

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only

received

date entered

JAN 23 1983

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Benham Historic District

and/or common

2. Location

street & number ~~Along sections of Kentucky Highway 160, Central Avenue~~
McKnight Street and Cypress Street ^{KY} not for publication

city, town Benham vicinity of

state Kentucky code 021 county Harlan code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Multiple ownership - see continuation sheet

street & number

city, town vicinity of state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Harlan County Courthouse

street & number Public Square

city, town Harlan state Kentucky

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Inventory of Historic Sites in Kentucky has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1983 federal state county local

depository for survey records Kentucky Heritage Council
Frankfort Kentucky

city, town state

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Benham Historic District is located in the center of Benham, Kentucky which is in eastern Harlan County near the Virginia border. This rich coal mining region is characterized by rugged mountains and deep valleys. Benham (pop. 1,000) is situated in a valley along Looney Creek, a tributary of the Poor Fork of the Cumberland River. Benham lies at the foot of Big Black Mountain which is the highest point in Kentucky and two long spurs of this mountain create the valley in which Benham is located. Benham is the home of the Wisconsin Steel Coal Mines of the International Harvester Company which continues as the main employer for the community.

The Benham Historic District represents an important concentration of the town's architectural resources which are associated with the historical development of the community. It contains nine buildings centered around a public park which originally comprised the community's governmental, educational, health and entertainment facilities necessary for a self-sustaining coal town. They are the largest and most costly structures erected in the community with the majority of brick construction reflecting the vernacular styles of the early 1920s. Today the buildings within the historic district are substantially unchanged and represent the planning ideas behind the coal town concept.

Planners and architects of the Wisconsin Steel Company laid out the community of Benham in 1912. They designed a central park area which was to be surrounded by the company stores, schools and churches. Most of the company buildings were located facing both the main highway on one side with access to the railroad at the rear. Surrounding this central area were the residential areas which extended onto nearby hillsides and valleys. These residential areas were initially composed of one-story frame structures situated on small lots. Streets were named for trees such as spruce, pine and maple, sidewalks were built and sewers were constructed. Altogether the early planners sought to employ the most modern of planned community designs.

The company buildings were originally one to two story frame structures but with an increase in coal production and population the Wisconsin Steel Company undertook a complete rebuilding of their structures in the early 1920s. These buildings were constructed at or near the original locations around the public park area. Between 1920 and 1925 seven major buildings were constructed which were to serve the needs of both the company and the community. These buildings were all interconnected by a coal fired steam heating system with underground piping. All of the buildings were constructed of steel and concrete with a brick exterior.

The design of the buildings in the historic district reflect the commercial building styles of the early 1920s. Common characteristics are inset decorative stone and brickwork, copper cornices and decorative metal panels. The interior of the buildings display decorative woodwork, plaster and metal also found

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1920 - 1930 **Builder/Architect**

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Benham is a coal mining community located in eastern Harlan County near the Virginia border. Harlan County is a rich coal mining area of Kentucky and is characterized by small communities centered around mines in the rugged mountainous terrain. Benham (pop. 1,000) is an excellent example of the planned coal towns which were created during the early 20th century by large mining corporations. It remains largely intact and still exhibits its original town plan and architectural heritage.

The area encompassed by the Benham Historic District is located in the center of the community around a circular public park. Containing nine buildings this area served as the focal point of the community with the buildings providing the functions necessary for a self-sustaining community. Adjacent to one another were the town's company stores, company offices, post office, hospital, theatre and school. These buildings are distinctive because of their similarity of design and brick construction. The design and setting of these buildings within the overall concept of the community shows the planning concepts central to the development of the Eastern Kentucky coal towns.

Benham is one of the best examples of the company coal town remaining in Eastern Kentucky. This rich coal producing area became developed at the beginning of the 20th century by both large and small coal mining companies. Many of the larger firms constructed entire communities around the mines to provide for housing, shopping and entertainment for the miners and their families. The best of these communities were carefully designed and constructed utilizing the most sophisticated urban planning designs of their day. Today, Benham continues to possess its original characteristics and the community plan is intact.

The site of Benham was originally a remote area occupied by the farms of several families. In the early 1900s purchasing agents and engineers of the International Harvester Company of Chicago began buying tracts of this land after the discovery of rich coal seams in the area. Some initial mining was performed by the company but production was hindered until construction of a spur line up the valley in 1911 by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. After 1911 it became evident that the mines were to be a long lasting enterprise for the company and plans began for the construction of a complete community to serve the mining families employed by the company. Five major sub-surface mines were opened by Wisconsin Steel in Benham during these years. At the same time another coal community known as Lynch was established by U.S. Steel adjacent to Benham up the valley.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property approx. 3 acres

Quadrangle name Benham

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	7	3	2	6	2	8	5	0	4	0	9	2	4	0	0
Zone	Easting					Northing									

B

1	7	3	2	6	3	8	0	4	0	9	2	4	2	0
Zone	Easting					Northing								

C

1	7	3	2	6	3	8	0	4	0	9	2	3	1	0
Zone	Easting					Northing								

D

1	7	3	2	6	3	9	5	4	0	9	2	3	1	0
Zone	Easting					Northing								

E

Zone	Easting					Northing								

F

Zone	Easting					Northing								

G

Zone	Easting					Northing								

H

Zone	Easting					Northing								

Verbal boundary description and justification The boundary of the Benham Historic District contains lots 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22 and 23 of Block "C" in the plan of Benham, Kentucky as shown on the accompanying map. This map is drawn at the scale of 1"=100'. The boundary includes all company buildings facing the public square.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Philip Thomason, Director

organization Thomason and Associates

date April 14, 1983

street & number 1700 Hayes Street Suite 202

telephone (615) 320-5732

city or town Nashville

state Tennessee

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature Mary Corman

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date June 15, 1983

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

for Delores Byers
Keeper of the National Register

Entered in the
National Register

date 7/21/83

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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National Park Service**

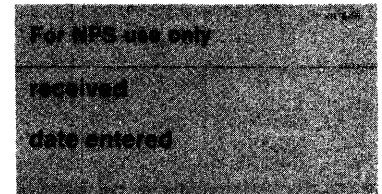
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Owner's List

1. Benham Theatre
Youth of Benham
P.O. Box 391
Benham, KY 40807
2. Benham Meat Market
City Of Benham
P.O. Box 38
Benham, KY 40807
3. Benham Commissary
James Bullock
Farmer's Square
Cumberland, KY 40823
4. Benham City Hall
City of Benham
P.O. Box 38
Benham, KY 40807
5. Benham Post Office
Benham Lodge 880
P.O. Box 44
Benham, KY 40807
6. Benham Fire Hall
City of Benham
P.O. Box 38
Benham, KY 40807
7. Benham Hospital
Valley View Hospital
c/o Gene Mattson
Cumberland, KY 40823
8. Benham United Methodist Church
Benham United Methodist Church
c/o Mrs. Nina Fawbush
Benham, KY 40807
9. Benham Grade School
Harlan County Board of Education
Harlan, KY

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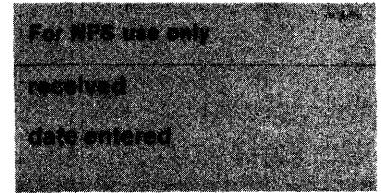
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10. Benham Park

City of Benham
P.O. Box 38
Benham, KY 40807

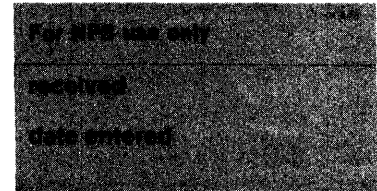
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during the period. Few changes have occurred to these buildings in past decades and they still display their original characteristics. Buildings within the historic district are as follows:

1. Benham Theatre, 1922. This two-story brick structure was constructed as a theatre by Wisconsin Steel to serve as an entertainment and meeting center for the miners and their families. The building is rectangular in shape with a flat roof. It has a central doorway opening with a limestone surround and fixed casement windows. The interior features an abundance of decorative egg and dart plaster molding on both the balcony, main floor and stage areas. Alterations to the building include an added frame doorway at the main entrance and removal of the original copper cornice. Although the building has become somewhat deteriorated it remains structurally sound and there is a great deal of community interest in its restoration.

2. Benham Meat Market, 1922. Presently used as a carpet store, this one-story brick structure originally housed a meat market which served the community. The building is rectangular in shape with the main facade featuring plate glass windows and an altered entryway. The upper facade displays brick soldier coursing, inset stone panels and a triangular stepped parapet. The interior consists of open floor space with an added dropped ceiling. The building is in good condition and is utilized for commercial use.

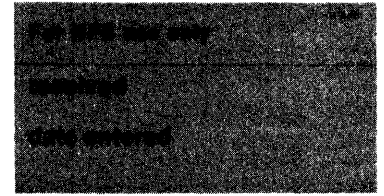
3. Benham Commissary, 1923. The Commissary building is the largest structure in Benham and originally served as the main store for the community. It is a three story brick building with a flat roof and is rectangular in shape. The main facade has plate glass display windows with concrete sills and brick panels. There are two main entryways with double doors and inset glass panels. The second floor is four bays wide with plate glass divided by mullions. The upper facade displays soldier coursing and inset stone panels. At the corners of the building are brick pilasters with stone capitals. The interior of the building consists of open floor space with a mezzanine level above the first floor. This mezzanine still retains its original office area and decorative oak railing. The building is presently used for storage space by the owner.

4. Benham City Hall, 1919. This building was originally used as the offices for Wisconsin Steel and was later turned over to the city of Benham for use as the city hall. The building is a one-and one-half story brick structure with a hipped roof and gable dormer windows. It features a double door entryway, one-over-one sash windows and a stairway and large windows on the west facade which served as the company pay windows. The interior has been remodeled with dropped ceilings but most of the original office areas and woodwork remains intact.

5. Benham Post Office, 1923. The Post office is a two and one half story brick building and is the most decorative of the community structures. The building is three bays wide with an offset entryway and plate glass windows on the ground

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story. Above the windows are two light transoms and rectangular brick spandrels. The second story windows are one-over-one sash. Between the second and half story windows are copper spandrels with decorative banding. The half story windows are arched with radiating brick arching, stone keystones and concrete sills. Separating each bay on the facade is a Doric pilaster with a stone capital and at the roofline is a copper cornice. The interior has been remodeled somewhat but it still utilized for the community post office and meeting rooms.

6. Benham Fire Hall, 1922. Although no longer used this one story frame structure originally housed the fire truck for the community. This building has a gable roof, shiplap siding and three-over-one sash windows. Beneath the gable roof are exposed brackets. The main elevation has large double doors. The building is presently vacant.

7. Benham Hospital, 1922. The Benham Hospital is an irregular shaped Bungalow style structure with a hipped roof. The main facade features a gable roof porch with brick piers. The windows are three-over-one sash with concrete sills. The eaves of the roof display exposed brackets. The interior is divided into rooms for offices and patient wards and most original details are still intact. This building was first called the Benham Doctor's office and Wisconsin Steel would send doctors to the community on a regular basis to care for the health of the miners. The building was deeded to the community in 1962 and operated as a public health facility until 1981. It is presently vacant.

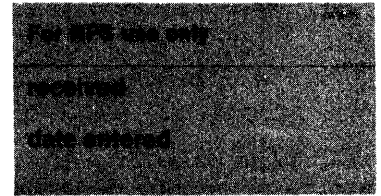
8. Benham United Methodist Church, 1928. Built in the Gothic style, this frame and stucco church has served the local methodist congregation for over fifty years. The building is rectangular in shape with an ell addition. It has arched Tudor style windows with stained glass. The main elevation has a square bell tower with lancet windows and a conical roof with a finial. The main entryway has double doors with a rounded arch transom. The building continues to function as the Benham Methodist church.

9. Benham Grade School, 1928. The Benham school is an irregular shaped brick building with a gable roof. It has an offset tower with an octagonal steeple and which shelters the main entryway. The windows are six-over-nine casement with brick sills. Decorative features include stone belt coursing and inset brick banding. The interior is comprised of numerous classrooms and offices with a gymnasium at the rear of the building. Most of the original interior features are intact. The building was originally used for both grade school and high school students but it is presently used for only for grade school students.

10. Benham Park, ca. 1915. The Benham Park is a circular recreation area in the center of the community building area. It was built as a playground center

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for the community children and has tennis courts and various recreational equipment. It was designed as an open space and recreational feature in the community plan.

These buildings and the park area served as the central shopping, governmental and meeting area of the community. Although several of the buildings are vacant this area is still the focal point of Benham and few alterations have occurred to either the buildings or the original plan. There are no intrusions in the district and it retains the integrity of its original design.

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Between 1912 and 1914 several hundred structures were built in Benham by area carpenters under the supervision of company architects brought in from Chicago. Most of these structures were one-story dwellings built along planned streets and thoroughfares. Company buildings were initially constructed of frame and were centered around a public park in the center of the community. By 1918 the mines were so successful that an expansion of the worker's housing was needed. During the next several years "new Benham" was constructed adjacent to "old Benham" and consisted of hundreds of homes many of which were substantial two-story duplexes.

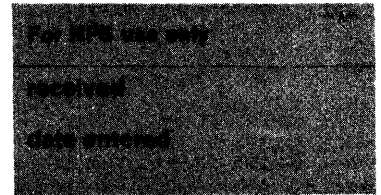
The early 1920s witnessed Benham at its peak with the Benham coal mines employing approximately 1,200 workers. The mines operated at full capacity for several years with 408 ovens turning out tons of coke for shipment to the International Harvester Company's Wisconsin Steel Mill in Chicago. The success of the Benham mines resulted in a new wave of construction by the company which began to replace the frame company buildings with more substantial brick structures. Between 1920 and 1924 a new theatre, hospital, company office and two company stores were constructed of brick around the public park. This activity was followed in 1926 when the Benham public school was constructed. The company also aided local congregations in building churches such as the Benham Methodist Church also located adjacent to the public park. This building boom transformed Benham into a modern community with substantial brick and frame structures.

Many of the miners employed in Benham were immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and many of their descendants still work in the Benham mines. The Benham mines also employed a large number of blacks who lived in a segregated area of Benham and attended a separate school. The miners were paid in scrip which was redeemable at the company stores or for uses at other company buildings. The company commissary sold not only food but also furniture, clothing, hardware equipment and other necessities. The theatre provided entertainment in the form of plays and movies. The hospital supplied health care to the miners with doctors and nurses on call for emergencies in the mines. Altogether the company buildings were intended to supply all of the miners needs during his employment with the company.

Employment in the mines began to decrease in the late 1920s and during the depression only four hundred workers operated the mines due to falling demand. During these years Benham and Lynch escaped the strikes and violence which characterized the Harlan County coal fields in the 1930s. An organizer for the United Mine Workers stated this was because "the working conditions at Benham and Lynch were better than the other part of Harlan County and it was, therefore, more difficult to organize the miners. They had already begun making good money and working shorter hours." Workers at Benham enjoyed a voice in community affairs through the Benham Employees Association and finally organized peacefully in 1939 when workers voted to join the Progressive Mine Workers of America.

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With World War Two demand for coal increased and the number of miners employed in the Benham mines rose to over 900. As the war ended mechanization began to gradually decrease the need for hand loading mining and the number of workers employed at Benham dropped significantly. In 1960 Wisconsin Steel began to sell off houses to the several hundred workers who remained at the mines. On July 18, 1961 Benham was incorporated and in later years many of the original company buildings such as the stores and offices were sold to the city or private individuals. The mining areas continue to be owned and operated by International Harvester which remains as the chief employer for the Benham community.

The Benham Historic District represents the period of peak development of the community in the 1920s. All of the original company buildings remain in good condition and few alterations have occurred to these buildings. The company office is now occupied by the city of Benham and serves as the city hall. The post office, Methodist Church and School continue to be utilized while the rest of the buildings are vacant or used for commercial businesses. Interest in restoring the Benham theatre has increased in recent years and a local committee is soliciting financing for its development. The buildings within the Benham Historic District area contains the the largest and most significant grouping of buildings in the community and there is strong interest and commitment to their future use.

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Caudill, Rebecca. My Appalachia. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

Condon, Mabel Green. A History of Harlan County. Nashville, Tennessee: The parthenon Bress, 1962.

History of Benham. Unpublished manuscript dated 1963 in the possession of Terri Williams Clark.

Titler, George. Hell in Harlan. Beckley, West Virginia: BJW Printers, n.d.

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Harlan County, Kentucky

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AMENDMENT:

While the Benham jail was included in the boundary of the Benham Historic District when it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in June 1983 it was not described. This amendment is offered to correct this oversight.

11. Benham Jail Ark Land Company
 C/O Don Bradley
 158 Central Ave.
 Benham 40807

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AMENDMENT:

While the Benham jail was included in the boundary of the Benham Historic District when it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in June 1983 it was not described. This amendment is offered to correct this oversight.

11. Benham Jail, c. 1922. This one-story, gable-oriented, brick structure was originally constructed as a jail by Wisconsin Steel. In later years it was used by Union organizers. Although a concrete block shed wing has been added to the building, it continues to contribute to the historic significance of the district. Like the jail the majority of the district's historic resources are brick structures which materially reflect the regional architecture of the early 1920s and all served community or governmental functions.

Benham Historic District
Amendment #57

- 1 Building #
- ⚠ Photo # and Direction

