

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Multiple Property Documentation Form

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This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

**A. Name of Multiple Property Listing**

Coal Company Stores in McDowell County

**B. Associated Historic Contexts**

Coal Mining in Southern West Virginia, 1880-1941

**C. Geographical Data**

McDowell County, West Virginia

See continuation sheet

**D. Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

2/10/92

Signature of certifying official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

4/17/92

Signature of the Keeper of the National Register

Date

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**E. Statement of Historic Contexts**

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Discuss each historic context listed in Section B.

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In 1873, a Tazewell County, Virginia blacksmith discovered a coal seam on his property that, within a decade, drastically transformed an entire region. When northern capitalists learned of this rich coal, they immediately made plans for large scale development. The initial focus of their attention was on Nelson's seam in what later became Pocahontas, Virginia. Exploration revealed that the high quality bituminous coal extended much farther into parts of Mercer and Wyoming Counties and nearly all of McDowell County, West Virginia. Railroad and landholding companies joined forces to extend industrial development into the southern West Virginia wilderness. Along with the construction of railroads, coal operators from northern cities established mines and, out of necessity, company towns to sustain the work force. McDowell County was quickly transformed into an industrial center known world-wide for its highest quality coal. From the late 1880's until after World War II, McDowell County mines fueled industries that put the United States at the top of the industrial world. Although most of this activity has gone from the area, many towns and buildings stand that reflect the wealth and power of the booming coal industry.

Before Pennsylvania businessmen discovered the value of southern West Virginia's coal, the area was sparsely settled and contained only a few scattered farms. The region's mountainous terrain caused the early settlers to avoid the rugged area and instead congregate in the flatter areas of Virginia and Kentucky that were better suited to agriculture. Records indicate, however, that western Virginians were aware of the coal seam and sent wagons to retrieve some of the resource for fuel in blacksmith shops<sup>1</sup>.

Coal's existence in the area was no secret to outsiders. An English geologist, W.B. Rogers, explored the region between 1836 and 1842 and reported the presence of coal. Long before then, Thomas Jefferson indicated in his Notes on Virginia that he suspected coal deposits in western Virginia. There was little interest in the resource though because of the lack of demand for the coal and its inaccessibility<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps the first person to make use of the resource in the area was a blacksmith, Jordan Nelson. He proved that coal was superior to wood for general heating purposes. Word of Pocahontas coal's quality spread and outsiders began to investigate further its possibilities. In 1873, Jed Hotchkiss of Staunton, Virginia, financed an exploration into southern West Virginia. He sent Isaiah A. Welch to explore and determine the value of the timber and mineral resources across approximately 500,000 acres. Welch arrived at Nelson's outcrop of coal and noted a remarkable seam that was thirteen feet thick<sup>3</sup>.

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Major Hotchkiss understood the potential of this vast seam but also realized the expense necessary to develop the area. He attracted the attention of northern capitalists who promptly purchased about 40,000 acres of prime coal property. Frederick J. Kimball, Vice President of the Norfolk and Western Railroad, acquired much of this property and in 1883 completed a rail route to Nelson's seam in what had become the town of Pocahontas, Virginia. A landholding organization called the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company worked in conjunction with the N & W and had agreed to establish the mine in preparation for the railroad. By the time the first train arrived, there was a community of about fifty houses, a hundred coke ovens and 40,000 tons of coal on the ground waiting to be shipped<sup>4</sup>.

In the mid-1880's outside capitalists established two large coal land leasing associations which allowed development for the rest of the Pocahontas coalfield. The Flat Top Coal Land Association and the Crozer Land Association together owned almost the entire field. These companies practiced a system of offering a thirty year lease with an option to renew for another thirty years. The land holders received ten cents per ton on all coal mined<sup>5</sup>.

Without access to the coal, the land holding company's property west of Pochahontas was worthless. The N & W Railroad and the land associations had many common investors interested in developing that region. As a result, work began immediately towards the tremendous task of completing a rail line into McDowell County. This required a tunnel more than 3,000 feet through Flat Top Mountain. Completion of the tunnel and rail lines into West Virginia allowed for development that entirely transformed the remote county into the leading coal producer in the state<sup>6</sup>.

Coal operators needed to invest only minimal capital to open the first mines. The mines' major requirements were a tipple, a coal processing facility; houses for workers; and a store. The lack of expensive machinery in the late 1880's kept costs to a minimum. Another factor in keeping costs down was the coal's accessibility. The terrain was an obvious obstacle in building the railway but once that was completed, the coal could easily be reached. The mountainous landscape favored coal mining because it exposed the seams on the hillsides. This allowed for drift mining which was more economical than the shaft mines required in the northern coal fields<sup>7</sup>.

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Because of the relative ease of establishing an operation, many small mines opened which accelerated the settlement and development of McDowell County. The N & W's location across the county largely determined the distribution of mines and surrounding communities. Opening a mine operation in southern West Virginia was rather simple because operators could easily obtain a lease and land companies encouraged the establishment of as many mines as the rugged terrain could accommodate. All along the railroad, coal companies would eventually build hundreds of mine operations. It all started quickly, considering the remoteness of the area and the lack of any established roads and communities. Before 1888, fifteen mines were operating and in the next decade, thirty one additional mines opened. The industry continued to grow and from 1900-1910, operators established another 119 mines. Over a fifty year span, from 1880-1930, 224 mines were in operation in the Pocahontas coal field<sup>8</sup>.

The coal that these mines produced was famous around the world. An article published in the Bluefield Daily Telegraph in 1914 claimed, "Original Pocahontas coal is celebrated in most of the countries of the world for its qualities have been put to such severe test as probably no other coal has experienced, and the success with which these tests were met has placed this coal in a class by itself - and that class is the highest". Railroads shipped coal to industrial centers in the Midwest and Great Lakes regions and to the Atlantic seaboard for foreign shipment. One of the biggest markets for Pocahontas coal was the steel industry in the northern United States. The high quality of coal in its most pure form, coke, made the product indispensable to the steel industry. Knowledge of the world's familiarity with the valuable resource no doubt instilled a sense of pride for miners and their families. Each miner could take credit for supplying coal to the nation's industrial centers that manufactured steel and other products which were shipped around the world<sup>9</sup>.

Along with the mines came a spectacular increase in population. The number of people living in McDowell County grew phenomenally at the turn of the century. In 1880, there were only 8,515 inhabitants in the county, but by 1910 the population exploded to 30,000. During the coal industry's earliest years, the number of native workers was adequate enough to satisfy the labor requirements. By the late 1880's, however, the number of new mine operations forced operators to attract thousands of workers from outside West Virginia. At first, mine managers recruited workers from the older coal fields of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and

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Indiana. As demands for labor became more intense, however, operators sent agents to Europe and the South to seek workers for the booming industry. They lured potential miners to southern West Virginia with enticing descriptions of comfortable housing and steady work with good wages<sup>10</sup>. Foreign immigrants from Italy, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Russia poured into the remote county. Initially, agents traveled to Europe to attract miners, but once immigration laws prohibited this practice, officials concentrated on recruiting workers on Ellis Island, New York. Because most immigrants had come from rural areas in Eastern Europe, their transition to the coal fields was similar to those of the native West Virginians who were also adjusting to an industrial lifestyle. Each immigrant group brought its own language and customs to the area, creating the kind of ethnic diversity that, until then, was only found in the large cities<sup>11</sup>.

Black miners made up another large portion of the work force in southern West Virginia, but they were not necessarily new to the coal fields. As early as the 1850's, blacks had mined coal in the Kanawha Valley and others were part of railroad construction crews throughout the region. The black population, however, was not sizable until recruiters visited the southern states in search of miners. By 1907, about thirty-five percent of the labor force in the Pocahontas coal field was black. In 1920, forty three percent of all black miners employed in the United states worked in West Virginia, with the majority of them in the southern part of the state. McDowell County had the largest concentration of blacks in the entire entire Appalachian region<sup>12</sup>.

The company towns that became home to these new arrivals distinguished southern West Virginia from anywhere else in the nation. During the peak years of coal production, thousands of miners and their families lived in these privately owned company towns. Industrial towns were located in other parts of the United States, but in the West Virginia mountains their influence was more profound and long-lasting than anywhere else in the nation. At the height of the coal boom, almost eighty percent of the mine workers in southern West Virginia lived in company-owned communities. The construction of company towns was absolutely necessary in West Virginia. Unlike the northern coal fields where mining operations began in regions that were already settled, southern operations opened in sparsely settled areas with few organized communities. Good roads in southern West Virginia were scarce and the rugged terrain made the daily transportation of employees impossible.

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In response to these conditions, coal operators in the south had to develop their own communities to house their workers. The company town was the most logical solution because it provided efficient and inexpensive housing for a large labor force<sup>13</sup>.

Although the quality of living in coal communities varied from town to town, conditions were usually good. Companies were proud of their towns and tried very hard to build ideal, self-sufficient industrial communities. Operators thoughtfully named the town and very often chose the design for its houses and other buildings. House types were usually uniform which gave the town a monotonous but neat appearance. These houses were not fancy but were well-constructed and usually had yard space for gardens<sup>14</sup>.

Coal communities were different from other rural towns in that they were oriented entirely to coal mining. Once a company leased its land, it constructed the actual mining operation first. In the earliest days, only a few industrial structures were necessary but as operations became more advanced, the need for additional structures increased. Because of the amount of limited space, towns had to be carefully planned to accommodate all necessary facilities. A typical 1900 mine included a tippie; coke ovens; fan, engine, and supply houses; a blacksmith shop, scales; and a stable. These structures occupied the flattest land while the community buildings and houses were located in the unused space. The rows of miners' houses, along with churches, schools, and the company store stood within walking distance of the mine<sup>15</sup>.

Sources written during the peak years in coal production indicate that mining towns offered a good life for miners and their families. One source claimed that, "the standard of living and the cultural attainments of the people in the mining operations of this field lend distinction to the industrial system under which they work". Many residents of company-built towns enjoyed clubs, recreational halls, athletic fields, and other luxuries that were absent in most rural towns across the country. It was certainly in the company's best interest to provide extras for their workers. Jobs in the coal mines were plentiful and miners did not hesitate to leave a community if another company provided better facilities elsewhere<sup>16</sup>.

The McDowell County town of Gary, built by U.S. Coal and Coke Company was a truly exceptional town that was the pride of its company. Twelve

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separate mine works were included in the Gary operation and each had a self-contained community. The company offered Gary residents surfaced roads between communities, weekly garbage collection, electric street lights, and company doctors. They also provided churches, company stores, restaurants, schools, clubhouses, athletic fields, and other recreational facilities such as tennis courts and a movie theater<sup>17</sup>.

Gary was just one of many model communities that provided first-class facilities for miners and their families. Residents in Elkhorn, a Crozer Coal and Coke company town in McDowell County, enjoyed performances by the Elkhorn Orchestra. Jenkinjones, also in McDowell County, offered luxuries such as a theater, barbershop, clubhouse, and streetlights. These and other company towns throughout the Pocahontas coalfield were known for their high-quality living conditions<sup>18</sup>.

A number of factors gradually brought an end to the company-owned and operated coal communities that characterized southern West Virginia since the turn of the century. Technological advancements and mechanization enabled companies to mine coal more efficiently which led to a reduction in the workforce. Following WWI, a general drop in the demand for coal occurred as consumers and large northern and eastern factories turned increasingly to cheaper fuels such as oil and gas. Automobiles were also a factor that brought about a decline of company towns. They allowed more mobility so that miners depended less on the company to provide housing and goods<sup>19</sup>. With automobiles, miners could travel to incorporated towns for goods and services and they could also live wherever they chose. Another reason that the importance of company towns diminished was the increasing influence in McDowell County of the United Mine Workers of America during the 1930's. The U.M.W.A. claimed that companies took advantage of their control in the community and caused the company to relinquish much of its influence. Companies began to sell houses and closed stores as the union demanded. These companies that had established operations early in the century occasionally changed hands but increasingly, during the 1930's, larger companies began to take over the small operations.

These factors combined and caused the isolated and self-contained communities to decline. The population of the towns decreased causing them to lose some of the sense of community that had been so typical in southern West Virginia for several decades. The character of the company towns changed over the years after the coal companies closed their mines and sold their property. The towns in many ways became



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more like other small towns across the country. Houses are now family owned and have taken on an individual look unlike the uniformity of the company towns. What sets these towns apart though are the remains of such structures as tipples, company stores and other company-built buildings that stand as a reminder of southern West Virginia's vast industrial empire.

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notes:

1. Koepler, "The Pocahontas Coal Field"
2. "Pocahontas Mine Story"; Koepler
3. "Pocahontas Mine Story; Welch, "The Pocahontas-Flat-Top Coal Field"
4. Koepler; Welch; Lambie, 31-33; "Pocahontas Mine Story"
5. Lambie, 39; Eller, 72
6. Eller, 73
7. Gillenwater, 27; Lambie, 40-41
8. Gillenwater, 24, 28; Eller, 72
9. "Coal", Bluefield Daily Telegraph, [1914]
10. Eller, 133-134; Gillenwater, 31; Eller, 165-168
11. Gillenwater, 31; Eller, 172-174
12. Eller, 168-169
13. Eller, 163, 162
14. Curtis and Hunter, eds. "Coal", 172
15. Gillenwater, 27, 39; Eller, 182-183
16. Pennington, 40; Hunter, "Story of McDowell County", 187
17. McGehee, "Gary: A First Class Operation", 30
18. Eller, 159
19. McGehee, "From Cradle to Coffin: The Company Store"15-16; Eller, 188; Athey, 7

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**F. Associated Property Types**

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I. Name of Property Type Coal Company Store

II. Description

III. Significance

IV. Registration Requirements

See continuation sheet

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See continuation sheet for additional property types

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**G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods**

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Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

See continuation sheet

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**H. Major Bibliographical References**

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See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- State historic preservation office  
 Other State agency  
 Federal agency

- Local government  
 University  
 Other

Specify repository: Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Bluefield, WV

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**I. Form Prepared By**

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name/title Stacy Sone, surveyor

organization WV SHPO

street & number Cultural Center, Capitol Complex

city or town Charleston

date December 16, 1991

telephone 304-348-0240

state WV

zip code 25305

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I. Name of Property Type: Coal Company Store

II. Description

The majority of the company stores standing in McDowell County are two story brick buildings of monumental design. No two stores look just alike and each displays some type of outstanding architectural feature that indicates its importance in the community. The buildings generally have in common large display windows, broad porches, stone foundations and the name of the coal company displayed on the facade.

Nearly all of the buildings were located in a flat area along the railroad tracks. Because of its important function in the coal community, the stores generally stood in a central location for easy access from the mine and residences.

Although all of the stores have a different appearance, each one is alike in that they served a variety of functions. Because of the coal communities' isolation from commercial centers, coal operators had to provide all the goods and services that a community required. Companies concentrated a number of different functions into one large building. All company stores offered a wide variety of merchandise at prices that were competitive with those in larger incorporated towns. In addition, the building often housed the post office, payroll, doctor's, and business offices, and a clubhouse to accommodate visitors. The building's centralized location and its variety of uses made it an ideal center for social activity in every company town.

Pocahontas coal was some of the richest in the world, so it is no wonder that it contains some of the largest and most impressive company stores to reflect that distinction. The remaining stores in McDowell County provide an outstanding cross-section of those that were built during the boom years in coal production after the turn of the century. Every one of them served as the most important community building. Some, such as those at Switchback, Jenkinjones, and Pageton, and Vivian are monumental brick buildings with some type of decorative detail. All four of these were designed in the 1910's and 1920's by an accomplished Bluefield architect, Alex Mahood. The two wooden stores are no

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less impressive in size although they are not as ornately detailed as some of the brick buildings.

The condition of the company stores in McDowell County ranges from excellent to deteriorated. When the mines closed, the stores usually closed along with them. The size of the buildings and the economic condition of the communities prohibited the use of the stores for other purposes so most of them were simply abandoned instead of remodeled. Although most of the buildings were abandoned and have deteriorated to some degree, they still are outstanding landmarks of the commerce and industry that sustained the area and they are representative of life and culture in the southern West Virginia coal fields.

### III. Significance

Each McDowell County company store is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A for their association with southern West Virginia's coal mining industry and under criterion C for their architectural significance.

The company-owned and operated store was central to each coal community. In every way, it was the most important part of every community next to the mine itself. It provided high-quality merchandise at prices comparable to independent stores in other towns. The stores offered an extraordinary variety of goods from fresh produce to furniture. Since its location was far away from other markets, the company sold nearly anything that anyone could want. The store not only offered necessities, but also some luxury items such as jewelry and pre-made clothing. In addition to serving as a store, the building housed other functions such as the post office and business offices. Because of its location and number of uses, the company store became the most important gathering spot in every coal community. During any time of the day or evening, residents congregated on the store premises to socialize. This gave each of the company towns a sense of community that was often absent in other rural towns where goods and services were scattered throughout the town<sup>19</sup>.

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Architecturally, the coal company stores in southern West Virginia had no rivals anywhere in the Appalachian region. Unlike general stores across most of the rural United States, company stores were architectural masterpieces intended to reflect the wealth and power of the coal company. They were meant to be monumental in size and distinctive in detail. Coal operators often insisted upon a unique design that would indicate the strength of his company. Since the design for the store reflected the operator's personal preference, there was a wide variety of stores built in the West Virginia coal fields. Operators often spared no expense in the building's construction. The end product was always a source of pride for residents in coal company communities.

Each store's period of significance ranges from its construction date to 1941. During the 1920's, automobiles allowed mobility that reduced the miners' dependence on the company stores. Many stores stayed in business through the 1930's, but by the 1940's, they became less important as commercial centers.

#### IV. Registration Requirements

To qualify for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A and C, the building must have functioned as a company store in a coal community. It must retain enough of its original fabric and appearance to reflect its importance to the coal community and to the survival of the coal industry.

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The multiple property listing for coal company stores includes all of the known extant company-built stores in McDowell County. The buildings were identified during a comprehensive survey of five southern West Virginia counties during 1990-1991. The survey focused specifically on coal related resources but also included other structures that are at least fifty years old and retain some degree of historic integrity.

The decision to nominate company stores is based upon their architectural significance and their close association with the coal industry. The standards of integrity were based on the National Register standards for assessing integrity. Knowledge of the significance of the property type and its scarcity helped determine the degree to which allowances can be made for the buildings' conditions.



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