

May 2022

Black Hillbilly: An Exploration of the Black Erasure from the Appalachian Historical Narrative

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<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.HUM.01>

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Master of Humanities Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Humanities.

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Black Hillbilly:
An Exploration of the Black Erasure from the Appalachian Historical Narrative

By

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A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of Humanities

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2022

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Abstract

In 1915 two Black businessmen, Archie McKinney and Matthew Buster, secured the purchase and operation of Eagle Coal Company Inc. in Montgomery, West Virginia. A Black-owned coal company operated and existed in southwestern West Virginia. Eagle Coal has all but disappeared, even from historical memory. What exactly happened to this coal company remains very much a mystery and is a poignant image that represents the mystery that surrounds the Black experience in Appalachia. In the face of “social injustice, racial violence, disfranchisement, and the intensification of the segregationist system,” Black Americans set out from the South in search of better jobs and better wages.¹ A faction of this group would settle in the Appalachian coal mining industry and invest in settling into the area long term by building Black communities. Their attempts to create Black wealth would come in various forms, such as schools, newspapers, shops, and, in Montgomery’s case, even a coal company; however, these initiatives appear as a blip in the Progressive Era of American History. This has led to a dominantly white image of Appalachia both during its economic success and impoverished downfall. To understand how areas like Montgomery, Keystone, and McDowell County were successful in building Black culture and Black community is to follow the migration of Black labor to West Virginia, examine Black experience and Black existence in West Virginia from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, and observe patterns of Black progression in densely black populated West Virginia areas. Through the investigation of Black experience and Black existence in these West Virginia areas, I share how Black Appalachia existed alongside White Appalachia, playing a foundational role to West Virginia’s development.

¹ Joe Trotter and Earl Lewis, *African Americans in the Industrial Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1996).

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my parents, Bola and Tom, for their support and encouragement. It's as Mom says, an accomplishment from one of us is an accomplishment for the whole family. To my readers, Dr. Jordan Lieser and Dr. Laura Stivers, thank you for helping me to become a better writer. My humble and many thanks to the Black historians both in academia and community that continue to share Black history to the masses, especially William H. Turner, Edward Cabbell and Joe Trotter, for their incredible work on Black Appalachia. A special thanks to Ancella R. Bickley and Lynda Ann Ewen for bringing Memphis Tennessee Garrison's incredible story to light. She was a remarkable Black Appalachian woman. My gratitude also extends to Ronald L. Lewis' foundation research on Black labor in Appalachia. It also with immense gratitude that I credit and thank the Chronicling America project for creating an archival space available to the masses. Many thanks to West Virginia University for sharing their archives with the Library of Congress to make that project possible. Lastly, to my partner and friends, thank you for the coffees, the study sessions, the zoom meetings, and the snack breaks. And to my cohort mate Gina, we made it mate.

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Introduction

Black folk are Appalachian folk. Building community, business, and wealth, Black folk migrated to Appalachia for work in an area that provided space to create Black neighborhoods, Black education, and Black wealth. In the post-Civil War Industrialization era, the demand for coal increased. Railway expansion connected the country and created its own coal demands while also serving as a mass transportation unit for coal. While Central and Eastern European immigrants are often cited as the workforce that filled these increased demands, a prominent population of Black workers were also a part of the available workforce. Coal mining companies in Appalachia used Black coal miners for mining labor but also as leverage in labor strike relations. Coal mining companies saw a chance to use the Black workforce to diminish unionization and aid in strike breaks² as it was easier to oppress Black workers due to prevailing racism. The companies saw Black workers as a people that were thought-to-be easier to handle than their white coworkers³. For Black folk, the prospect of work in Appalachia brought anticipation of higher wages, less discrimination, and a better quality of life than they had further South. In West Virginia, a state just established in 1863, this exchange between the needs of the coal mining industry and those of Black folks offered a unique partnership. Despite segregation, prejudice, and unsettling racial relations, Black culture and community existed in areas of Southwestern West Virginia like Montgomery and Keystone. Remnants of this Black Appalachia can still be found today amid the stereotypically white image this part of Appalachia displays. This relationship between coal companies and Black workers was not without exploitation. Yet

² Cabbell, Edward and William Turner. *Blacks in Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 127.

³ Laing, James T. "The Negro Miner in West Virginia." *Social Forces* 14, no. 3 (1936): 419. Accessed August 29, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2571281>.

for Black folk, it served as a step towards Black wealth and progression, albeit briefly, in this part of Appalachia.

The first images that come to mind when one thinks of Appalachia are not the Black newspaper owner, the Black educational institute, nor the Black owned coal company. Instead, it's coal fields, white laborers, and white towns that for a time experience economic success but are now reduced to poverty.



Figure 1 Woman and kids in Scotts Run, WV



Figure 2 Blair Mountain Miner

The images above display the prevalent white stereotype of Appalachia. It's the hillbilly in the mountain who for generations has worked the coal fields or the land and now lays ancestral claim to Appalachia. The image of the hillbilly became synonymous with Appalachia. Appalachians or hillbillies were identified as people that were backward, ignorant, and othered. Such presumptions were made in tandem with the assumption that Appalachia is white and homogenous. Biased stereotyping of the hillbilly, both historically and today has been used to depict the area in need of saving, specifically to save white kin. In the case of the late 19th century, the stereotype of Appalachia's image caused erasure. In 1910, the Black population in Southwestern West Virginia was 40,000⁴. Areas of this region today maintain a smaller Black population. Montgomery, West Virginia today holds a population of 1,275, with a little more than 14 percent of that population identifying as "African American."⁵ Keystone, West Virginia

⁴ Joe Trotter. *Coal Class and Color* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 17.

⁵ "Montgomery city, West Virginia", *United States Census Bureau*, accessed, January 31, 2022, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=1600000US5455468>.

today only holds a population of about 270 but boasted a Black demographic of 70 percent as recent as the 2000 census.⁶ Prevailing Black existence in Southwestern West Virginia produces a contradiction to the mainstream image of West Virginia Appalachia. Through examining Black history in Southwestern West Virginia, and the occurrences of Black progression and Black wealth in this region, I explore components of Black existence in these areas in the early 1900s to better understand how this brief cultural success existed at a time of racial violence and segregation. Exploring Black labor, living conditions, religious and political power, and education and entrepreneurial goals, I argue that contrary to the current census demographic and the overwhelming volume of West Virginia history featuring a white Appalachia, that Black Appalachia existed not outside the margins of this timeline, but rather existed in parallel with the white Appalachia currently dominating the historical narrative.

Black folk were instrumental in bringing the state of West Virginia forward as a legitimate and competitive coal production economy through Black labor in the coalfields and on the railroads as well as the determination to build Black community. This was not a marginalized group in West Virginia but rather a contender in political elections, education, entrepreneurship, and labor. My aim for this work is to provide a better understanding of a diminished history of a moment and place in time that could not have been the industry that it still attempts to cling on to today, without Black folk.

Methodology and Sources

Integrating archival research, and historiography, I capture an understanding of the labor migration to Appalachia between 1880 – 1920. This Black Progressive era represents the Black

⁶ “City of Keystone, West Virginia,” *WV.gov*, Last modified 2022, <https://local.wv.gov/Keystone/Pages/about.aspx>.

community that contributed to West Virginia's growth and wealth as a state. My archival research produced *The McDowell Times* Black owned newspaper, which provides weekly issues of Black politics, labor, and life in McDowell County West Virginia and its surrounding areas. Founded in 1904, *The McDowell Times* was a prominent Black newspaper in West Virginia. Published amongst the coalfields of Keystone, its editor and primary publisher, Matthew Thomas Whittico, also known as M.T. Whittico, believed in publishing a newspaper for the interest of what was then commonly called the Negro race. Provided by the archives of West Virginia University, the Library Congress compiled available issues of the Black-owned newspaper into a digitally available archive called "Chronicling America"⁷. Newspapers like *The McDowell Times* serve as a lens into the Black experience in early 20th century Appalachia. It should be noted that the Black Appalachian historiography must include the first historians to pioneer researching this topic. They are white. However, the number of Black historians studying Black Appalachia is growing. For my central research, I have chosen to prioritize the works of Black scholars before me who have been studying the Black Appalachian experience.

Joe William Trotter Jr., has created an extensive list of works focusing on the Black experience, specifically of the working class, and the connection between a Black person's work and the communities they live in. *Coal, class, and color: Blacks in southern West Virginia, 1915-32*, published in 1990, *African Americans in the Industrial Age*, published in 1996, and *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, published in 2019, all provide an overview of the creation of the Black working class, and the cultural institutions that Black folk built both out of their own working class and with collaboration of the Black elite to create

⁷ "Chronicling America, Historic American Newspapers," *Library of Congress*, Accessed Sep. 10, 2021, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.

community and township in the coal fields of West Virginia. Trotter's perspective primarily focuses on the Black working-class and how their migration from the south in search for jobs served as a catalyst to the rapid industrialization of the United States. Specifically calling the Black working-class the Black proletariat, Trotter is also calling forth an ancient Rome term used to categorize population. Meticulous in his findings, Trotter's works serve as a resource of Black population, labor, and existence in southern West Virginia from the 1880s – 1920's.

Two additional scholars who laid the foundation for Trotter's work are Edward J. Cabbell and William H. Turner, editors and collaborators of one of the first comprehensive texts of Black Appalachian History, *Blacks in Appalachia*, published in 1985. Turner, born in the coal town of Lynch, KY in 1946 comes from a generation of coal miners. He used his professional career to work on behalf of marginalized groups and has produced two pivotal works on Black Appalachian history. In addition to *Blacks in Appalachia*, Turner published *The Harlan Renaissance*, a hybrid of sociological research and historical narrative that sheds light on the Black Appalachian Experience of the Kentucky Region of Harlan County.⁸ Edward Cabbell was born in Eckman, WV in 1946. Cabbell hailed from McDowell County. Becoming the first African American to earn a master's degree in Appalachian Studies with Appalachian State's first graduate cohort, Cabbell went on to co-edit *Blacks in Appalachia* with William H. Turner. In addition to this work, Cabbell also founded the John Henry Memorial Festival, and founded and published *Black Diamonds*, a magazine that promoted Black Appalachian history and heritage.⁹ William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell both brought an expertise in Appalachian

⁸ "About William H. Turner, PhD," William H. Turner, accessed Apr 13, 2022, <https://whturnerphd.com/about>.

⁹ Phyllis Wilson Moore, "In Memoriam: Ed (Edward Joseph) Cabbell," *Appalachian Journal*, 46, no. ½ (2018): 7, accessed Apr 13, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45219220>.

African American Studies. The compiled essays of *Blacks in Appalachia* tell of Black Appalachian history from the 1500's into the 1920's encompassing social, economic, and cultural, Black Appalachian history in various Southern and Southwestern Appalachian regions. With multiple chapters providing West Virginia history, this Black-made text was a foundation to dive deeper into Southwestern West Virginia, an area that saw Black populations producing small towns and communities that had a direct impact on coal production, the labor workforce, and even political leanings.

Two years after *Blacks in Appalachia* was published, Ronald L. Lewis, a widely published Appalachian historian, wrote *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780 -1980*. Ronald L. Lewis Ph.D. published multiple works on Appalachian labor relations, class and ethnicity specifically the white immigrant experience and also the Black-American experience. Lewis grew up in a coal mining town and had several relatives who worked and died in the coal mines. Though Lewis' experience of a coal mining town was in the Ohio Appalachian region he was curious to research a topic that was ignored. When writing his dissertation, Lewis reached out to a labor historian with his idea: Black coal miners in America. Lewis said the historian replied "Don't waste your time. There aren't any Black coal miners. Only hillbillies are coal miners."¹⁰ Since his dissertation, Lewis has contributed three Black Appalachian works to Appalachian history as a white historian. Lewis was a pioneer of Black Appalachian history specifically; its labor history having published his first book about Black Appalachian labor in 1979. Lewis' 1987 book, *Black Coal Miners in*

¹⁰ Ashley Brewer, Donna Corriher, Jesse Edgerton, Hannah Furgiuele, Coty Hogue, Rebecca Jones, Blaze Edward Pappas, Shannon Petty, Patricia D. Beaver, and Ron Lewis, "Do what Lights Your Fire: An interview with Ron Lewis," *Appalachian Journal* 39 no. ½ (2010): 36-55, Accessed Apr 25, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43488508>.

America, spans from the slavery system to convict labor and exploitative lower wages for Black workers in the Southern and Northern U.S. mines, and also touches on the central Appalachian experience where Black workers had greater social equality despite the coal companies' manipulation of racial tension and segregation.

Another text that provided a Black historical narrative about life in Southwestern West Virginia is the book *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*, published in 2001. Created out of Garrison's 1968 transcribed interview, sociology professor and Director of Oral History of Appalachia at Marshall University Lynda Ann Ewen, along with Ancella R. Bickley a retired English professor at West Virginia State University, collaborated to bring Garrison's narrative to text. Ewen provided introductions to Garrison's oral account that built a bridge uniting Garrison's oral account to published historical text on the Black Appalachian experience in southern West Virginia. The daughter of former slaves, Garrison moved to McDowell County West Virginia at an early age and shared in her narrative, rich and detailed memories of work, life, and family experience in the coal mines and coal company towns. Garrison pursued education and became a teacher and union organizer. Garrison's voice and story was uplifted and brought to light through the collaboration of white and Black women and offers a perspective that is often brief or forgotten, the voice of the Black Appalachian woman. Garrison's narrative coupled with Ewen's historical introductions and images, moves Garrison's oral account into written word.

This historiography provided a comprehensive overview of Black Appalachian history through utilizing census reports, maps, photo images, public record registries and reports, and sociological surveys to produce historical findings. Turner and Cabbell's text tell us that Black Appalachians were present during the inception of Appalachian industry and were

simultaneously building and creating Black society and community as they continued to participate in Appalachia's contribution to the United States. Trotter tells us how and why Black laborers migrated to Appalachia as they searched for better wages and better opportunity for quality of life. Garrison offers a recorded humanist experience, an opportunity to attest to an individual Black experience of the time and region of Appalachia this piece further explores. Finding Garrison's account also aided in filling in gaps on the Black woman experience, an area severely lacking in the other texts selected for this historiography. Secondly, Garrison's account offered an additional voice and view of the living conditions in the late 19th century and early 20th century Southwestern West Virginia coalfields. The texts of Cabbell and Turner, and Trotter inform the reader of the master-servant dynamic between Black coal laborer [tenant] and white coal operator [landlord], wage rates, conditions of the work, and the segregation of the housing. In need of more Black experience in turn of the 20th century southern West Virginia, I secured *The McDowell Times* newspaper collection with the objective to discover additional yet authentic Black Appalachian experience across multiple community aspects such as housing, politics, and education.

I aim to utilize *The McDowell Times* as my informer of Black experience as it relates to the texts of Garrison, Trotter, Cabbell and Turner and Lewis. Touching briefly on existence, experience, power, and legacy, I explore through the lens of this Black owned newspaper the Black Appalachian history of the early 20th century. It is my intention to prove the prominent existence of Black folks in Southern Appalachia as foundational historical knowledge of the Appalachian region in an attempt to argue against the widely accepted white image of Appalachian history.

Chapter 1, Black Appalachians: From origin through 1800, looks at the first Black Appalachians as well as the Black migration into West Virginia to help answer how Black folk came on arrival. Chapter 2, Coal Mining & Living While Black, focuses on the segregation and living conditions in the coal fields. Chapter 3, Black Class Struggle vs Black Class Success, discusses the Black worker and the Black elite in the community. Chapter 4, Black Appalachian Power, looks at Black power in southern West Virginia. Chapter 5, What Limits Black Power, examines the limits to Black leadership and power. Chapter 6, Black Appalachian Legacy highlights some of the legacies.

Chapter 1 – Black Appalachians: From origin through 1800

Before the coal and salt mines, railroads, and lumber yards, the first Black Appalachians lived on Indigenous land of the Cherokee Nation that extended from Alabama up to Virginia. Before the British settlers came to the Americas, Spanish colonists arrived in the 1500s, carrying enslaved Africans on their ships for labor. American historian Theda Perdue tells us in her excerpt “Red and Black in the Southern Appalachians,” of *Blacks in Appalachia*, that in 1526 there was a likelihood of enslaved Africans fleeing from their southern colonies to have entered Cherokee Nation territory of Southern Appalachia. Perdue references a revolt that occurred in Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón’s colony (present day South Carolina) in which enslaved Africans fled north into present day North Carolina.¹¹ The 1539 -1543 Spanish expedition of Hernando de Soto brought enslaved Africans into the Southern Appalachia region as the expedition traveled from Florida and into North Carolina as well as Tennessee. Another explorer, Juan Pardo also brought enslaved Africans to America with his 1566 to 1568 expedition into South Carolina, western North Carolina, and eastern Tennessee. English colonists also contributed to the transplanting of Black folk in the Appalachian region through the purchase of enslaved Africans from the 1700s as colonists. This slave trade continued into the 1800s. The economic venture of slave trading allowed for the use of Black folk as a free labor source for various forms of work including coal mining. In 1850 Virginia, soon to be West Virginia, slave labor made up most of the Kanawha County’s coal-mining labor population.¹² In 1860, ten percent of the general population in Appalachia were slaves, placing that number at 138,796 enslaved Black people.¹³

¹¹ Edward Cabbell and William Turner, *Blacks in Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 28.

¹² Joe Trotter. *Coal Class and Color* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 17.

¹³ James B Murphy, “Slavery and Freedom in Appalachia”, *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 80, no. 2 (1982): 153.

Arriving initially against their will does not deter from the observation that Black folk have been Appalachian folk long before the statehood of West Virginia.

With the expansion of Virginia westward, slavery travelled further into Appalachia and played a unique role in West Virginia's statehood. The Virginians who lived west of the Allegheny Mountains did not agree with Virginia's secession from the Union and opted to create their own territory in 1861. One of the issues impeding the path to statehood was slavery. Voters in the western counties of Virginia were divided with some preferring to retain slavery while others sought to abolish. There were also those who wished to exclude Black folk from the area entirely. This issue was presented on the U.S. Senate floor as an amendment to the West Virginia Statehood Bill and with compromise was brought forth by Senator Waitman Willey who represented the Reorganized Government of Virginia; soon to be West Virginia. Willey's Amendment stated that all enslaved Black folk under the age of 21 on July 4th, 1863, would be freed upon reaching that age.¹⁴ The amendment was accepted along with the statehood bill and West Virginia was created on June 20, 1863. Built into West Virginia's creation was a pathway toward leaving slavery and entering a form of citizenship¹⁵.

With the end of the civil war in 1865 and the expansion of the railroad beginning in the 1870s, Black folk looked to Appalachia for work and states like West Virginia were actively recruiting Black laborers. West Virginia's labor force in the 1880's initially was made up of largely white Americans born of the area who left their farms to work for higher wages, but Black folks had already been a part of the region. No longer slaves, more Black folk were

¹⁴ Richard O. Curry, *A House Divided: State Politics & the Copperhead Movement in West Virginia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964) 73.

¹⁵ Otis Rice & Stephen W. Brown, *West Virginia: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993) 18-23.

migrating from the south. With the railroad expansion, Black folks found work laying railroad tracks. After finishing the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad tracks in 1873 the workers, including the Black laborers, stayed in the area to work. This pattern also occurred among Black laborers who worked on the Norfolk and Western Railroad as well as the Virginian. By 1890, West Virginia's Black population was around 3,000 and almost tripled to 11,000 in 1910.¹⁶

The cause for migration that contributed to both the region's population increase as well as work opportunity for Black laborers was two-fold. Black laborers who had migrated for railroad work would opt out of returning home to the south and stay in the Appalachian area to work as coal miners while simultaneously laborers still residing in the South were being actively recruited. Black laborers were employed for coal mining under the assumption that they were resistant to unionization. They were hired to break strikes and forestall unionizing attempts and were actively sourced by labor contractors specifically hired to bring Black workers to West Virginia. Coal mine companies consistently pitted Black and white miners against each other. Sociologist James Laing reported an instance where a coal operator used Black miners to aid in thwarting union organization. For not joining the strike with the white miners, the Black laborers were attacked.¹⁷ Despite the dangers of the work in Appalachia, the low wages, barren harvests, and racial violence further south, motivated Black folk to migrate for the coal mining companies promise of higher wages, the area's decreased discrimination, and greater educational opportunity for their children.¹⁸

¹⁶ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 17.

¹⁷ Edward Cabbell and William Turner, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 127.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

To promote and recruit Black folk to uproot their lives and head to Appalachia West Virginia, companies employed agents to entice those looking for work. The labor agents were also accompanied by Black recruiters who upon arrival would speak at organized meetings with the promise of higher wages, lower levels of discrimination, and multiple job opportunities for working in the mines. Being a labor recruiter was not without its challenges. Columbus Avery, a Black miner from McDowell County recruited for his general manager and was often at risk of being arrested on his treks by train to the deep south to pick up Black workers since he was not a licensed labor agent. “If the law caught you with a bunch of tickets you were gone.”¹⁹ Workers interested in migrating to West Virginia for work were told to meet at the train station to ride in specific cars with the agents and recruiters in tow. In some instances, workers were told to pack a week’s worth of meals and were given a ticket to ride the train while others were given funds up front to make the journey. Workers would discover later that such benefits from the agents and recruiters weren’t free when they witnessed their transportation costs being deducted from their paychecks. For example, one worker was told he would make \$4.00 to \$5.00 a day in the mines if he would join the recruiter on the train ride from Alabama to Virginia, but after working two weeks in Virginia at the Stonega Coal & Coke Company, the worker owed the company \$21.80 for his transportation costs. On the train, agents would lock the doors to the train cars and were armed. The stated reasoning for locking doors was that many of the workers were traveling by train to West Virginia for the first time and the agents wanted to decrease the risk of folks falling off the train. Some suspect however that the agents were locking the doors to keep those who had changed their minds mid-ride and wanted to back out of the commitment.²⁰

¹⁹ Ronald L. Lewis, ““From Peasant to Proletarian: The Migration of Southern Blacks to the Central Appalachian Coalfields,” *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 1 (1989): 83.

²⁰ Edward Cabbell and William Turner, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 128.

With the increased demand for coal during World War I, the need for labor intensified. Labor agents were sent to southern states with cash in their pockets to offer steady work with good wages if workers were willing to take the train to West Virginia. Receiving train tickets and in some cases up to \$25.00 in cash, workers would hop on the train to Appalachia only for that money to then be deducted from their first few weeks' pay. Even West Virginia's governor engaged in recruitment. In the 1910's, Governor H.D. Hatfield publicly commented in an article found in *The McDowell Times* that "West Virginia offers better and more attractive opportunities for coal miners who are seeking steady employment and good homes than can be found in any other state in the Union."²¹ The article went on to further promote the promise of good pay from the state's mining industry as well as educational opportunities through the state's public-school systems. The governor however does not mention less discrimination as a benefit or perk to coming to work in West Virginia but taking into consideration that this article was published in a Black-owned newspaper and prepared by Black editors, their promotion of the governor's comment for miners to come to West Virginia supports the perspective that Black workers were welcome in the state. In the same article, Governor Hatfield is also calling for high moral citizens to choose West Virginia as their home state and states that he is appealing to all classes of all people. This was an invitation that was extended to Black people as equally as it was extended to white people. For West Virginia, recruiting was most effective. By 1910, West Virginia's Black population was just over 40,000 and substantially larger than the population of the neighboring states of Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee.

²¹ "Governor Says Miners Should Come to W.VA," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), Jan. 23, 1914.

Sending a message to southern communities directly by bringing in Black labor recruiters and sending a message from afar with Black-owned newspapers, the coal mining industry in Southwestern West Virginia was proclaiming they had a need for labor. This complemented the Black man's need for a better class status and that could come in the form of a wage-earning job that supported the clothing, housing, and education for oneself and one's family. A Black man could experience upward mobility, transitioning into the working-class as a coal worker. Yet, discrimination still existed. Black laborers could only hold a limited number of positions, the majority of them not supervisory as white workers wouldn't work for Black management.²² Additionally, West Virginia was not immune to segregation. This separation, coupled with the dense population of Black folk in areas of southern West Virginia lent itself to building Black community and culture.

²² Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 27.

Chapter 2 – That Black Coal Miner Life

Black workers held various labor positions in the coal-mining industry, specifically the brakeman, trackman, motorman, and machine man positions that were considered the “inside labor”²³ jobs. The coal loader, a labor position that took place inside the mine, was often filled by Black folk as well. This position was attractive to Black laborers as it was one of the most lucrative and had the least supervision; however, it was also one of the most dangerous positions. Booker T. Washington worked inside both the salt mines and coal mines of West Virginia as a boy. In Washington’s book, *Up from Slavery*, he explains how he felt the danger and dread that comes with being hired to do jobs inside the mines. Washington writes of the mile long walk from inside the mine that spanned “from the opening of the coal-mine to the face of the coal, and all, of course, was in the blackest darkness” and the “danger of being blown into pieces by a premature explosion of power, or of being crushed by a falling slate.”²⁴

Coalfield Mining

Coal loaders were paid for the tonnage of coal loaded for the day, not a fixed day wage based on one’s experience or race. This framework of equal pay is quickly struck down as Black folk were overwhelmingly hired for the most dangerous positions. Yet for Black folk, autonomy was possible in the work despite racial prejudice and the oppressive master-servant system. Memphis Tennessee Garrison remembers her father working as a coke yard boss at the McQuails’ coal company in McDowell County.

The McQuails owned the place where we lived and my father was a contractor in the mines. They’d let a Negro man take a section of the mines; he’d hire his own men and work it; they’d pay him for it and he’d pay his miners. I don’t know the

²³ Ibid, 27.

²⁴ Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (Not Identified: Not Identified, 1901), 20.

business part of it. I only knew that my father had lots of money because he had the money to pay his men with and the company didn't have any responsibility for those men. He was the one who had to get that coal out and get it in those cars.²⁵

Black workers were not considered for supervisor or managerial roles. Predominantly employed as coal loaders, Black workers also were employed in the coal fields as trackmen, motormen, brakeeans, machinemen, all the jobs that required entering inside the mine. Due to racial discrimination among coal operators, Black folks were collectively taking the most risk as a work population. Conditions in the mines meant a substantial risk of injury, explosions, trapped due to mine collapse, trampled under the coal loading cars, and firedamp, a mixture of methane and carbon dioxide that would secrete from the walls' ancient vegetation could ignite when coming into contact with sparks or powder blasts, sending fires racing through the mine shafts. All were daily risks Black workers were taking. Ellis Ray Williams, a resident of McDowell County and second-generation coal miner, recalls the dangers he and his father encountered when working as coal loaders. At the end of their workday, Ellis and his father heard a big bump. Instructed to run by his father, Ellis recounts how he was almost ready "to give up mining."²⁶

And I ran out, and he started right behind me, and he thought about that car of coal there and he turned and ran back in there to release the brake on this car to save that car of coal. And when he turned, he knocked the brake off the car, and it was on a slant and the car started drifting out. And my father was running down the track ahead of the car, and a piece of slate fell out of the top and sort of hit him in the back of the head, and knocked him to the side and forward, otherwise that car would have run over him. And it scared me to death because I really thought I'd lost a father, but when he got up he had one little bruise. It knocked his mining cap off and everything, and he just thanked God and that was it, but it scared me to death.²⁷

²⁵ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*, 91.

²⁶ "The Mine Wars Article Ellis Ray Williams", American Experience, PBS, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/minewars-interview-williams/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

Despite the danger, there was a sense of dignity as Ellis Ray called it, “to go into the mine, load the coal, bring out the coal, and earn your paycheck.”²⁸ In comparison to the sharecropping and violence in the south, West Virginia was progress for the Black man; progress in work autonomy, condition of living, and freedom.

Memphis Tennessee Garrison also remembers the injuries sustained by Black young boys who worked in the mines. Memphis’ own brother went to work in the mines at around the age of twelve. She remembers the daily wage for children to be twenty-five cents an hour. The young boys would operate the switch for coal cars to ride one railway while the motor that helps haul the car travels another railway. Working long hours and without union regulations, young laborers would fall asleep at their position, or a car would jump the track, and the injuries sustained would require removal by stretcher. “And they would bring him home on a stretcher ground to pieces.”²⁹ Despite these risks, these jobs also brought an aspect of freedom. As a coal loader, Black laborers could work and earn their wage with the least supervision. Their wage earned for the day was dependent upon the tonnage of the coal loaded cars, and though there was the risk of being maimed or killed, it was not at the behest of a master who only saw them as property.

Coalfield Living

In its genesis, coal towns were built by Black men, first when they were still enslaved and again when freed. Memphis Tennessee Garrison, a resident of McDowell County, recalls stories from her childhood in the West Virginia coalfields, how the first “crude huts” from before she

²⁸ Ellis Ray Williams, *Mine Wars: American Experience*, PBS.

²⁹ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*, 109.

was born were built by Black men, even manning the sawmills to make their own lumber for the houses.³⁰ Booker T. Washington, as an inhabitant of some of the earlier housing, recalls the family cabin in West Virginia having similar living conditions as their home in Virginia; measuring the West Virginia home as worse because their home in Virginia was "...at all times sure of pure air."³¹

In the late 19th century, housing was crowded, clustered and without sanitary regulations. Housing was within walking distance of the mines, near the railroad tracks, and cheaply built. Water was collected and brought into the home or on the front porch for washing clothes, eating utensils, and bathing. To protect against the winter weather, families lined the walls with newspaper. Furniture, clothing, food, mining equipment, as well as house supplies and equipment was all sold at the company store or independent store.

Company stores operated as a monopoly and were the central source for workers to purchase needs. Owned and rented by the coal companies, miners could occupy the housing only if the company presently employed them.³² Initially settled as incorporated areas, company towns were a way to maintain control over their laborers. Black workers were paid for their work in the coal mines, salt mines, sawmills, and railways, but the company could deduct retroactively for a credit to be paid at the company store, a pending balance still owed for the train ticket to West Virginia or rent past due on the company house. While not a master to slave relationship there were elements of control. Even housing contracts gave management control to search and

³⁰ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, Ancella R. Bickley and Lynda Ann Ewen, *Memphis Tennessee Garrison : The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001), 90.

³¹ Edward Cabbell and William Turner, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 44.

³² Edward Cabbell and William Turner, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 15.

seizure of a household and also eviction without prior notice.³³ Such master-servant rights were upheld by local county law.³⁴

Housing was segregated, an intentional tactic by coal operators to maintain socially current prejudices of the early 20th century by dividing workers and their families into three sections, housing for African Americans, immigrants, and what historians call native whites.³⁵ While this segregation is occurring in the coalfields of West Virginia for coal operators to control their workforce, Jim Crow law is also being institutionalized at the federal level during President Woodrow Wilson's administration. States and cities would enact laws to discriminate specifically against Black Americans. Some segregation outside of West Virginia held more violent consequences for Black Americans while the segregation inside the coalfields provided areas of Black community gathering and recreation so long as it wasn't gathering to unionize. Segregated housing in the coalfields was used to control the coal miner. The Black coal miner was to stay with their own to deter union organizing. The Black coal miner was pitted against immigrant white and white-native co-worker when Black workers were hired to break strikes, join strikes, and work in the mines in a capacity that provided an advantage to the coal mining companies.

Coal company towns were often unincorporated areas and lacked elected representation at the city and county level. Company towns employed who they saw fit to run the company stores, law enforcement, and the postal service. Such reach provided multiple opportunities for company owners to monitor and surveil the workers for union talk, dissent towards workplace or

³³ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 15.

³⁴ *Mine Wars: American Experience*, directed by Randall MacLowry (2016: PBS), PBS.

³⁵ Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 134.

living conditions, and strike organizing. Companies capitalized on controlling the prices of rent, wages at work, and supply costs in the company stores. If workers fought for a wage increase, the company in control would still in turn provide a profit to the coal operators. Ellis Ray Williams, a Black coal miner who had migrated from South Carolina to Southwestern West Virginia with his family as a young boy, explains, “If they gave the miners a raise then they’re gonna raise the rent and raise everything, the cost of food at the company store...so you’re actually right back where you started from.”³⁶ Carl Starr, a white coal miner in southwestern West Virginia also spoke of exploitation. “They paid you with their money, bought your food off of ‘em...they was oppressed all the time.”³⁷ This class struggle was felt across racial lines and served to unite coal workers.

In the early 20th century, conditions in the coal fields improved. *The McDowell Times* reported on nine coal operations that improved both work and living conditions, including information from a source who lived and worked at one of the coal operations.³⁸ In a September 1915 issue, the paper reports on living conditions at Stotesbury and Glen White: “water is good, rent is low and good order is maintained.”³⁹ It is quite plausible that living conditions were yet another lever mining companies used to spread their influence. Labor strikes occurred in Western West Virginia as well as Southern Central West Virginia. Meanwhile, World War I persisted and the need for coal dramatically increased. Mindful of unrest regarding labor conditions in counties such as Raleigh, where Stotesbury and Glenwhite operated as well as Mercer and McDowell Counties, coal companies attempted to improve conditions of the company town to quell union

³⁶ Ellis Ray Williams, *Mine Wars: American Experience*, PBS.

³⁷ Carl Starr, *Mine Wars: American Experience*, PBS.

³⁸ “Improved Conditions. In Winding Gulf Coal Fields are Steadily Improving,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), Sep. 17, 1915.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

organizing and to maintain production goals during the war. To compete with unionized mining operations, non-unionized companies in southern West Virginia were motivated to offer similar pay to deter unionizing. Flat Top Coal field was reported to have “wages equal to those paid laborers in any part of the world, and greater than in many places.” Another improvement made by coal operations was having an independent store and a shorter working day to compete with the recently accepted Hatfield-UMWA contract. After a nearly one-year strike at Paint Creek and Cabin Creek coal operations, union leaders and coal operators signed an agreement with newly elected Governor Henry Hatfield of which to limit the workday to nine hours. As a result, non-unionized operations in southern West Virginia were inclined to offer eight-to-ten-hour workdays to compete with union operations. Company towns also began building churches, schools, and recreation facilities to keep workers from unionizing. These decisions were aimed at convincing workers that they were being taken care of by their employers.

Even with the employer dependent and oppressive restrictions, segregated housing and segregated building of churches and schools provided opportunity for Black folks to learn, work, and gather in an environment with a decreased levels of discrimination and racial violence. Creating Black safe spaces for themselves, the Black populations of Southwestern West Virginia built community. Black churches and fraternal organizations provided mutual aid and spiritual community gathering. Black schools provided avenues to transition from working-class to middle-class through literacy and education. As the Black population increased in counties like McDowell, Black entrepreneurs and businessmen saw an opportunity to collaborate with Black coal miners. This uplifted their class and provided Black-owned commerce, improving both the well-being of families and the community and even promoting Black wealth.

Chapter 3 – The Black Class Experience

The Black proletariat, also known as the Black working class, stood as the foundation for building up the Black community. Laborers, having relocated themselves to Southwestern West Virginia for work would then relocate their families once settled. Booker T. Washington traveled on foot with his mother from Virginia to West Virginia, a range of 225 miles.⁴⁰ Memphis Tennessee Garrison arrived as a small child with her family after her father had made the migration for work around 1887 -1888.⁴¹ In 1880, the U.S. Census office cited 4,794 Black folk in Southwestern West Virginia, an area stretching across nine counties; McDowell, Mercer, Mingo, Logan, Fayette, Kanawha, Raleigh, Boone, and Wyoming.⁴² In 1909, counties like McDowell and Mercer had more Black miners than white miners. By 1910, the population was 40,503. Thirteen percent of the population worked in the coal field productions of Southwestern West Virginia. To quote historian Joe Trotter, “there were more Black miners in West Virginia than anywhere else in the nation.”⁴³

By 1913, West Virginia had become the country’s second largest producer for coal. According to *The McDowell Times*, the state produced 7,394,654 tons of coal in 1880 and by 1912 produced ten times that amount.⁴⁴ This announcement, printed in a Black-owned newspaper, was a reminder to their predominantly Black subscribers that they had a part in this

⁴⁰ Mark Bollinger, “Booker T. Washington Boyhood Site and Monument,” *National Park Service. U.S. Department of Interior*, accessed Mar 9, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/places/booker-t-washington-boyhood-site-and-monument.htm>.

⁴¹ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*, 90.

⁴² Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 11.

⁴³ *Mine Wars: American Experience*, PBS.

⁴⁴ “West Virginia Second In Coal Production,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), Jul. 25, 1913.

production output. The Black working-class West Virginian directly contributed to their state's wealth.

While not owned as property, the Black coal miner was a tool for coal companies to leverage in their labor relations. The Black coal miner was used in labor strikes, serving as both a striker and strike breaker. Exploiting a Black working-class laborer's wage struggles, companies hired members of the Black community to work as mine guards, the coal company's local enforcement, for additional compensation.

Companies also hired new Black laborers and brought them in as strikebreakers. Memphis Tennessee Garrison's accounts tell us of union men and Black strikebreakers in McDowell County in the early 19th century. Garrison remembers Mother Jones and the union (United Mining Workers' Union) visiting just outside their company town. Garrison's oral account references a manufactured divide between the Black laborer of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Garrison uses the terms Negro and New Negro to explain the two waves of Black working-class laborers and their complex relationship with striking and union organization. When the first wave of union organizers came through McDowell, Garrison described how the white and immigrant laborers were ready for a strike, "The foreigner had such a hard time in his own country, he was a striking man. He was ready for a strike. He struggled with labor for his well-being."⁴⁵ Garrison says that the Black laborer's struggle is different. "But the Negro hadn't had anything, maybe just a little farm down in Virginia, a few acres he was trying to pay for. So, all he did was to come and work and half eat and half sleep and sometimes

⁴⁵ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*, 108.

get maimed and killed.”⁴⁶ This is the first wave of Black laborers, the generation that remembers their individual transition from enslaved to free, and like Booker T. Washington, left slavery behind them. Garrison calls them the “first pioneers.”⁴⁷ From Garrison’s view, the Black laborer isn’t necessarily for or against the union. Their fight is different. They’re prioritizing earning their daily wages, they’re prioritizing their survival both in the mines and the company town. But with the “new Negro,”⁴⁸ being recruited and brought up to the coal fields at times as strikebreakers; the manufactured divide was built between Black workers. Black strikebreakers, though unskilled, would be put to work by the coal operators. And just as the Black laborers who had come before them, the Black strikebreakers would stay. Pitting Black laborers against each other, the coal operator intentionally created Black non-strikebreakers, reminding them that they can be replaced even by their own if they went on strike.

An example of this exploitation of the Black working-class occurred in early 1865. Coal operations in Southwestern West Virginia, reduced wages by 20 percent and openly encouraged Black miners to strike; as a tactic. The Norfolk & Western railway had lowered the price guarantee minimums for shipping coal. Coal operators aimed to reinstitute the previous minimums. In April, operations south of the Pocahontas field had shut down due to strikes; strikes that Black laborers were participating in. The Norfolk & Western served both West Virginia and Virginia. And while West Virginia was striking, a larger Virginia coal company was operating right across the state line. In May, West Virginia strikers convened in the city of Keystone to march on the Virginia operation to have them join the strike while in Virginia, non-strikers were assembling to resist strikers coming into the territory. This Virginia operation also

⁴⁶ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, 109.

⁴⁷ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, 110.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

had a population of Black laborers who were non strikers who joined their company in protecting their operation.⁴⁹

This Black-on-Black conflict across the union line, manufactured by the coal operations, was an example of the ways Black laborers were exploited in Appalachian labor relations. The exploitation of the operations perpetuated the stereotype that the Black laborer was easier to handle. The precariousness of surviving after slavery in an era of structural racism made them more vulnerable to exploitation. Black miners at both operations were doing what was needed in order to survive. For the Black laborer in this time period, the abolition of slavery was only decades old and in the case of the 1865 strike, only months. Black laborers had only just recently experienced entering a class system. Garrison argued that white folk strike for a different type of freedom than their Black coworkers. Whether a striker or non-strikebreaker, Black laborers participated in strikes for the freedom to exist, participate, and contributed as a member of the working-class, as a proletariat.

To continue control over their labor force, coal companies also used Black middle-class workers in their exploitative efforts. Preachers, who were brought into work for the segregated Black church in town, also worked as a mine guard during strikes. Pitted against their own, Black preachers would use the opportunity of the sermon during church services to speak against unionizing.⁵⁰ As a preacher in the company towns, they preached while on company time. With the preacher experiencing their own master-servant relationship with their employer, there was a shift in how the preacher and the church experience existed in Black culture. Specific to working-class preachers, working in company towns, they were restricted as to what could be

⁴⁹ William Turner and Edward Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 137.

⁵⁰ William Turner and Edward Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 100.

included in their sermon. Where a church once stood as a community's realm of secular and spiritual guidance now also stood a company "lick."⁵¹ The coal company built the church, set the rules, handled the finances, and hired the church leaders. Preachers could face consequences for speaking out of turn. Reverend Alfred Eubanks, a preacher in McDowell County, made a pro-union talk in a Saturday night sermon and was beaten by mine guards the next day on his way to Sunday service. When there wasn't scheduled service, preachers would serve as labor agents and work in recruitment.

As a teacher in the company towns, another middle-class position, there were also some restrictions. Coal companies built the schools on company property and then leased or deeded the land to the county to only be used for religious or in this case educational services and maintained their right to revoke the agreement. So long as teachers did not discuss labor affairs, or advocate for a miner's economic needs, they could run their classroom as they saw fit. Schools were segregated, separate and unequal, but David A. Corbin in his piece "Class Over Caste" mentions an outlier of the late 19th century racially prejudiced United States. For a moment, West Virginia was prioritizing Black education. Elder Black teachers of the 1890's called it the "Golden Age of Negro education in West Virginia."⁵² The state's strategy was to increase the literacy of the workforce to reduce accidents and increase productivity, so they passed educational legislation. There was a demand for Black teachers. Black teacher salaries for a moment were on average, higher than white teacher salaries. West Virginia was even paying more per Black student than white student. Coal companies saw an opportunity to heavily influence the educational school system and built schools rapidly. In 1885, the McDowell

⁵¹ William Turner and Edward Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 99.

⁵² William Turner and Edward Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 101.

County public education system was made up of 9 log cabin schools each worth around \$100. These 9 schools only operated for three months a term. 1904 McDowell County had 78 schools, each worth around \$300 - \$600 with eight-month long school terms.⁵³ Memphis Tennessee Garrison remembers attending a one room school also as a child in McDowell County. The coal company her family lived and worked in was owned by a family named the McQuails. They, like other coal companies, had built a school within the company town to deter talk of unionization by providing what a family would need, a schoolhouse included. Garrison remembers the school being built near Elkhorn, in a small town called Ennis. For Garrison and the other children, there was no other school but this one.

We had a lesson every day; everybody in that school did something. We had wooden seats; he [the teacher] had a table for a desk. We had a big stove in the middle. We burned coal because there was plenty of coal, so we were warm. We had a dipper in the bucket for water; the water came down from the mountains on the hillside. I can see all of that now. Beautiful living.⁵⁴

Garrison's first teacher, Mr. Price, had a great impact on her. She went on to teach with him and after his death, she saw to it that he had a proper burial since he died destitute. The salary of a Black teacher may have been higher for a time than a white teacher's salary, but it still was not a livable wage even with bonuses to encourage teachers to stay and teach in the coalfields.

Freedom of curriculum in the classroom however was a great motivator. While Black teachers had to stay away from labor affairs while teaching in a segregated Black school, they were afforded the opportunity to teach Black history frequently. Teachers were utilizing texts from Booker T. Washington and Carter Woodson in the classroom, scholars who had grown up

⁵³ William Turner and Edward Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 101.

⁵⁴ Memphis Tennessee Garrison, *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian*, 38.

in working class families in the coalfields but had transitioned from working class in part due to their education. Not only were the children of coal miners receiving an education, but adult workers were given an opportunity for education. Columbus Avery was illiterate when he came to the coalfields in the 1890s but learned to read and write through night classes that Black teachers in his town offered for free. These foundational educational skills, aided in elevating his class and social status leading to opportunities of elected office at the local level and in unions.⁵⁵ Despite stifling union organizing, coal companies inadvertently provided a space for Black community within the Black classroom. By 1926 some classrooms took on Carter G. Woodson's idea of celebrating a Negro History Week in which students made posters about Black history and placed them all around the company town. Carter's idea of Negro History Week was the precursor of Black History Month.⁵⁶

Local elementary schools were widely available in southwestern West Virginia, especially in McDowell County, but a local high school for the area was scarce. To attend high school, students would have to relocate or travel substantial distances to continue their education. Memphis Tennessee Garrison went to elementary school in McDowell County West Virginia but went to high school in Ohio. Carter G. Woodson, lived and worked at coal mines in central West Virginia, but moved to Huntington along the West Virginia and Kentucky border for his high school education. In McDowell County, while the number of Black children was tiny but mighty and a little over 2,000, almost 80 percent of that population attended school.⁵⁷ West Virginia was recognized for their efforts in education. Carter Woodson praised the schools in McDowell

⁵⁵ William Turner and Edward Cabbell, *Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman*, 103.

⁵⁶ "Carter G. Woodson", History & Culture, National Park Service, accessed March 16, 2022. <https://www.nps.gov/neri/learn/historyculture/carter-g-woodson.htm>.

⁵⁷ William Turner and Edward Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 101.

County company towns as “well-equipped” with “well-qualified” teachers. Those were Black teachers.

Not all middle-class work was equal. For the company owned preacher, they straddled the line between working class and middle class often working for the coal company when not in service. Some preachers were able to take on the second job of being the teacher like Garrison’s teacher Mr. Price, a graduate from both a seminary and university. Other middle-class work included business proprietors, barbershops, beauty shops, hotels, and rooming houses but their success was dependent upon the success of the Black coal miner and their working-class earnings.⁵⁸

As Black workers increased in the area with the coal supply expansion for World War 1 so too did the middle class and Black elite populations increase. The core of the Black elite in West Virginia was comprised of doctors, lawyers, and wealthy merchants who saw a commercial opportunity to build in the incorporated areas surrounding the coal mines. Cities and towns like Keystone, Welch, and Kimball sprouted law offices, doctor offices, even newspaper publishers. Ads for restaurants, clean and press shops, grocery stores, undertakers, and even real estate agents were listed in Black subscribing newspapers such as *The McDowell Times*. A collaboration was building with the two polarizing classes and while not always harmonious, the two classes provided for each other. Working class earnings supported the proprietorships while Elite class provided jobs and commerce for an increasing population as well as Black community with places to participate in Black culture and Black existence. This collaboration had its shortcomings. When it came to unionization there were instances of a difference of opinion. In

⁵⁸ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 145.

Keystone, WV the Black upper-class editor of *The McDowell Times*, Matthew T. Whittico, did not shy away from publishing anti-union articles that spoke directly to the Black coal miner. In a December 5th, 1913, issue, Whittico warned Black miners of white organizers with the United Mine Workers Union would be coming to the area to hold meetings about an upcoming strike.

Again we warn the miners in this section and especially the Negro miners to be very careful about following the lead of these labor trouble makers. With industrial conditions unsettled and a panic liable to come at any time the Negro miner should work every day that he can and deposit as much of his money as possible in the bank. There it will do him far more good than by paying one dollar per month and oftimes more into the treasury of the United Mine Workers.⁵⁹

It could be argued that the intent of this warning was to keep a coal miner's earnings out of the pocket of the union and into that of the Black entrepreneurs. Workers who are on strike have no money to spend thus slowing profits in the incorporated commercial areas of the cities and towns. Whittico is also intentional to mention that it is white organizers coming to speak in the area. The United Mine Workers is not Black founded, Black led, nor did it have many Black members. This union was also not native to West Virginia having been formed in Ohio. In this instance, the Black elite might have also been seeking to protect the Black community that was being created, in Southwestern West Virginia. They saw organizing as striking and saw striking as waging war on one of the most viable employers in the region, the coal company.

The proletariat's migration and participation in increasing the population through means of familial relocation and reproduction, was the genesis of Black community in southwestern West Virginia coalfields. Participating and experiencing labor relations, earning a wage that can be used in commerce, providing for young families who would need education, all serve as pathways for community building. Though not perfect, the collaboration and pushback from each

⁵⁹ "Union Organizers Busy," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), Dec. 05, 1913.

other, the Black working, middle, and elite classes built Black culture and Black existence into towns and municipalities that barely show a memory of having a predominantly Black population or even being a majority Black town. This erasure to southwestern West Virginia leaves gaps of knowledge in not only the Black students of West Virginia, but their surrounding states. As a resident of northeastern Kentucky, an area that sits thirty miles north of Huntington, West Virginia, and about 140 miles from McDowell County, I went through 17 years in Kentucky's public educational system without a reference of Black coal mining history specific to the surrounding area or to the state. I was 32 years old when I discovered that on my trips from Kentucky to North Carolina, I had been driving by the West Virginia Colored Institute, now a designated Historically Black College or University (HBCU), West Virginia State University. This erasure puts the Black Appalachian folk of today at a disadvantage because Black folks did more than just try to survive in the coal fields of Southwestern West Virginia. They thrived.

Chapter 4 – Black Appalachian Power

From working-class to upper-class, avenues of Black power existed in the Black community that were being built. Religious organizations, fraternal organizations, and the power of the vote were instrumental in Black organization at the community level, local elected level, and in unions. For religious organizations, the community needed a sturdy church. In the early 20th century, building churches was directly supported by contributions from the community. *The McDowell Times* reported multiple occasions of fund-raising, sometimes listing the names of folks who were able to donate as a means of proclamation and a reminder of Black folk investing in Black folk. Some donations ranged from 5 cents to 25 cents.⁶⁰ Outside of advertising the fund-raising campaign directly to Black newspaper subscribers, fund-raiser events would follow the end of a church service. While the Black elite played a pivotal role in financial backing of the community churches, the list of 5 to 25 cent donations highlights the participation of all socioeconomic levels in the Black community.

The church also provided leadership and social and cultural opportunities for the community. “Sunday school, choir, boards of deacons and trustees” were just a few forums for Black folks to congregate socially, culturally, and politically crossing class and age lines. The church also provided Black women leadership opportunities. Trotter tells us that Black women steadily maintained a majority of the membership roster at Black churches. In 1916, it was estimated Black women made up almost 57 percent of the Black Baptist population in West Virginia. Memphis Garrison’s mother found leadership opportunities in their church through Memphis’ first teacher. Memphis’ mother became head of her Missionary Society Being both a

⁶⁰ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 180.

preacher and a teacher, Frazier Price taught Memphis as a student in the classroom and as a church go-er in Sunday school. The church was involved in its congregation's daily struggles and realities and a network of churches was used to support Black communities. Ministers and preachers would visit other churches as guest speakers to promote solidarity and unity among Black Appalachian folk across class and coal company lines.⁶¹ *The McDowell Times* would report on the comings and goings of visitors to Keystone. In these short social society quips, a preacher's visit would be reported; like, Rev R.D. Meadows of Huntington visited Crumpler, West Virginia in March of 1914 in company with Rev. S. W. Cobbs to hold revival services.⁶² Pulling from a larger network, Black religious leaders were able to fund-raise from a network of multiple communities. This relationship also made opportunity for cooperation between communities as they could join together for large revival services, funerals, and other occasions.

Black fraternal orders also worked in partnership with the Black church to develop community, stability, and cohesiveness. Fraternal organizations, often with a marching band, regalia, and parades, provided both recreation and mutual aid to the Black communities in southwestern West Virginia. Parades, rituals and services peaked social and cultural interest while programs like fraternal insurance plans served to protect the Black coal miner.⁶³ The Knights of Pythias, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, and the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons were fraternal orders that held local chapters in the McDowell County area, and these are just a few of the orders that existed in southern West Virginia in the early 20th century. Membership meant access to a brotherhood that was not restricted by one's class. The Black coal miner and the lawyer communed together, contributing their part to the initiation fee,

⁶¹ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 191.

⁶² "Ashland Notes," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone:WV), Mar. 27, 1914.

⁶³ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 203.

membership dues, and small monthly fee that contributed to your insurance coverage. This layer of social and financial protection was more comprehensive than the coal company's individual decision to protect a worker's job if they were injured or maimed on the job.

Company job protection was not widespread and was based on internal company decisions, often only protecting one's job for only up to two weeks. Workers' Compensation was instituted 1913 in the state of West Virginia but was based upon premiums paid by employers and employees. The Fraternal orders could provide Black built mutual aid locally in one's town. One's insurance coverage appeared tangible especially if you were a member of the organization holding your insurance coverage funds. In addition to community protection, the fraternal orders were a social and cultural center piece. In 1915, the Knights of Pythias chapters of Keystone and Eckman, McDowell County, put on an annual thanksgiving celebration at a church in town. This overlap between the church and fraternal order was common. The order held a grand spectacle, marching to the church in a parade, dressed in full regalia⁶⁴. Annual Thanksgiving services were opportunities to have Black civic leaders speak on racial solidarity as well as Black religious leaders to speak on caring and supporting one another.

Fraternal organizations promoted community cohesion but they were not free of class hierarchy. While membership was predominantly held with the Black worker, the leadership of the organizations were of the Black elite. The Black working class did have access to leadership positions at the local level as office elections were based on membership votes. If a local chapter held a predominantly working-class base, this provided opportunity for a more diverse representation at the local leadership level. This allowed for the Black working class and Black

⁶⁴ Ibid.

elite to not only participate in fellowship together, but to lead together on a more equal footing. As the Black coal miner population increased in a community, so did the growth of the fraternal organization. As the Black coal miners found work declining, so too did the fraternal organization suffer economic decline. In this way, the working-class held the most power not only to a fraternal organization's existence, but to Black community existence. The coal miners were the backbone of the community.

Another aspect of Black power was the right to vote. Black folk electing Black folk for office was paramount to sustaining Black existence and community in West Virginia. In 1910, the number of voting age Black men in southern West Virginia was about 15,300. 5,900 of those votes came from McDowell County.⁶⁵ Middle class Black leaders provided electoral organization through the creation of establishments like the McDowell County Colored Republican Organization with an intention to reach every Black voter in their area. Later known as the People's Colored Republican Organization of McDowell County, the organization worked to keep the Black man's vote organized during the early 20th century. Holding meetings with encouragement of all Black men to attend, the organization had a goal to ensure every eligible Black voter was indeed exercising their vote. *The McDowell Times* reported on the organization, promoting that "Every Colored Man in the County Should Attend."⁶⁶ The article encouraged Black men of all class lines to attend and participate in the organization's election of leadership positions, and challenged those who may have been skeptical of the organization's work.

⁶⁵ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 219.

⁶⁶ "The M'Dowell County Colored Republican Organization", *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), Nov. 14, 1913.

Is not the McDowell County Colored Republican Organization larger than any individual or set of individuals? Can the Negro who demands justice of others do justice himself? Can Negroes bury self long enough to serve the race in county and state?⁶⁷

In an almost direct challenge to its readers, the newspaper stressed that the attendance and participation of these meetings was bigger than oneself and appealed to a reader's call of duty to attend in service of his race. This political group aimed to protect the civil and political interests of the Black race in McDowell County and the state. Within that motivation is the work to inform, educate and organize the Black Appalachian. There was some cross functionality between the fraternal orders and the political organizations. In Mercer County, the fraternal order Odd Fellows Hall held an open meeting to discuss the creation of a Black Republican organization to represent their county. Through organizing the Black man's vote, the organization aided in supporting Black men elected to leadership positions at the city and state level. The McDowell County Colored Republican Organization supported in getting multiple Black folks elected to office in 1913; six deputy sheriffs in the county, three guards on the county road, constables, justices of the peace in four districts, boards of education members in three districts, and the State Librarian.⁶⁸

This strategy also led to Black men being elected at the state legislator level. In 1916, attorney E. Howard Harper of Keystone was the Republican nominee and successfully elected to the West Virginia House of Delegates.⁶⁹ Harper, with the help of Black republican organizations, was able to consolidate his support by steering the local Black vote to support white state and

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Great Meeting of the McDowell County Colored Republican Organization." *The McDowell Times*.

⁶⁹ Joe Trotter, *Coal Class and Color*, 226.

local officials. Building that support prior to his nomination and election, Harper won one of four seats that year with the direct support of the Black man's vote.

This image of a Black elected official, with their collegiate degree and experience as an attorney, is a polarizing image to the white Appalachian trope that was often presented. Governor Hatfield himself appointed delegates to represent West Virginia at the National Negro Educational Congress that took place in Oklahoma City in 1914. The mixture of delegates was predominantly Black professors, one Black locally elected official, and one Black woman.⁷⁰ If one was to do a basic search of 1916 Appalachia, the first images to appear are still white, and impoverished. Search for 1916 West Virginia coal miner and you'll see white coal dusted men posed in the mine or just outside the shaft. And yet, they existed, prominently existed, and represented the state of West Virginia. Black power expanded beyond the coal field and into the state's office. Along this timeline from coalfield to state, Black power has emerged in the realms of West Virginia education, medicine, law, and entrepreneurship. Yet paralleled to these examples of leadership exists stark segregation and discrimination.

⁷⁰ "Colored Delegates Named," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone: WV), May 8, 1914.

Chapter 5 – What Limited Black Power

While Black folk were being elected to local and state levels of office, West Virginia's governor's seat maintained the pattern of electing white men to the office. While some white elected officials representing Southwestern West Virginia had admiration for the Black coal miner and even the Black teacher, this was a minority point of view, counter to segregation and complicit in the manipulative use of racial prejudice administered in coal company towns. And where one governor seeks to collaborate with the Black vote, another will not. Governor Hatfield, running as a member of the Republican Party, was inclined to gain the support of the Black Appalachian. Governor Cornwell, a Democrat, had loyalty to white voters and once in office conducted a silent eviction of Black legislators who had been appointed to the state level bureaucracy. Cornwell also moved to cut state funding to Black institutions. Democratic control of the Governor's seat in 1916 restricted Black Appalachians from directly representing themselves and further strengthened the concept of a white man to speak for Black people.

Similar political erasure occurred in 1913 and was reported on by *The McDowell Times*. At the national level, Black folks were removed from office under the Wilson Administration. President Wilson removed six previously appointed Black officials from office and "replaced them with white men."⁷¹ In contrast to this removal of six appointed Black officials, Woodrow Wilson did reappoint Judge Robert H Terrell to maintain at his bench on the Municipal Court of the District of Columbia.⁷² Robert was the first Black judge to sit on that bench. Wilson's contradictory decisions around Black elected officials' positions illustrate an additional nuance

⁷¹ "Offices Held By Republican Negroes Filled By White Democrats," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), May 23, 1913.

⁷² "National Capital," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), May 08, 1914.

to what limits Black power. To put it bluntly, Black progress and advancement is still at the control of a white man.

Political segregation was also apparent in the suffrage movement occurring in the United States. In 1915, the woman suffrage amendment was defeated in the Senate with the strategic use of the Fifteenth Amendment. Southern Senator J. Vardaman of Mississippi proposed amending the woman suffrage amendment to include repealing the Fifteenth Amendment.⁷³ As *The McDowell Times* framed it, "...they [southern senators] were not permitted by the Northern and Western Senators to tack on amendments discriminating against Negro women."⁷⁴ Vardaman's proposal received 19 votes. Senator John S Williams also offered a proposal for the woman suffrage amendment; to grant the right to vote to white women only. His proposal received 21 votes. Though not an overwhelming majority, the number of votes provide a measurable source of fear of the Negro vote as *The McDowell Times* argues. In addition, it is also an action of limitation. Vardaman's proposal would remove a Black man's protection against discrimination of their right to vote. Williams' proposal would remove a Black woman from obtaining their right to vote all together. Strategically pitted against another disenfranchised group, the proposals were successful in defeating the woman suffrage amendment in 1914. Consequently, the proposals ignited concern as well. *The McDowell Times* wrote, "When 21 senators cast their vote to put 'white' in the constitution and 19 voters repeal the great amendment which gave the Negro

⁷³ "Women Suffrage Centennial Part II: The Siege of the Senate," Art & History, United States Senate, Accessed April 6, 2022.

https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/People/Women/Part2_SiegetheSenate.html.

⁷⁴ "Woman Suffrage and The Negro," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone: WV), Mar. 27, 1914.

his citizenship made him really a free man there is serious danger for free institutions in America.”⁷⁵

In addition to the limits found in political office and policy was the social and cultural limit imposed by the Jim Crow policy. While West Virginia had minimal Jim Crow laws for the state, the laws existed outside of West Virginia and held great power over the Black existence in white America. The civil rights act of 1875, which was to prohibit racial discrimination in public places and facilities such as restaurants and public transportation, was declared void in the eyes of *The McDowell Times*.⁷⁶ The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the right of railroads to put Black folks in “Jim Crow” cars, separate from the white folk and further, relegate Black folks to second-class.⁷⁷ The court having decided that the civil rights act was not “applicable to interstate commerce” also absolved the railroads of the liability to be sued for forcing Black folks holding first class tickets to take second-class accommodations instead.⁷⁸ This example of the most powerful court in the country affirming such discrimination, ripple into the daily existence of not just the Black Appalachian, but all Black Americans. For S.W. Green, head of the Knight of Pythias in 1913, *The McDowell Times* reports his near escape from lynching while traveling from Louisiana to Florida. After being asked by the conductor three times to move train cars. Cooperating upon each request, Green found himself physically removed from the train where a crowd of “17 or 18 persons” carried him to the jail whereupon the next morning he was “allowed

⁷⁵ “Women Suffrage and The Negro, *The McDowell Times*.”

⁷⁶ Civil Rights Act of 1875 - equality of all men before the law” and prohibited racial discrimination in public places and facilities such as restaurants and public transportation. <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilRightsAct1875.htm>.

⁷⁷ “Supreme Court Upholds Jim Crow Train,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), June. 20, 1913.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

to plead guilty to a misdemeanor and fined \$25 and costs for violating the ‘Jim Crow’ law.”⁷⁹ Green also went on to note in the article that for the past five years he had traveled this route frequently without confrontation. This confrontation was reported on in 1913 on June 20th, the same issue as the announcement of the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to uphold the regulation of Black folks to separate train cars. Jim Crow train cars would directly affect McDowell County in 1914 and motivate the Black Southwestern West Virginian to vote. Democrats outwardly called for Jim Crow cars as part of their campaign should they gain political majority in elected office.⁸⁰

The third limit or rather a delay to Black power was The First World War. W.E.B Dubois as editor of *The Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, wrote in July of 1918 that while war lasted, Black folks were to pause on their grievances and shoulder with fellow white citizens. Over 370,000 Black people participated in some capacity in World War I.⁸¹ The Great War delayed Black progression towards full citizenship but in addition the war was also seen as a job provider. Just as Europe was entering the Great War, the news of war in Europe was arriving to Southwestern West Virginia and was initially perceived as an opportunity for more work in the coalfields. *The McDowell Times* ran the sub headline, “Foreigners May Have To Go Back To Fatherland To Fight And Our Smokeless Coalfields Will Have To Be Manned By Americans To Meet Heavy Demands”, reporting that after speaking with Vice-Consul Von Reuter of Austria-Hungary, Vice-Consul estimated that nearly ninety percent of Emperor Franz Josef’s subjects

⁷⁹ “Green Tells of His Experience,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone: WV), June. 20, 1913.

⁸⁰ “Democrats Want ‘Jim Crow’ Car,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone: WV), Aug. 07, 1914.

⁸¹ Matthew Margis, “A Brief Look at African American Soldiers in the Great War,” *National Archives The Unwritten Record* (blog), February 13, 2017, <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2017/02/13/a-brief-look-at-african-american-soldiers-in-the-great-war/>.

would return to the Fatherland and take up arms for the war effort.⁸² When examining Black progression in the Southwestern coalfields of West Virginia during the late 19th century and early 20th century, the great war paused the fight for racial solidarity and asked Black folks yet again to band together and fight alongside all Americans for an America that had freed Black people from slave labor only just about 49 years prior and yet continued to regulate them as second class citizens of the nation, failing to also protect them from racial violence but accepting their draft enlistment to sacrifice themselves for the country. Black participation both in the coalfields and in the war is another example of Black Appalachian existence that continues to contradict the mainstream image of a white Appalachia.

⁸² “War May Help The Coal Miners In West Virginia,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone: WV), Aug. 07, 1914.

Chapter 6 – Black Appalachia’s Legacy

Black Appalachians having existed in Appalachia as long as white Appalachians left a legacy in southwestern West Virginia. Despite their displacement in the mines in the 1920s due to mechanization, and erasure from the Appalachian historical image, southwestern West Virginia holds Black legacy and history. In Southwestern West Virginia, Black Appalachians left a legacy of education. Founded in 1891 and born out of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, the West Virginia Colored Institute was one of 19 land-grant institutions designated to provide for the education of Black citizens.⁸³ Because West Virginia maintained segregated educational systems, the institute was for Black folks specifically.⁸⁴ Initially offering vocational training and courses equivalent to a high school education, the institute expanded in 1915 to offering college degrees. The institute also offered social club opportunities. The baseball team competed against other teams in Montgomery and Charleston. The Young Men’s Christian Association of the Institute represented the school while attending the 1913 International Convention of the Young Men’s Christian Associations in Cincinnati, Ohio.⁸⁵

By 1913, the school was open for twenty-one years and had over 300 graduates. The alumni consisted of four ministers, three medical doctors, one dentist, one pharmacist, one author, one artist, two printers, ten principals, multiple bookkeepers, stenographers, and a whole

⁸³ John Michael Lee, Jr., Ph.D. and Samaad Wes Keys, “Land and Grant but Unequal State One-to-One Match Funding for 1890 Land-Grant Universities,” *Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities Office of Access and Success Policy Brief*, Report No. 3000-PB1 (2013): 1. <https://www.aplu.org/library/land-grant-but-unequal-state-one-to-one-match-funding-for-1890-land-grant-universities/file>.

⁸⁴ “Our History Runs Deep”, *West Virginia State University*, Accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.wvstateu.edu/about/history-and-traditions.aspx>.

⁸⁵ “W.V. Colored Institute,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), May 23, 1913.

host of teachers.⁸⁶ The institute served as a foundational step towards academic achievement, educational literacy, and class ascension. *The McDowell Times* reported that the West Virginia Colored Institute turned out some of the best teachers within the state. Beyond teaching to the Board of Education's standards, the institute also instilled pride in Black folks. "These teachers tell the pupils of the great achievements of the race, its struggles and aims and inspire them with ambition to better their condition and accomplish great good."⁸⁷ Located in Institute, West Virginia, 10 miles from Charleston, and now named West Virginia State University, the institute now resides as a proud HBCU.⁸⁸

Between Black working-class consumer dollars and Black elite business building and investment, a plethora of businesses sustained Black community and commerce amongst the Black populations in southern West Virginia's coal fields. While these businesses are no longer standing, *The McDowell Times* serves as a reminder of how many years of success the business sustained. H.J Capehart, a Black attorney based out of Keystone, W.V. kept a posted advertisement space for his service on page 4 of *the McDowell Times* weekly newspaper for multiple years. Madam Alice Walker, not to be mistaken for Madam CJ Walker, also maintained a consistent ad space in *The McDowell Times* for her miracle hair grower and shop based out of Bluefield West Virginia. One business that is somewhat of a mystery to the historical record as of the writing of this paper, is the Black owned Eagle Coal Company. According to historical West Virginia annual mining reports, as well as *The McDowell Times*, the coal operation was located in Montgomery, Fayette County, and was owned entirely by Black folk. Archie McKinney was the president; Matthew Buster was secretary-treasurer, and a predominantly

⁸⁶ "The West Virginia Colored Institute," *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV), June 27, 1913.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ "Our History Runs Deep", *West Virginia State University*.

Black workforce operated the coal company. While unable to obtain photos of the mine, the existence of a fully operational Black owned coal company is a powerful marker of Black Appalachian progression in West Virginia. Predominantly operated and managed by Black folk, from coal miner to owner provides internal Black job promotion. Within this space, a coal loader could take jobs outside of the mine and work to be considered for managerial positions. This company also provided a Black community experience in the workplace. Like other coal mining companies, your fellow church goers and baseball teammates were your co-workers except this environment was predominantly Black. The Eagle Coal Company deserve further historical research. The company disappears from the registry logs and newspaper after 1917. But during their peak, the company was valued at \$100,000, due to wartime demand, and employed up to one hundred workers.⁸⁹ Amicably reported on by *The McDowell Times*, the newspaper praised the company for having coal of the “highest quality” and even took a large lump of coal to the National Negro Exposition in 1915.⁹⁰ Beyond this source, there are no other widely available sources that mention this coal company existed and no evidence of its end is easily attainable. This brief but pivotal existence of the coal company illustrates a comprehensive collaboration from the working-class and the elite.

The final legacy I highlight here is the published Black word. Fourteen known Black newspapers were created in West Virginia and cumulatively existed for more than one hundred years. Three of these newspapers were founded in Southern and Southwestern West Virginia, *The McDowell Times*, *The Pioneer*, and the *West Virginia Eagle*. These newspapers served as an entry point into Black community and connected Black Appalachians to the experience of other

⁸⁹ *Encyclopedia of African American history, 1896 to the present: from the age of segregation to the twenty-first century*, s.v. “West Virginia” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 112.

⁹⁰ “Negroes Operating Coal Mine,” *The McDowell Times* (Keystone, WV).

Black folks across the country. These newspapers represent a direct archival source to the Black perspective. *The McDowell Times* reported on all Black economic classes and social statuses of its community, often encouraging the collaboration between the Black coal miner and the Black elite. M.T. Whittico, partnering with R.W. White and T. Edward Hill ran *The McDowell Times* from 1904 to 1941. The newspaper reported on local and national news but gave specific attention to news that concerned Black folk. The spectrum of articles covering Black working-class to Black elite-class affairs gave a platform for the intersection of race and class. Whittico successfully merged the news of war, economics, and politics, with social community such as church affairs, fraternal organization events all existing together alongside editorials and advertisements in a weekly Friday issue.

The Black experience both local and outside the state was the focal point of this newspaper. Reports of racial discrimination and lynching were placed alongside reports of the Black voter's local influential power, and bustling Black-owned business. Political articles published in the newspaper leaned towards the Republican perspective as Whittico was a staunch Republican. Despite the growing voice around labor and Socialist movements at the turn of the 20th century, Whittico promoted the Black Republican vote as well as the coal companies that could show improved conditions for the Black coal miner. Whittico's leanings influenced the political tone of *The McDowell Times*, a tone not completely shared across all Black class lines. Reports of labor strikes and union organization were also published in this newspaper but were often followed by Whittico's anti-strike opinion. While not a completely unbiased artifact, *The McDowell Times* provided a chronological Black Appalachian experience of southwestern West Virginia. The newspaper survived for almost 37 years, chronicling the Black Appalachian experience throughout Jim Crow, World War I, and most of the Great Depression.

For Black Appalachia Today

In the late 1800s, Black Appalachia was dynamic and complex. In Southwestern West Virginia, the Black folk's first experience of both Appalachia and mining was a mixture of free and enslaved labor as West Virginia's statehood included the Willey Amendment that weaned the state off slave labor. At the turn of the 20th century, with the migration from the deep south underway, the Black folk's experience in Southwestern West Virginia coal mining became a resettlement opportunity. To seek out less discrimination and more earnings, Black workers entered the mines in some of the most dangerous job positions and conditions in an effort to obtain autonomy. Racially discriminated against, Black workers were not hired at the managerial level, ultimately capping how much success a Black worker could have in the coal mining industry. Heavily recruited and manipulated by the coal companies, Black workers were also used on both sides of the strike lines. Continuing to do the most dangerous work of the coal mines, while living in segregated communities and dependent upon the coal company for their food, water, and shelter, Black folks carved out a predominant existence and community in this region of Appalachia.

Black workers contributed greatly to the high volume of coal production in Southwestern West Virginia, having brought their families to join them in company housing, engaging with the independent local business and commerce, and pursuing education. Using the segregation of the towns to their advantage, Black folks utilized education as a central source to uplift themselves out of class barriers. Adults and children learned to read and write allowing for more community building and participation. With state provided funding, Black folk were able to educate their own Black teachers who then taught the Black community. With the boom of coal production in the region, members of the Black elite class actively decided to move to areas like Southwestern

West Virginia to promote Black wealth through means of Black-owned business. Cities like Keystone and Pocahontas, counties like McDowell and Montgomery, boasted booming Black populations in the early 1900s in comparison to the areas' white populations at that time. What these regions had in common were coal company jobs, coal company housing, and a mixture of Black classes. Supporting each other through business, education, and commerce, Black communities, alongside white immigrant and native-born West Virginians, maintained a social and economic presence despite racial discrimination, segregation, and violence.

Southwestern West Virginia was diverse both in experience and the quality of the coal town. Some coal companies had better housing conditions, fresher water, offered temporary sick, and injury pay, or better earnings. For Black Appalachians, the priorities were to navigate racial discrimination, segregation and at times violence, which were inescapable regardless of coal company conditions. Southwestern West Virginia did not protect from that, but the region's mixture of white Appalachian, immigrant and Black Appalachian coal mining laborers existing in the same class produced white and Black men working alongside each other through some coal mining jobs, such the coal loading position. The hard work and struggle of the working-class coal miner in Southwestern West Virginia was felt by both Black and white workers. Both were liable to be subjected to the search and seizure or eviction of housing. Both experienced the deductions from their pay and both were at risk of being maimed or killed by their daily work inside the mountains. Residing in this same class struggle created instances of class struggle community across racial lines. This moment of equal job footing was scarce and fleeting in that white coal miners could advance to managerial roles and Black laborers were excluded from these positions. Eagle Coal Company contradicted this trend in 1915 operating under Black owners and with a predominantly Black staff across general labor and managerial roles. The

written and recorded knowledge of the Eagle Coal Company is limited, but its recorded existence represents a peak of progressions and Black wealth that was created largely without harm in a region of Appalachia that was not prioritizing racial violence.

Researching news articles of *The McDowell Times* from 1904 – 1917 showed a chronological Black history of southwestern West Virginia Black communities that did more than just survive. This newspaper was an entry point into a Building Black era when Black Appalachians built their community. The Black folks from the late 1800s to early 1900s had built the railroad tracks and company housing that the next wave would use to travel to the region and to seek home and shelter. Black professors like Byrd Prillerman worked with the state of West Virginia to build Black education through the creation of the West Virginia Colored Institute, a school that opened its doors in 1892 and still stands today under a new name, West Virginia State University.⁹¹ Black Republicans across all class lines influenced local electoral office with their organized vote. Black churches created fellowship, safe space, and mutual aid while the Black Fraternal Organizations created injury protection funds and community celebrations. These components of community were built and sustained by the Black communities of Southwestern West Virginia and *The McDowell Times* gave a Black voice and Black perspective.

Areas of this work where continued research is beneficial is the deeper investigation into the Eagle Coal Company. Annual Coal Mining registers as well as *The McDowell Times* have a record of its existence and operation, but more research is needed into the experience of working at a Black-owned mining company. It would also be beneficial to learn of the owners' challenges or obstacles as Black owners in the Jim Crow era. There are three archived collections at the

⁹¹ "Byrd Prillerman," *West Virginia Archives and History*, Accessed Apr 28, 2022, <https://archive.wvculture.org/history/histamne/prillerm.html>.

WVU West Virginia & Regional History Center that make mention of an Eagle Coal Company. Further investigation of these archives both oral and written may provide a deeper discovery into the level of success of the operation as well as the reason for its disappearance. In addition to this area, there is also an opportunity to take a more genealogical approach to studying Black Appalachian history, by researching the commerce class of the Black communities in southwestern Virginia. Utilizing the advertisement sections of *The McDowell Times* and applying the owner's names through a genealogical search could surface personable narratives of how Black folk made the migration to southwestern West Virginia.

When researching this topic, I aimed to utilize the work of Black researchers, writers, and scholars as the foundation in my topic. In addition, I looked for Black primary sources through means of photographs, oral narratives, and Black publications. This search was difficult in two ways. The first difficulty was and is the gatekeeping of what were once community archives that now reside in educational institutions. It's a complex inquiry as to why one must prove their worthiness to access history when this section of history is already so scarce from regional history. It is also understood that such forms and inquiries are formalities or for record keeping purposes, but this does not answer the question of why the process of attempting to access American history is in general practice, a very guarded experience. The second difficulty was accumulating enough Black created works to ensure comprehensive and objective research. Where one can very easily create a thesis project built entirely on referenced work and research created by white folk, the same cannot be achieved when seeking to create a thesis project built comprehensively on Black research, publication, and archives. This is not to say that Black written history should be the only sources to utilize when researching Black history. It simply highlights that even when attempting to uplift the Black race by centrally focusing on Black

written history for this Black Appalachian research, it was still needed to incorporate the scholarly work or research that came from white folk as white scholars had written about this history first.

My aim for this research was to question the generalized imagery and idea of Appalachian history; that it is white and hillbilly. The discoveries of Black labor, Black wealth, and Black communities in Southwestern West Virginia is an entry point that contradicts the predominantly white image of Appalachia. Black West Virginian populations in McDowell, Mingo, and Montgomery counties still exist today though at a much smaller volume. West Virginia's statehood and industry was built on the complex and evolving experience of Black labor. Black workers have been a part of West Virginia since its genesis; building its mines, laying its railroad track, building its coal company homes, mining its coal. May this piece be a reminder to Black Appalachians living in southwestern West Virginia that this Black history has always been there and it's the aim of research like this to end the Black erasure from such diverse history.



Figure 3 A Pupil in Pleasant Green School - Pocahontas Co. West Virginia



Figure 4 Inhabitant of Scotts Run, West Virginia, who has just received relief check.



Figure 5 Coal miner, his wife and two of their children, Bertha Hill, West Virginia]

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