site and Alabama Iron & Steel Museum before heading to Blocton. The West Blocton Coke Ovens Park conserves some of the 467 ovens that once comprised the Blocton coke oven complex.



Blocton Coke Ovens



Blocton Coke Oven Close Up

The Brierfield Furnace dates to 1861.



Brierfield Ironworks // Bibb Furnace

2023 Conference – Save the Dates For Socorro, NM – June 8-11, 2023

Our 2023 Conference will be held in Socorro, NM at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. The 2023 conference will be in person and on Zoom for those who will not be able to attend in person.

Socorro NM sits on the west bank of the Rio Grande at the head of the *Jornada del Muerto* part of the Camino del Real de Tierra Adrento from Mexico City. Starting as a Piro Indian pueblo, Spanish missionaries established the first Mission here in 1589. By 1630, Socorro was the administrative center for the region and a happening place because of the salt being shipped south to central Mexico silver mills. The Pueblo Indian rebellion in 1680 caused the Spanish to abandon the area until the reconquest of 1693. However, Socorro was not resettled until 1800 when Spanish authorities felt they could once again protect settlers.

During the Spanish and Mexican era lead and silver deposits had been found but not worked to any extent. It wasn't until the 1860s that the mineral wealth of the area started to be noticed. Mining of galena ore in Magdalena, to the West, started around 1866. A mining boom arrived with the AT&SF railroad in 1881, with major producers in the nearby Kelly-Magdalena district, the construction of the Gustav Billings Smelter in Socorro, and the usual wild, raucous boomtown with its lynching of never do wells. In 1889, the New Mexico School of Mines was established in Socorro as well. Mining continued at such districts as Rosedale, Chloride, and others in the nearby hills and Black Range into the twentieth century.

Mining History Association Awards

The MHA establishes various committees to annually review applications and nominations and to decide whether to issue certain awards. The process culminates with the announcement of award winners at the MHA Awards Banquet or Presidential Luncheon.

The ***Rodman Paul Award*** is given in honor of scholar and mining historian Rodman Paul whose influence in the field of Western mining research inspired a generation of future mining historians. The Award is given for outstanding contributions to mining history. This year's recipient of the Rodman Paul Award is past MHA President and current professor of history at Texas State University **Ron Brown**. The Rodman Paul Award Committee noted that this year's award was given for service to our organization and mining scholarship including the production of two books in the field including *Hard Rock Miners: The Intermountain West*.

The ***Besleme-Orrell Heritage Award*** recognizes outstanding achievements that contribute to the understanding and appreciation of our mining heritage. The Besleme-Orrell Heritage Award was presented to **The Breckenridge Heritage Alliance** for their interpretive efforts at the Washington Mine and Mill Exhibit near Breckenridge, Colorado.

John Townley published the first Mining History Journal. The ***John Townley Award*** is given in honor of this achievement to the best essay published in the MHA Journal in the previous issue. This year's John Townley Award was given to **Stephanie Saager-Bourret** for her article published in the 2021 *Mining History Journal* titled "Survey in an Instant: the Autumn Travels of David Dale Owen, 1839."

The Association recently established the ***Keith Long Presentation Award*** to recognize the service of past President Keith Long and the best presentation given during the Association's annual meeting. The first ever ***Keith Long Presentation Award*** was presented to **Terry Reynolds** for his presentation "A False Glimmer of Hope: The Rise and Fall of Arkansas' Cinnabar Mining District, 1931-1946."

Jennifer Dunn of Montana State University received a ***Graduate Student Support Award*** to attend and present at our conference in Birmingham. Jennifer is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Montana State. She presented on the "Failure to Protect: Asbestos Contamination from the Vermiculite Mine at Libby, Montana, 1963-1990."

The ***Ed Hunter Distinguished Service Award*** recognizes a person for their extraordinary contributions to the MHA. The award is not necessarily given on a yearly basis, but only when a qualified candidate has been nominated and selected. The Committee received no nominations for the Award this year.

The ***Cherry Hunter (Mining Art) Award*** honors both its namesake and the award recipient whose works show outstanding commitment to and skill in recording mining history through graphic arts. The committee received no nominations for the award this past year.

The Association also recognizes mining history books in two separate categories. The ***Clark Spence Award*** recognizes the best book in mining history based on the high academic standards of the award's namesake. The ***Mary Spence Award*** recognizes books that are edited works, compilations of documents, significant photographic histories or related genres. The ***Clark Spence Award*** is given every other year. No award was made in either category this year.

Research Grants

The Mining History Association supports mining history research through the peer-reviewed *Mining History Journal* and by providing grants to researchers to conduct archival research. Through good financial stewardship, the MHA has been able to increase the number of research grants to four per year.

This year's research grant recipients are

David Baillargeon, Assistant Professor, University of Texas-Arlington;
Anabel Galindo, Postdoctoral Fellow, Arizona State University;
Peter Vale, Ph.D. student, University of California-Berkeley; and
Charnan Williams, Postdoctoral Fellow, Cornell University

We look forward to seeing the results of their research at a future conference or in an article in the *Journal*.

Election Results and Call for Nominations

With the passing of the presidential pick from Eric Nystrom to Chris Huggard, Dana Bennett begins her term as Vice President. Jennifer Dunn, Ed Raines, and John Koerth also started three-years terms on the MHA Council.

Stephen Hart and Peter Maciulaitis currently service as the MHA's Nominating Committee. The Nominating Committee is charged with filling the following positions in the coming year: Vice President (President Elect) and two members on the Nominating Committee.

Feel free to nominate anyone (including yourself) for any of these positions.

Initial Call for Papers 2023 MHA Conference

The 2023 Program Committee of the MHA invites presentation proposals on any topic or aspect of mining history. Sessions normally include three presentations scheduled to last twenty minutes each. There are no temporal or geographic limits to topic material. Presentations that address mining history of the Socorro, NM area and New Mexico in general are, however, particularly welcome given the location of the Conference.

Proposals should include title of presentation, an abstract (not to exceed one page) for each presentation plus biographical information about each presenter. Please send the written proposals via email to Eric Clements (eclements@semo.edu) by January 1, 2023. Submission by email is required.

Calling All MHA Authors – Publicity Opportunity

Annually the Mining History News includes a section in the Fall issue highlighting mining books written by our members during the past year or two. These announcements supplement but do not replace the traditional list of publications and book reviews in the Mining History Journal and serve as an additional a way to bring your work to the attention of the entire membership of the MHA. To participate, please send the complete bibliographic information (author, title, publisher, publisher location and year, number of pages, binding, price and ISBN) plus a 100-150 word summary to Paul Sphyhalski at prspyhal@yahoo.com. Please include "MHA" at the start of the subject line. The deadline for inclusion in the Fall issue is September 1st.

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| <p>MHA Nuggets</p> <p>September 20 October 18 November 15 January 17</p> | <p>8:00 pm Eastern 7:00 pm Central 6:00 pm Mountain 5:00 pm Pacific</p> <p>5 minutes of social time 20/25 minute presentation Questions/social time</p> |
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Zoom Meeting, Passcode: MHA
OR
LiveStream on YouTube
Mining History Association channel



Join us for MHA Nuggets the third Tuesday of the month on Zoom. Each Nugget includes a mining related presentation and social time to spend with your MHA friends! Our upcoming Nuggets:

September 20, 2022

The Last Years of the New Almaden Mercury Mine in Santa Clara County, California by Michael Cox
Meeting ID: 838 6832 9454 Password: MHA

October 17, 2022

Riddle Nickel Mine, Douglas County, Oregon, By Clark Niewendorp
Meeting ID: 896 8352 0593 Password: MHA

November 15, 2022

Digging Deeper: Discovering Women in Nevada Mining, by Dana Bennett
Meeting ID: 828 6254 9789 Password: MHA

January 17, 2023

A Visit to Helgustaðanáma, Iceland's Historic Spar Mine
by Johnny Johnson
Meeting ID: 846 9877 5787 Password: MHA

The presentations will also be livestreamed on YouTube and recorded for later viewing on the Mining History Association YouTube channel. To utilize the chat features or ask questions during or after the program, you should login using Zoom.

We also have openings for talks next spring. Your topic doesn't have to be academic. Topics can include a visit to a historic mining site or town or an interesting little topic that you happened to find out about. Send an email to mininghistoryassociation@gmail.com if you would like to present an MHA Nugget in the future.

New Temporary Mining Exhibit

The Western Museum of Mining & Industry's next changing exhibit, *Left Behind in the Mines*, opens on Tuesday, September 13, 2022, with a 4pm lecture by Bryan Kahtava. When working mines were abandoned, miners often left things behind when they departed. Clothing, food cans, bottles, and boxes, improvised equipment, and much more. This intriguing exhibit features artifacts from Bryan's extensive personal collection of "stuff" that was left underground in western mines. The artifacts on display challenge some long-held views of life underground, especially in regard to diet and leisure time. A number of items were totally unexpected and are not in museum collections because of their underground locations and difficulty in collecting these artifacts. *Left Behind* will run through Saturday, February 25, 2023. WMMI is located in Colorado Springs, CO, and is open Monday-Saturday 9am-4pm. For more information, see the WMMI website, www.wmmi.org.

2nd International Conference of Mining and Underground Mining Museums

The Cracow Saltworks Museum is organizing the 2nd International Conference of Mining and Underground Museums to be held from May 22 to May 25, 2023, in Wieliczka and Zabrze, Poland. "*Mining Heritage = Human Heritage*" is the theme of this Second Conference.

The organizers are currently planning on 40 papers being delivered in a variety of thematic sessions including discussions on new mining sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List and how to gain entry on the List and protection of mine workings while creating accessibility. The primary language of the conference will be English.

Please mark your calendars and monitor the website www.icmum.pl as information on the Conference continues to develop. Questions can be directed to Monika Dziobek-Motyka at m.dziobek@muzeum.wieliczka.pl.

Mining History Association
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Upcoming Events

Australasian Mining History Conference
Burra, South Australia
Sept. 18-25, 2022

Western History Association
San Antonio, Texas
October 12-15, 2022

**Futures in the History of
Deindustrialisation Conference**
Bologna, Italy
October 13-15, 2022

**International Conference of Mining and
Underground Museums (ICUM2023)**
Wieliczka, Poland
May 22-25, 2023

Mining History Association Conference
Socorro, New Mexico
June 8-11, 2023

The *Mining History News* is published quarterly by and for the members of the **Mining History Association**. Submissions for the newsletter are encouraged.

Deadlines: Fall issue: September 15th
 Winter issue: December 15th
 Spring issue: February 15th
 Summer issue: June 15th

Submissions for the newsletter should be sent to Paul R. Spyhalski at prspyhal@yahoo.com with MHA at the start of the subject line.

Change of address: Please send all address changes to Barbara Clements, Membership Chair, at the following address:

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