

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

PH0676373

FOR NPS USE ONLY
APR 3 1979
RECEIVED
DATE ENTERED

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

St. John Mine

HISTORIC

Snake Cave Mine

AND/OR COMMON

St. John Mine (preferred)

2 LOCATION

WI 133

STREET & NUMBER

Highway 133

___NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Potosi

___ VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
Third

STATE

Wisconsin

CODE
55

COUNTY
Grant

CODE
043

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

- ___DISTRICT
- ___BUILDING(S)
- ___STRUCTURE
- SITE
- ___OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

- ___PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- ___BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- ___IN PROCESS
- ___BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- ___UNOCCUPIED
- ___WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- ___YES: RESTRICTED
- ___YES: UNRESTRICTED
- ___NO

PRESENT USE

- ___AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- ___COMMERCIAL
- ___PARK
- ___EDUCATIONAL
- ___PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ___ENTERTAINMENT
- ___RELIGIOUS
- ___GOVERNMENT
- ___SCIENTIFIC
- ___INDUSTRIAL
- ___TRANSPORTATION
- ___MILITARY
- ___OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Laverne C. Ihm -and- Richard Wagner

STREET & NUMBER

St. John Mine Potosi, Wisconsin 53820

CITY, TOWN

Potosi

___ VICINITY OF

STATE
Wisconsin 53820

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Registry of Deeds

STREET & NUMBER

Grant County Courthouse

CITY, TOWN

Lancaster

STATE
Wisconsin

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Wisconsin Inventory of Historic Places

DATE

1976

___FEDERAL STATE ___COUNTY ___LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

State Historical Society of Wisconsin

CITY, TOWN

Madison

STATE
Wisconsin 53706

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

EXCELLENT DETERIORATED
 GOOD RUINS
 FAIR UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

UNALTERED
 ALTERED

CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE
 MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

St. John Mine is a natural cave that was extensively exploited for lead prior to 1870. The cave opening is about halfway up the western bluff of the hollow that contains Potosi. Mining enlarged the cave to a volume and depth many times greater than that of the natural opening. The drifts of the mine strike in a direction sixty-five degrees west of north following a vein of nearly pure galena. The vein was almost entirely played out when the mine closed in 1870. Although longer drifts ran as deep as a mile from the cave mouth, most have been closed off, and the readily accessible depth of the mine is about 300 feet. This lies entirely within the nominated property.

The host rock of the mine is Ordovician Galena Dolomite. The floor is composed of rubble, chert, and clay, which was backfilled by miners digging deeper in the mine. In places this fill is as deep as twenty feet, covering exhausted diggings. A number of exploited drifts are also backfilled with the scrap material. Plainly visible on the walls and ceiling of the mine are holes made by the miners' hand drills and evidence of blasting with black powder. Small bits of residual lead, as well as stalactites and stalagmites also are visible. The mine is illuminated with electric lighting.

For purposes of safety and security, the mine opening is secured with a wooden wall and door. A minimal amount of shoring has also been necessary at the entrance. Access to the mine is gained either by a long flight of wooden steps or by a private road which switches back once in its climb from the parking lot on Highway 133. About two-thirds of the way up the flight of stairs is a reconstruction of a log Badger hut, a crude dugout with low log walls and covered with half-round logs and sod, like the simple shelters used by early miners in Wisconsin. At the foot of the road, fronting on Highway 133, stands a modern A-frame building. This interesting building is constructed of materials salvaged from demolished buildings in the Potosi area. It serves as an orientation center and gift shop for the mine complex and as a dwelling for the owners. The stair, road, Badger hut, and A-frame are not of historical importance.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
--PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> --ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> --COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> --LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> --RELIGION	
--1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> --ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> --CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> --LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> --SCIENCE	
--1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> --AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> --ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> --LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> --SCULPTURE	
--1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> --ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> --EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> --MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> --SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> --ART	<input type="checkbox"/> --ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> --MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> --THEATER	
1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> --PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> --TRANSPORTATION	
--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 1700, c. 1832

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Discovered and exploited by the Indians and the French, the St. John Mine is among the very earliest lead mines in Wisconsin. During the nineteenth-century period of American lead mining, the St. John Mine was a rich and important mine in the Potosi area. Its development by Willis St. John contributed significantly to the development of the village of Potosi. Now maintained and interpreted as a museum, the mine is a worthwhile educational attraction in the Wisconsin lead region.

The Snake Cave Mine is thought by many to be the lead mine that the French explorer, Nicolas Perrot discovered in 1690. It is likely that Pierre LeSueur worked this mine in 1700. That year he ascended the Mississippi River with license to develop lead and copper mines that he has seen and/or learned about on previous expeditions on the upper Mississippi. After investigating the Fever River district (Galena), LeSueur and his party of twenty-nine miners continued into Wisconsin and explored a lead mine near the mouth of the Grant River, which joins the Mississippi near modern Potosi. This mine was in a cave which contained a rattlesnake den. Eluding the serpents, LeSueur and his men mined a supply of the mineral from the cave. While it is impossible to confirm that LeSueur's lead-mine cave and the St. John Mine are one and the same, Reuben Gold Thwaites was of the opinion that they were, as is Dr. Allen Heyl, Staff Geologist of the U. S. Geological Survey and past president of the Geological Society of America. Thwaites concluded that LeSueur and his men "supplied themselves with lead from what came to be afterwards known as 'Snake diggings,' near the present village of Potosi." Heyl, after reading LeSueur's journal, also concludes that LeSueur mined in this cave in 1700, and continued, "[the St. John Mine] is perhaps the oldest single exact spot in southwest Wisconsin where you can say the earliest explorers had been and mined lead."¹

Indians probably had known of and had worked the mine some prior to LeSueur's arrival, and it is probable that they and the French continued to work the mine through the eighteenth century. It is thought, however, that they neither blasted nor followed the veins of lead very deep, but mined only that ore that was readily accessible. The extensive exploitation of the Snake Cave veins remained for the Americans.

Willis St. John was the first American to exploit the Snake Cave lead deposit. In 1825 he had come to the Galena lead district from southern Illinois with his father and brother. The three mined in the Fever River area through the outbreak of the Winnebago War of 1827. Willis fought in the war, and when his father and brother decided to return south in 1828, he elected to remain in the lead region and began prospecting to the north of Galena, perhaps in Wisconsin. It is possible that Willis visited Snake Cave in the period between the Winnebago War and Blackhawk's uprising.²

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(see continuation sheet)

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 5.6

QUADRANGLE NAME Potosi, Wis.-Iowa

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

A 15 6871610 4728275

B

C

D

E

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G

H

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

(see continuation sheet)

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE CODE COUNTY CODE

STATE CODE COUNTY CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

David A. Donath, Historian

ORGANIZATION

State Historical Society of Wisconsin

DATE

October 1978

STREET & NUMBER

816 State Street

TELEPHONE

608/262-3390

CITY OR TOWN

Madison

STATE

Wisconsin 53706

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE X

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

Richard M. Murrey

TITLE Director, State Historical Society of Wisconsin

DATE

2/26/79

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Bill Donath
KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

June 4, 1979

ATTEST: *William H. Abraham*
CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

DATE

6-9-79

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8. SIGNIFICANCE (continued)

St. John participated in the Blackhawk War, and upon its close went to Snake Cave with one Isaac Whitaker, and began mining there in earnest. St. John and Whitaker are named among the first permanent settlers of Potosi. The story is told that when St. John first entered the cave he found an abundance of rattlesnakes, much as LeSueur had before him. Only after removing them by fumigation could he begin extracting ore. The naming of the Potosi valley as "Snake Hollow" is attributed to him.³

Soon after beginning mining the cave, St. John built a smeltery in the ravine below, southwest of St. Thomas Roman Catholic Church. Lead was transported from the mouth of the cave to the smeltery via a chute, the course of which may still be seen. Snake Cave proved to be a rich deposit, and it made St. John's fortune. His success attracted others to the Potosi area, and within a few years the bluffs and ravines of the district were pocked with succor holes and more extensive mines. By 1840 Potosi, then called Snake Diggings, was an established village. By 1843 St. John had extracted upwards of 250,000 pounds of the mineral from the cave and had opened two more mines in the valley. He had also purchased a quantity of real estate and was considered a wealthy man in the area.⁴

By 1848 a series of business reverses, coupled with a monetary crisis at the State Bank of Illinois, where he banked his capital, had destroyed St. John's fortune. That year he sold the mine to Nelson Dewey and Henry L. Massey, who operated in profitably for the next twenty years. By 1870 the Snake Cave veins had entirely been exhausted, and the mine ceased operation. Three years later Dewey, facing bankruptcy, sold his share to Massey. The defunct mine remained in the Massey family until 1969 when Laverne C. Ihm purchased it on land contract.⁵ Ihm reopened the mine as a historical attraction and has made several improvements to the property to facilitate its opening to the public. The orientation, historical interpretation, and tour of the mine which Ihm and his guides give visitors are historically accurate and educationally worthwhile.

¹Reuben Gold Thwaites, "Notes on Early Lead Mining in the Fever (or Galena) River Region," Collections of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, xiii, 273-274; Louise Phelps Kellogg, The French Regime in Wisconsin and the Northwest (Madison, 1925), p. 361, 361n; Thwaites, ed., "LeSueur's Voyage up the Mississippi," Collections, xvi, 177-181; Thwaites, Wisconsin: The Americanization of a French Settlement (New York, 1908), pp. 77-80; Thwaites, The Story of Wisconsin (Boston, 1890), p. 80; Allen V. Heyl to Laverne C. Ihm, 16 Sept. 1970.

²Genealogical research on the St. John family conducted by Frank M. Lang included in a letter to Laverne C. Ihm, 1969; Castello N. Holford, History of Grant County, Wisconsin (Lancaster, Wis., 1900), p. 262.

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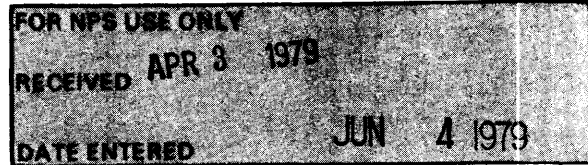
PAGE 2

³Holford, History, p. 242; Lang to Ihm.

⁴History of Grant County, Wisconsin (Chicago, 1881), p. 761; Holford, History, p. 217.

⁵Laverne C. Ihm, interview, 17 Sept. 1978.

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MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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- Heyl, Allen V. letters to Laverne C. Ihm, summer 1969, 16 Sept. 1970, 19 Feb. 1971.
- History of Grant County, Wisconsin. Chicago, 1881.
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- Kellogg, Louise Phelps. The French Regime in Wisconsin and the Northwest. Madison, 1925.
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- _____. Wisconsin: The Americanization of a French Settlement. New York, 1908.

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10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA -- verbal boundary description
the parcel is delineated by the heavy black line; total acreage 5.6

