

AN HISTORIC COAL MINING COMMUNITY AND ITS SCHOOL

**A Study of Pocahontas High School
1908-1991**

by

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ABSTRACT

Pocahontas High School, the smallest of four Tazewell County high schools, is presently located in the historic town of Pocahontas, Virginia. From the school's establishment in 1908 until 1955, the high school was located at the top of Water Street within the town limits. In 1955, students were moved to a new building at its present site just inside the town's corporate limits. The school today serves the communities of Abbs Valley, Boissevain, and the Town of Pocahontas, Virginia.

This study included an examination of the role of the school in the mining community, and the relationship between the coal company and the school. Thus, the researcher reviewed literature-surrounding life in mining industrial towns to determine whether Pocahontas conformed to the conventional interpretations of such mining-industrial communities. The researcher also considered the life of the school and community following the cessation of mining operations in Pocahontas. An examination of the reasons for the school having remained open despite declining enrollment and the importance of the school to its communities was examined through the eyes of local community leaders, residents, and graduates of Pocahontas High School.

This study employed conventional historical research methods in order to document the history of Pocahontas High School. The data collected from documents and interviews were handled qualitatively, with some data appearing in the form of numbers and graphs. Data gathered for this study were derived from both primary and secondary sources. This study used written, pictorial, and oral sources. Oral materials included oral history interviews with local historians, public officials and individuals involved with Pocahontas High School during the period of study. Triangulation verification techniques were used to accurately

describe the impact of coal mining and the closing of the mine on the development, growth, and decline of the school and community.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the four ladies in my life. My mother, Betty Brewster has been a constant source of inspiration. She has always been there to encourage me in my endeavors and provide me with the needed wisdom to succeed with this dissertation and many other challenges along the way. I love and respect her for all the unselfish acts that she performs, and for always giving more than she has taken.

My wife, Debra, has offered me support and understanding. I admire and respect her for having the ability to complete difficult tasks successfully. She is the love of my life and soul mate.

My daughters, London and Sahara, have been tolerant of my constant obsession with the completion of this project. London, thank you for being a positive role model for Sahara. Sahara, thank you for being so much more like your mother than your father, you have been sweet and kind.

To my father, thank you for the example that you set for me over the last years of your life.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction to the Study

Pocahontas High School, the smallest of four Tazewell County high schools, is presently located in the historic town of Pocahontas, Virginia. From the school's establishment in 1908 until 1955, the high school was located at the top of Water Street within the town limits. In 1955, students were moved to a new building at its present site just inside of the town's corporate limits. The school today serves grades 7-12.

A short distance west of the high school's present site are Boissevain, a small mining settlement, and Abbs Valley, a fertile region 10 miles in length that has become a residential section. These three communities, which serve as feeder areas for Pocahontas High School, are located in the northeastern region of Tazewell County and border the West Virginia counties of McDowell and Mercer.

From the time the town of Pocahontas was founded in 1881, much of its economic and social development was closely linked to the great Pocahontas coalfield.¹ The Pocahontas coalfield is part of the great Appalachian Coalfield, comprising a 900-square-mile coal-producing area located in the Appalachian Plateau of southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia. The original boundaries of this coalfield encompassed the West Virginia counties of McDowell, Mercer, Raleigh, and Wyoming, plus a small section of Tazewell County, Virginia. However since 1930, the coalfield boundaries have shifted southwest to include

¹ Bessie G. Walker, "A Study of Human Relationships in the Classroom of a Small Public High School Located in a Mountainous Area of Virginia" (Masters Thesis, Radford University, 1964), 23.



Pocahontas High School today rests on a 14-acre lot surrounded by the beautiful Appalachian Mountains. (Photo courtesy of Pocahontas High School)

Buchanan County, Virginia.² The Pocahontas Number One Mine, located in Pocahontas, Virginia, was the original mine of the Pocahontas coalfields.³

Those who came to seek work in the mines formed the population of the Town of Pocahontas. A number of Hungarian, German, and Welsh immigrants arrived there when the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company opened the first mine in the Pocahontas coalfield in 1883. McGehee indicates that by the early twentieth century there were as many as 2,000 Hungarians, blending with African-Americans, Jews, and native mountaineers from other Appalachian communities to create a unique society.⁴ The immigrants who came to seek work in the mines added to the diversity of the town's early make-up, and still contribute to the rich cultural traditions present today.

By the 1950s, the coal mines that sustained life in the Pocahontas community had been all but worked out. The coal industry, which had dominated life in the community from its beginnings, had sharply declined. The Pocahontas Fuel Company had begun to sell off its residential property and had discharged or transferred many of its employees. In 1955, the mines closed, causing many people to lose their jobs. By 1962, with the closing of the town's mines and the eventual closing of many of the mines in the region, Pocahontas had become what might be called a retirement community.⁵

² Mack H. Gillenwater, "Cultural and Historical Geography of Mining Settlements in the Pocahontas Coal Field of Southern West Virginia, 1880 to 1930" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1972), 11; Gillenwater's study analyzed the natural and cultural landscape of the Pocahontas Coalfield. He examined four mining settlements' structure, morphology, and the components of a mining town. One of those four settlements studied was Pocahontas, Virginia.

³ "Law Protects Famed Name Pocahontas," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1950, 2. Pocahontas Coal was a trademark protected by the United States Courts. The coal was produced in the definite territory of McDowell, Mercer, and Wyoming counties of West Virginia and Tazewell County of Virginia. Pocahontas Coal was a semi-bituminous low volatile smokeless coal produced exclusively in the counties listed above.

⁴ Stuart McGehee, "Hunkies in Pokey: Immigrants in the Coalfields," *Coal People Magazine*, August 1987, 21-22.

⁵ Walker, 24.

However, conditions were not the same in the communities of Boissevain and Abbs Valley. Both communities had been settled at about the same time as Pocahontas. Many of those living in these two communities were working for the U.S. Steel Company and its shops and mines located at Gary, West Virginia, twenty-five miles away. Much younger than the inhabitants of Pocahontas, the residents of the Boissevain and Abbs Valley had, by the mid-1960s, a greater proportion of school-age children. By 1980, it was noted that eighty-two percent of the high school population came from these out-lying areas, with only eighteen percent coming from the town of Pocahontas.⁶

Since 1980, Pocahontas High School has experienced a gradual decline in student population. At the conclusion of the 1978-1979 school year, the total enrollment was 341.⁷ At the conclusion of the 1996-1997 school year, that total had declined to 210.⁸

Within the present day community there is an interest among both local and county groups in restoring the historic richness of Pocahontas and in developing the area as a tourist attraction. The Pocahontas Exhibition Mine, closed during much of the 1980s, reopened in 1990. Recently, the concept of a tourist train connecting Historic Bramwell, West Virginia, and Historic Pocahontas, Virginia, has received consideration and funding from both the legislative bodies in West Virginia and Virginia.

Pocahontas High School still survives despite the demise of the coal industry, declining enrollment, and nationwide downsizing trends. The school has been spared the fate of consolidation that has overtaken many schools and communities in decline. The factors that have led to the shifts in the population of

⁶ Pocahontas High School, "Self Study-Evaluation 1979-1980," 9.

⁷ Ibid, 9.

⁸ Pocahontas High School, "School Improvement Model, 1997," 8.

the three communities have magnified the school's importance in the eyes of local residents. With the fear of consolidation ever present, the members of these communities perceive the school as a vital component in the battle to retain local identity and to preserve traditions related to their historic past.

Purpose of the Study

This dissertation is an historical study examining the influence of coal mining on school and community, with emphasis upon Pocahontas High School. The purpose of this study is to describe, record, analyze and interpret for future students of education historical information pertaining to Pocahontas High School and the culture that developed within a coal mining community. The researcher chronicled key events in the evolution of a coal mining community, showing the relationship between these events and the development of Pocahontas High School. The study begins with the development of the mines in the early 1880s and continues for forty years beyond the closing of the Pocahontas Number One Mine in 1955. This study examines the influence the coal company had on the operation and culture of the school and what impact the closing of the mine had on the school and community. The researcher then investigated the life of the school and the community following the cessation of mining operations. An examination of the reasons for Pocahontas High School having remained opened despite declining enrollment and the importance of the school to its communities was examined through the eyes of local community leaders, residents, and graduates of Pocahontas High School.

Mullins contended that the vast majority of literature concerning mining-industrial towns has determined that the coal company maintained a virtual monopoly over the community's activities and institutions.⁹ Research has shown

⁹ Terry W. Mullins, *Bishop, Virginia-West Virginia: A Tazewell County Coal Community and Its School, 1887-1987* (Tazewell, Virginia: Clinch Valley Printing Company, 1996), 2.

that in many coal mining towns, coal companies provided the land, built the schools, equipped them and subsidized school budgets.¹⁰ However, Dotson's study of mining communities and their schools showed that the attitude of the citizens towards local schools was not the same in all places.¹¹ Therefore, the researcher examined the literature surrounding life in mining industrial towns to determine whether Pocahontas conformed to the conventional interpretations of such mining-industrial communities.

Description of the Population

The researcher examined the school's history through the perspective of representatives from the community, school administrators, teachers, support staff, and students who were involved with Pocahontas High School at various stages of its history. The writer detailed key historical events within the school's community, showing how such events influenced the development, growth, operation, and traditions of Pocahontas High School.

Need for the Study

This study makes an important contribution to the overall historical consciousness of the communities of Pocahontas High School and those of Tazewell County Public Schools. To date, no study has documented the local history of the school.

Since Pocahontas, Virginia, is a registered historic town, there is a particular interest in preserving Pocahontas High School's unique history for the benefit of future generations. Kyvig and Marty described local history as a tool for stimulating group pride and distinctiveness.¹² This study will seek to provide the

¹⁰David A. Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners 1880-1922* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 71.

¹¹ John Andrew Dotson, "The Public School in the Mining Community" (Masters Thesis, University of Kentucky, 1931), 14. Dotson's study, conducted in 1930-1931, examined eight mining communities and their schools in Eastern Kentucky.

¹² David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the World Around You* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1996), 5-6.

reader with a specialized knowledge of a particular phase of this community's educational history, and illustrate some of the unique aspects of school and community relations.

Methodology

This study employed conventional historical research methods in order to document the history of Pocahontas High School from 1908 to 1991. Pocahontas High School was accredited as a public high school in Virginia in 1908. The year 1991 was chosen so that the researcher's position as principal would relate less to the time period covered by this study.¹³

The researcher described the changes that took place within the school and community during the period under study. Emphasis was placed on the description of life and culture there in order to give the reader a vivid understanding of the uniqueness of life within this small, rural Appalachian community.

Data Collection

The data collected from documents and interviews were handled qualitatively, with some data appearing in the form of numbers and graphs. Data gathered for this study were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary source materials originate during the time period that researchers are studying.¹⁴ Butchart described a primary source as any material created contemporaneously to an event being studied.¹⁵ Primary sources may take the form of eyewitness accounts of an event, a first-hand document describing an event, or written tradition passed down from generation to generation.¹⁶

¹³ The researcher became principal of Pocahontas High School in July 1997.

¹⁴ William K. Storey, *Writing History: Guide For Students* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18.

¹⁵ Ronald E. Butchart, *Local Schools: Exploring Their History* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1986), 35

¹⁶ William W. Brickman, *Educational Historiography: Tradition, Theory, and Technique* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Emeritus, INC), 98.

A secondary source is defined as a derived source, once removed from first hand material.¹⁷ Secondary source materials are those works that are based upon primary documents. These sources often interpret events of the past and the primary sources describing those events.

This study used written, pictorial and oral sources. Written sources for this study included: official school records and reports; government documents; official minutes; past studies; local historical archival records and personal papers; annual reports; local and area newspaper files; and other local documents. Pictorial sources included maps and photographs. Oral materials included oral history interviews with local historians and individuals involved with Pocahontas High School during the period of study.

Interview Protocol

A list of questions pertinent to the topic was developed prior to the initial stage of the interview process. The investigator attempted to gain a contextual grasp of the topic prior to the development of the question set. The rationale for this approach is that a question guide can help relate the oral history data to material sources of information.

For this study, the researcher used a combination of an organized questionnaire and the “free-form” approach to data collection. Caunce describes the combination of an organized question guide and the “free-form” approach as the preparation of a detailed list of questions, but employment of the set only as a general guide for the interview.¹⁸

¹⁷ Brickman, 108.

¹⁸ Stephen Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian* (New York, NY: Longman Group, 1994), 152-153.

Verification of Sources

Cutler defined oral history as a methodological resource for the study of the history of education.¹⁹ Orally communicated history provides a valuable source of information, and complements the written record by providing a more intimate view of the events described.²⁰ However, Cutler reminds us of the criticism oral history has received for depending on the human memory, an often inconsistent and unreliable source of information.²¹ Allen and Montell warned that in the evaluation of oral evidence, the sources of that evidence must be carefully considered.²² Therefore, triangulation verification techniques, such as comparing oral histories with material sources, were used to accurately describe the impact of coal mining and the closing of the mines on the development, growth, and decline of the school and community.

Researcher Bias

Since the researcher is a member of the community whose past is being studied, the researcher was cautious not to reflect his interest or biases in this study. Though the researcher is currently the principal of the school involved in the study, his tenure there relates only generally to the time period covered by this study. The researcher's primary responsibility was to ascertain, investigate, accumulate, and accurately report data and information related to the school and its historical evolution.

¹⁹ John H. Best, ed., *Historical Inquiry in Education: A Research Agenda, Asking For Answers: Oral History*, by William W. Cutler, III (Washington, DC: The American Education Research Association, 1983), 105.

²⁰ Barbara Allen and William L. Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1981), 15.

²¹ Cutler, 95.

²² Allen and Montell, 89.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DISCOVERY AND MARKETING OF POCAHONTAS COAL

Early History of the Region

Haller described the land prior to the development of the coalmines in the northeastern region of Tazewell County as a “country that could support only a small population.”²³ The land was mostly made up of dense forests of oak, hemlock, and chestnuts, with thick undergrowth of laurel.²⁴ The inhabitants of this region seem to have lived in a frontier survival mode, understanding little about the coal that existed beneath them.²⁵

One of the earliest settlements in this region was a farming community known as Abbs Valley. The community was named for discoverer Absalom Looney, who was the first white man to settle there, and is known for the Shawnee massacre of the pioneer Moore family during the mid-1780s.²⁶

During the 1800’s, the people of Abbs Valley lived in a manner similar to that of other inhabitants of farming communities in Tazewell County. However, there had not been much movement to settle in the Abbs Valley area. Mann believed that the reason for this was the fear of Native Americans and the community’s location “off the beaten path.”²⁷ Consequently, settlement tended to occur in the other farming communities of Tazewell County where land was much more accessible to trade outlets. The land in Abbs Valley, held mostly by the

²³ Virginia Haller, *Pocahontas: A Record of Struggle and Achievement* (Roanoke, Virginia: Economy Printing Company, 1937), 6. Haller was the Valedictorian of the Pocahontas High School class of 1914. She was later taught at Pocahontas High School.

²⁴ N.R. Cartwright, *Pocahontas, Virginia, Founded 1881: A Little of Her History and Resources* (Bluefield, West Virginia: N.R. Cartwright, 1906), 1-2.

²⁵ Mary B. Pudup, Dwight B. Billings, & Altina L. Waller, eds., *Appalachian in the Making: The Mountain South in the 19th Century, Diversity in the Antebellum Appalachian South: Four Farming Communities in Tazewell County, Virginia*, by Ralph Mann (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 157.

²⁶ Mann, 133.

²⁷ Mann, 137.

Moore family and a few absentee farmers, consisted primarily of underdeveloped farmland occupied by peasants and squatters.²⁸

Early Discovery and Exploration of the Pocahontas Coalfields

Lambie revealed that since colonial times numerous written sources have detailed the existence of coal in southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia.²⁹ Early exploration confirmed the presence of abundant amounts of coal in this region. Thomas Jefferson described its existence in his *Notes on Virginia*, and Professor W. B. Rogers wrote about the richness of the coal in his geological researches conducted between 1836 and 1842.³⁰ However, it would be the exploration and writings of Dr. Thomas Walker, physician, surveyor, and adventurer from Albemarle County, in 1750 that would spark outside interest in the Pocahontas coalfields.³¹

Walker's exploration began around 1748 under the guidance of Colonel James Patton, from the neighborhood of Pattonsburg, Virginia. Patton organized an exploration team after receiving a grant of 120,000 acres from King George II.³² His precise route of exploration into Southwest Virginia after leaving the New River is unknown. Consequently, after returning home from the first expedition Colonel Patton, along with Dr. Thomas Walker and others, organized the Loyal Company, securing from the English crown a grant of 800,000 acres of land located north of the North Carolina line and west of the Alleghany Mountains. Dr. Walker was appointed as an agent for this company. Both Walker and The Loyal

²⁸ Ibid, 133.

²⁹ John T. Lambie, *From Mine to Market: The History of Coal Transportation on the Norfolk and Western Railway* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1954), 26.

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York, New York Harper and Row, 1964) 25. "Pocahontas No. 1 Retires," *The Norfolk and Western Magazine*, September 1955, 520.

³¹ Jack M. Jones, *Early Coal Mining in Pocahontas, Virginia* (Lynchburg, Virginia: Jack M. Jones, 1983), 3.

³² William C. Pendleton, *History of Tazewell County and Southwest Virginia* (Richmond, Virginia: W.E. Hill, 1920), 171.

Company would play a vital role in the early settlement and development of the portion of Southwestern Virginia west of the New River.³³

In 1750, Dr. Thomas Walker and a group of explorers made their second trek westwards across the New River, through the Cumberland Gap, and into Kentucky.³⁴ The purpose of this second trip was to select desirable places to settle on behalf of the Loyal Company. Upon returning from his trip, Walker and the others passed through the present town of Pocahontas, Virginia. Dr. Walker kept a journal that describes their travel route. Major Jedediah Hotchkiss, a civil engineer and mineralogist, first brought to public attention the journals of Dr. Thomas Walker.³⁵ Excerpts from Walker's journals, later published by Hotchkiss, seem to suggest that Dr. Walker was the first white man to discover and record the great coal deposits around Pocahontas and in the Flat Top region.³⁶

The Promotion of the Pocahontas Coalfields

Until the late nineteenth century, nearly all of the coal produced in the United States came from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.³⁷ However, this was about to change because of the progressive actions of a select number of investors and entrepreneurs.

The promotion of coal in the Pocahontas region owes a great debt to Major Jedediah Hotchkiss³⁸ of Staunton, Virginia. Hotchkiss believed that Pocahontas coal was the finest in the world, and he worked hard to promote this idea outside the region.³⁹ Major Hotchkiss published a magazine called "The Virginias" that

³³ Pendleton, 171-172.

³⁴ David E. Johnson, *History of the Middle New River Settlements and Contiguous Territory* (Radford, Virginia: Commonwealth Press Incorporated, 1906), 11.

³⁵ Jones, 3.

³⁶ Johnson, 11-12.

³⁷ Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 27.

³⁸ As a matter of general interest, Major Hotchkiss had served as a mapmaker for Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson during the American Civil War of 1861-1865.

³⁹ Shifflett, 29.

promoted the possibilities of the West Virginia and the Southwestern Virginia coalfields.⁴⁰ Upon reading the travel journals of Dr. Thomas Walker, Hotchkiss was convinced that the coal deposits referred to by Walker were located in and around the vicinity of the present day town of Pocahontas, Virginia.⁴¹

In 1876, Major Hotchkiss hired Captain Isaiah A. Welch to investigate the coal deposits and timber resources there. On this trip, Welch discovered the mountain blacksmith shop of Jordan Nelson located near Powell's Bottom, now Pocahontas, Virginia. Nelson, a farmer and a blacksmith, mined small quantities of the coal to sell to his neighbors, who took the minerals home in saddlebags.⁴² According to local tradition, when a customer of Nelson's tried to purchase a large wagon full, Nelson's Aunt Bessie Thompson protested for fear that the supply would soon be exhausted.⁴³ However, Thompson was unaware that Nelson was mining from one of the richest coalfields ever discovered.⁴⁴

Welch returned from visiting Nelson with a sample of the rich coal from his 13-foot coal bank.⁴⁵ Upon receiving his portions of the Pocahontas coal from Welch, Hotchkiss gave samples to Colonel Thomas Graham of Philadelphia. Graham was financing the building of the New River Railroad from Radford, Virginia to Hinton, West Virginia.⁴⁶ Thomas Graham sent his son John to investigate Nelson's outcropping of coal.⁴⁷ The younger Graham returned with more samples that were subsequently analyzed by chemists in Philadelphia. As

⁴⁰ W. P. Tams, Jr, *The Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia: A Brief History* (Morgantown, West Virginia: West Virginia University Library, 1963), 19. It should be noted that Tams himself was a pioneer coal operator.

⁴¹ Jones, 3.

⁴² Local tradition has Nelson discovering the coal while looking for a stray cow. After noticing the black substance in the bottom of a small stream, Nelson retrieved it, and back at home attempted to melt the substance thinking that it was tar.

⁴³ McGehee 1992, 12.

⁴⁴ Mullins, 9.

⁴⁵ "Pocahontas No. 1 Retires" 1955, 521.

⁴⁶ Jones, 4.

⁴⁷ Mullins, 10.

expected, the coal samples retrieved by Graham were found to be of superior quality.⁴⁸

Hotchkiss worked to solicit support from a group of Philadelphia capitalists to purchase the land and to launch the railroad needed to transport the coal to market.⁴⁹ Hotchkiss and Graham were able to convince the group of the potential profitability of the coal found in this region. With the financial support of this group, the Norfolk and Western Railroad and its newly formed subsidiary, the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company,⁵⁰ bought up 100,000 acres of choice property throughout the region. The Southwest Virginia Improvement Company purchased 406 acres from Jordan Nelson for \$1,932 and the mineral rights for an additional 500 acres for \$4,000.⁵¹

The development of the town of Pocahontas began with the arrival of a mining superintendent and engineers whose job was to begin the process of constructing a coal-mining town. In January 1882, a village to be called Pocahontas was laid out on Laurel Creek in Tazewell County, and laboring gangs were brought in to clear off the site.⁵² A tipple was built, mining houses were constructed, and foundations were graded for coke ovens.⁵³ With the arrival of Hungarian, German, and Welsh immigrants in the summer of 1882, the

⁴⁸ Jones, 4.

⁴⁹ Shifflett, 29.

⁵⁰ The Southwest Virginia Improvement Company became the Pocahontas Collieries Company in 1901. In 1907, the company merged with the Pocahontas Consolidated Company to become the Pocahontas Consolidated Collieries Company. The Pocahontas Fuel Company was established as a selling agent in 1910. In 1917, the mining and selling companies were merged to form the Pocahontas Fuel Company.

⁵¹ Tazewell County Deed Book #18, 93 (Tazewell, Virginia: Tazewell County Courthouse). The money Nelson received from the sale of his land was stolen shortly following the transaction. In 1922, Nelson died with little to show from his ownership of one of the richest coalfields ever discovered. Today, Nelson is buried in an unkempt cemetery in Bluefield, West Virginia. His gravestone reads "Jordan Nelson, 1829-1922, Discoverer of Pocahontas Coal."

⁵² Haller, 7. The naming of the company town was often left up to the owner. The coal operators usually supplied the name of the town before the residents arrived. On June 30, 1882, the camp's name was changed from Powell's Bottom to Pocahontas. Although there are several theories on the origins of the name, the most popular belief is that the new mining community was named at the suggestion of Mrs. Frederick Kimball. Mrs. Kimball offered the name Pocahontas, in memory of the Indian Princess.

⁵³ Lambie, 33.

transformation of a wilderness country into an industrial coal mining town had begun.

The Coming of the Railroad

In 1852, G.W.L. Bickley in his book *History of the Settlement and Indian Wars of Tazewell County, Virginia* asked the question: “When shall we have an outlet for this coal?”⁵⁴ Bickley’s question and his assessment of the intrinsic value of coal to Tazewell County were certainly an idea ahead of its time. An answer to his question would be offered over thirty years later with the first shipments of coal from Pocahontas.⁵⁵

In 1855, the Virginia and Tennessee railroad was built to Wytheville, Virginia, placing it in reach of Tazewell County. Newly designed turnpikes gave communities the opportunity to forge trade links with the outside world. However, despite these improvements, the northeastern section of Tazewell County remained isolated. By 1860, this region did not have an adequate connection to outside trade links; thus, the ability to trade was somewhat limited.⁵⁶ In fact, the two nearest railroad facilities were located over rugged mountains and rough roads at Wytheville, Virginia, 60 miles away, and Saltville, Virginia, 51 miles away.⁵⁷ Since the coal could not be transported to distant markets, the land was considered worthless by outside investors.⁵⁸ Thus, the major hindrance to the development of the coalfields in Pocahontas was the lack of transportation for the coal. Although a system of railroads linked much of the nation by 1870, railroad companies had not penetrated the Appalachian Mountains.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ George W.L. Bickley, M.D., *History of the Settlement and Indian Wars of Tazewell County, Virginia* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Morgan Press, 1852), 136.

⁵⁵ Pendleton, 661.

⁵⁶ Mann, 151.

⁵⁷ Charles F. Brooks, “Pocahontas: Coal’s Beginning,” *Clinch Valley News*, 26 December 1979, 4. Haller, 8.

⁵⁸ Shifflett, 29.

⁵⁹ Corbin, 2.

Prior to the construction of the railroad, the Pocahontas coalfield region had little in the way of cities, towns, or villages.⁶⁰ In 1872, the possibilities of such a railroad to connect coal resources to outside trade markets moved one step closer to reality when the New River Railroad, Mining, and Manufacturing Company received a charter from the Virginia State Legislature. The charter allowed the company to construct, operate, and maintain a railroad from the New River Depot in Pulaski County to Mercer County, West Virginia.⁶¹

Meanwhile, Colonel Thomas Graham acquired a majority of the stock from the New River Railroad, Mining, and Manufacturing Company. He went to work securing the coal-laden lands, and used his influence to encourage the building of a railroad into the Pocahontas coalfield region.⁶² The construction of the railroad into the region during the 1870s was slowed by an economic depression.⁶³ However, in 1879, a narrow gauge railroad was constructed from the mainline of the Norfolk and Western Railroad in Radford, Virginia to the future town of Pocahontas, Virginia.⁶⁴ Since there was interest on the part of the Norfolk and Western Railroad in connecting with the railroad systems of Ohio and the northwest, the extension into Pocahontas would soon become an integral part of that plan.⁶⁵

In 1881, Frederick Kimball, then Vice-President of the Norfolk and Western, became interested in expanding the railway into the Flat Top Coal Region of West Virginia.⁶⁶ Kimball believed that the rich coal deposits could provide cheap fuel for his railroad and would allow the Norfolk and Western Railroad to compete in

⁶⁰ Johnson, 354.

⁶¹ Pendleton, 661.

⁶² Johnson, 125.

⁶³ Shifflett, 29.

⁶⁴ Haller, 6-7.

⁶⁵ Lambie, 120. The Norfolk and Western Railroad was the product of the consolidation of several railroads in Southwest Virginia.

⁶⁶ Shifflett, 29.

the profitable eastern coal trade.⁶⁷ The single gauge line from Radford to Pocahontas was purchased by the Norfolk and Western Railroad, which began construction on a standard gauge railroad.⁶⁸ Upon completion of the land survey, construction of the railroad into the Pocahontas coalfields was begun on August 3, 1881.⁶⁹ The installment of the line was both difficult and expensive. However, despite bad weather and mountainous terrain, progress on the new line went quickly. In March 1883, the 75-mile line reached Pocahontas, Virginia.⁷⁰ The transportation of Pocahontas coal to the tidewater region had officially begun. The first train arrived in Pocahontas on March 10, 1883 to begin hauling a pile of 40,000 tons of coal that had already been extracted from the mines. Mrs. Harriet Eliza Lathrop, the mine superintendent's wife, described the historic arrival of the first train:

“I was just plain excited the day it did arrive and could hardly settle down to do anything intelligently; finally we heard the locomotive whistle down the line, and I assure you no operatic music ever thrilled me as that sound did, and the freight train with a dilapidated looking passenger car on the rear was a beautiful sight. Everyone turned out to see and welcome it, with cheers and shouting.”⁷¹

The Norfolk and Western Railroad loaded the train's first car with Pocahontas coal for its own use and a second car was decorated for transport to Norfolk, Virginia.⁷² This car was consigned to Mayor William Lamb for free

⁶⁷ Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: Industrialization in the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 69.

⁶⁸ Haller, 6-7.

⁶⁹ Pendleton, 661-662.

⁷⁰ Gillenwater, 24.

⁷¹ *The Pocahontas Coalfields: Early Recollections and Happenings: The Lathrop Memoirs*, by Harriet Eliza Lathrop (Marceline, Maryland: Watsworth Publishing Company, 1983), 36. Mrs. Lathrop was the wife of the first mine Superintendent Mr. William Lathrop. At her children's request, she recorded a written account of her early days in Pocahontas, Virginia. This written account was pieced together for Lathrop's children from memory, and with the help of letters Mrs. Lathrop had written her mother in New York City between the years of 1881 and 1885.

⁷² The railroad used the first carload of coal for fuel.

distribution among the people in that city.⁷³ There a band, flags, and numerous curious individuals greeted the train.⁷⁴ Finally, after over three decades, Bickley's question had been answered. An outlet for this valuable resource was found and a region had sprung to life.

⁷³ Walter R. Hibbard, Jr., *Virginia Coal: An Abridged History and Complete Data Manual of Virginia Coal Production and Consumption* (Blacksburg, VA: VPI and SU Printing, 1990), 27.

⁷⁴ Haller, 9.

CHAPTER THREE

EDUCATION IN EARLY VIRGINIA

The Struggle for Public Education in Early Virginia

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson, Edmond Pendleton and George Wythe submitted a bill for *More General Diffusion of Knowledge* to the Virginia's General Assembly.⁷⁵ In his *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson outlined this bill to provide for an established state system of education that would create a township or ward system of elementary schools. This plan would have allowed every free white boy or girl to attend a tax-supported elementary school for three years.⁷⁶ The elementary school curriculum was to consist of reading, writing, arithmetic, and the elements of European and American History. Jefferson proposed that any child would be able to receive more education if the parent was willing to pay for it. Outstanding male students, too poor to pay, were to attend one of twenty grammar schools for six more years of training.⁷⁷ However, Jefferson's 1779 idea would not be adopted for several decades. His plan to establish a state system of education was not yet appealing to a new Republic that was still occupied with the growing pains of nationhood.

The Literary Fund

Among the other efforts in Virginia that assisted in the creation of a public school system during the nineteenth century was the establishment, in 1810, of the Literary Fund by the Virginia General Assembly. The Literary Fund constituted a basis for early support of free public schools.⁷⁸ The funds deposited therein were disbursed on the basis of the population of school age children living in each

⁷⁵ Mullins, 25.

⁷⁶ Jefferson, 140.

⁷⁷ William A. Maddox, *The Free School Idea in Virginia Before the Civil War* (New York City, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1918), 15-16.

⁷⁸ Joseph Friedl, Sr., *A History of McDowell County, West Virginia, 1858-1976* (Parsons, West Virginia: McClain Printing Company, 1975), 13.

county of Virginia. Income for this fund came from fines, forfeitures or other penalties. The fund received considerable assistance in 1816 when it was assigned \$1,210,550 that was repaid by the Federal Government for money borrowed from Virginia during the War of 1812.⁷⁹

Heatwole described the Literary Fund as the nucleus for the support of free schools during the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ Prior to 1871, the Literary Fund constituted the only state assistance for public education. In the beginning it was used for the support of higher education, providing tuition scholarships to private schools, and for support of the establishment of the University of Virginia. However, when the western counties of Virginia protested these practices, a compromise was reached through which \$45,000 was set aside annually to provide schooling for those unable to afford a private school education.⁸¹

The Underwood Constitution

A state public school system similar to the one proposed by Jefferson a century earlier was established with the ratification of the Underwood Constitution in 1869.⁸² The Underwood Constitution provided for a state superintendent of public instruction elected by the General Assembly. It also provided for a State Board of Education, consisting of the Governor, attorney general, and chief state school officer that would regulate all matters involving the administration of the school system. The General Assembly was authorized to adopt compulsory attendance laws and to levy taxes for the support of schools.⁸³

⁷⁹ Jim B. Pearson and Edgar. Fuller, eds., *Education in the States: Historical Development and Outlook* (Washington, DC: National Education Association of the United States, 1969), 1290.

⁸⁰ Cornelius J. Heatwole, *A History of Education in Virginia* (Norwood, Massachusetts: Norwood Press, 1916), 104-108.

⁸¹ Friedl, 15.

⁸² Mullins, 28.

⁸³ J.L.Blair Buck, *The Development of Public Schools in Virginia: 1607-1952*. (Richmond, Virginia: Commonwealth of Virginia, 1952), 71.

William Henry Ruffner

William Henry Ruffner was chosen the First State Superintendent of Public Instruction under the Underwood Constitution. Heatwole regarded Ruffner as a wise choice for the position writing that:

Ruffner's work in inaugurating a public school system and overcoming the long, traditional prejudice of the people of Virginia against such a plan of education was a remarkable example of knowledge, wisdom, clear vision, and statesmanship.⁸⁴

However, upon his election to the post, some opponents of the new Underwood Constitution and its provisions for establishing a public school system came to view Ruffner as having neither the leadership ability nor the skills needed to implement the new system of public education.⁸⁵ Given the fierce opposition to the new plan, many felt Ruffner would not long subject himself to the difficulties surrounding the establishment of public schools in Virginia.

However, Ruffner wasted no time in dispelling assumptions to that effect. Upon his election, he rapidly delivered his plan for public schools to the General Assembly. Ruffner's plan outlined the duties of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in relation to the other officers of the public school system, along with the duties of the county superintendent and district trustees. It also stipulated the amount of money that should come from state funds, the county treasuries, and from taxes levied by the school districts. The plan further required public schools to provide free education to all persons between 5 and 21 years of age. This plan, submitted with a few modifications, was passed and signed by the governor on July 11, 1870.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Heatwole, 219.

⁸⁵ William A. Link, *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place: Schooling, Society, and Reform in Rural Virginia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 17.

⁸⁶ Pearson and Fuller, 1292.

Operating in an atmosphere of decided hostility, Ruffner spent much of his first year as state superintendent defending the new system. By 1872, remarks from county school superintendents indicated that the tide of public support was steadily shifting in favor of free public schools.⁸⁷ Ironically, the new system survived because of Ruffner's strong leadership and his convincing argument that public schools should and would not alter the established social and racial order.⁸⁸

The growth of public education during Ruffner's tenure was remarkable. At the close of the first year, 130,000 students were attending 2,900 schools under the direction of 3,000 teachers. By the end of the first decade under Ruffner's leadership, enrollment had jumped to 220,730 students.⁸⁹

The Underwood Constitution's Impact on Tazewell County

Pendleton stated that the speed of recovery and readjustment from the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction in Tazewell County was the result, in part, of the creation of the new free public schools.⁹⁰ Prior to the Constitution of 1870, the citizens of Tazewell County had relied entirely upon private schools for the education of their children. Schools could only be maintained within communities that were thickly populated and where the wealthiest citizens lived. In 1852, there were only 15 schoolhouses in the county, and all of them were housed in one-room buildings. Bickley felt that education during this era in Tazewell County was deficient.⁹¹ He described these 15 one-room schoolhouses as being "better suited for barns than seats of learning."

The Underwood Constitution and its provision for public schools did not provide for the establishment of public high schools. However, some rural school

⁸⁷ Buck, 74-77.

⁸⁸ Link, 18.

⁸⁹ Pearson and Fuller, 1292-1293.

⁹⁰ Pendleton, 657.

⁹¹ Bickley, 113.

districts were authorized, by special legislation, to establish and maintain secondary schools. These schools usually operated under the control of a group of trustees, with the school district's superintendent serving as a non-voting member. During the period of 1870-1886, at least five secondary schools were in operation in Tazewell County. Two of these were free schools established by special legislative acts of the General Assembly. However, secondary schools in Virginia would not come under the complete control of the public school system until 1906.⁹²

The office of superintendent of schools was established in Tazewell County as a result of the Underwood Constitution.⁹³ The Rev. Jonathon Lyons, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Jeffersonville, was appointed the first superintendent of Tazewell County Public Schools. Mullins contends that it was not unusual at the time of Lyons' appointment for the community's clergy to be among the best educated of its citizens.⁹⁴

In addition to the Underwood Constitution, the improvement of educational conditions in Tazewell County seemed to coincide with the change in the attitudes of citizens toward education. At first, the taxpayers were reluctant to pay taxes in support of common free schools and some were hesitant to send their children to these schools. When these attitudes changed, private schools were virtually abandoned, and the common purpose among citizens became that of promoting and supporting the free school system.⁹⁵

⁹² Raymond P.G. Bowman, "*Secondary Education in Virginia, 1870-1886*" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1937, 3.

⁹³ Ernestine H. Brewster, *Pocahontas: A Profile* (Tazewell, Virginia: Clinch Valley Printing Company, 1989

⁹⁴ Mullins, 29.

⁹⁵ Pendleton, 657.

The Development of Public High Schools

During State Superintendent Joseph W. Southall's administration⁹⁶, elementary schools continued to multiply rapidly and the demand for high schools increased.⁹⁷ Southall believed that public high schools should be accessible to the residents of every county.⁹⁸ He encouraged the establishment of more high schools as a means of increasing the opportunities for college preparation, and as a way to secure teachers for elementary schools from among the high school graduates.⁹⁹ However, at the turn of the century, the opportunities for a high school education were still extremely limited.¹⁰⁰

The Eggleston Administration

In 1906, Joseph D. Eggleston became State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Heatwole described Eggleston as demonstrating a rare combination of tact and leadership in his relationships with other political leaders in the state, allowing him to be highly effective in his work.¹⁰¹ Eggleston devoted much effort to the development of an adequate public high school system in Virginia.¹⁰² Consequently, Eggleston would see the number of high schools in the state grow from 75 in 1906 to over 388 by 1910.¹⁰³ Under Eggleston's guidance, the first course of study for high schools was published in 1906 and revised in 1910. The latter publication listed a minimum requirement in subjects and units for three grades of high school. The development of these early courses of study indicated a trend towards state-level leadership and guidance in the supervision and improvement of classroom instruction.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Southall was State Superintendent from March 1898, to February 1906.

⁹⁷ Buck, 129.

⁹⁸ Heatwole, 258.

⁹⁹ Buck, 129.

¹⁰⁰ Pearson and Fuller, 1293.

¹⁰¹ Heatwole, 324.

¹⁰² Buck, 142.

¹⁰³ Heatwole, 329-330.

¹⁰⁴ Pearson and Fuller, 1296.

The Growth of Public High Schools in Virginia

With sufficient funding, the number of high schools in Virginia grew rapidly. The passage of the Mann Act by the General Assembly in 1906 generated the funding necessary for public high schools to become a reality. The Mann Act earmarked \$50,000 annually for a special high school fund.¹⁰⁵ Link described this Act as not only promoting the growth of high schools in Virginia, but also establishing central control over them by making their support contingent on state involvement.¹⁰⁶ For example, to receive these funds, local high schools were required to implement a prescribed curriculum and to establish a fixed length of session.¹⁰⁷ This funding was also contingent upon whether local communities furnished adequate buildings and increased teacher's salaries.¹⁰⁸ The Act also gave state officials the power to inspect high schools annually.¹⁰⁹

Following the passage of the Mann Act, many communities demanded state funded high schools.¹¹⁰ Heatwole described the movement for establishing rural high schools as having more to do with increasing local taxation for school purposes than any other cause.¹¹¹ To assist the localities in defraying the cost it would take to build the needed facilities, the General Assembly passed the William Loan Fund Bill in 1908. The William Loan Fund Bill authorized local school boards to borrow money from the Literary Fund.¹¹² Counties and local school districts, at an annual rate of four percent, could borrow the funds to be repaid in

¹⁰⁵ Buck, 143.

¹⁰⁶ Link, 129.

¹⁰⁷ Link, 129-130.

¹⁰⁸ Heatwole, 324.

¹⁰⁹ Link, 30.

¹¹⁰ High schools were described as an absolute necessity to provide training for those students attending Normal Schools for teacher certification.

¹¹¹ Heatwole, 330.

¹¹² Buck, 144.

ten annual installments, for the purpose of erecting school buildings whose plans had been approved by the Department of Public Instruction.¹¹³

The growth of high schools in the state of Virginia is attested to by the statistical growth in the numbers of high schools, teachers, and students. With the funding provided by the state after 1906, the number of high schools increased rapidly for the next several years, at a rate of nearly 100 per year. By 1910, there were 388 high schools with a statewide enrollment of 15,323.¹¹⁴ In 1917-1918, there were a total of 522 public high schools with an enrollment of 27,107 students.¹¹⁵ However, of these 522 high schools, only 183 were accredited four-year schools. For the necessary improvements to be made, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Harris H. Hart decided to focus on the “quality” and not the “quantity” of high schools in Virginia. Throughout his administration, Dr. Hart sought to improve public high schools in Virginia by enacting statewide compulsory attendance laws, raising teacher certification standards,¹¹⁶ implementing an equivalency examination for graduates of unaccredited high schools who wished to attend college, and by decreasing the number of school districts in Virginia.¹¹⁷ Hart’s initiative to enact statewide compulsory attendance laws in Virginia improved overall school attendance. In 1925, school was made compulsory for all students between the ages of eight and fourteen that lived within a two-mile walk from the school or within a one-mile walk of bus transportation.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Heatwole, 324.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 329-331.

¹¹⁵ Buck, 239.

¹¹⁶ Mullins, 30-31. In 1917, Tazewell County had only 2 teachers with collegiate degrees. By 1928, that number had increased to 35 teachers.

¹¹⁷ Buck, 238. School Board Minutes, Tazewell County School Board, 10 August 1909. The unit law, passed in 1922, eliminated the district system and established uniformity in Tazewell County by having just one school board instead of three. Prior to the elimination of the district system, Tazewell County had three local school boards, one for each district. The Jeffersonville, Clearfork, and Maiden Spring districts all had local school board that appointed members to the Tazewell County School Board Committee, which would meet annually.

¹¹⁸ “Three New School Laws,” *Clinch Valley News*, 18 August 1925, 1.

By the end of the Hart administration in 1931, the number of accredited high schools in Virginia had increased to 464, and served a student population of 32,363.¹¹⁹ The growth of the high school during the Hart administration was clearly evident in Tazewell County. In 1917, there were 361 high school pupils enrolled with 34 graduates; in 1928 there were 676 high school pupils enrolled and 96 graduates.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 239. Harris H. Hart served as the Superintendent for Public Instruction in Virginia from 1918 to 1931. This is currently the longest tenure for a Superintendent of Schools in Virginia.

¹²⁰ "School Not in Such Bad Shape," *Clinch Valley News*, 25 January 1929, 1.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PIONEER ERA, 1882-1909

Early Life in a Mining Town

By 1883, the settlement of Pocahontas, Virginia was steadily growing.¹²¹ The mining settlement consisted of around 50 houses, company store, butcher shop, 10-pin bowling alley, newspaper, 100 coke ovens, a chapel, and about 40,000 tons of coal on the ground. The surplus of coal that had been stored there was awaiting the arrival of the first train.¹²²

Since coal was not always found near established communities, the mining town was created for the purpose of mining coal and housing the company miners.¹²³ The construction of these mining towns improved the quality of life for some natives who had before lived on the outskirts of civilization.¹²⁴ Conley described the coal camp or mining town as different from the average town.¹²⁵ Unlike earlier settlements, the mining town was constructed for the sole purpose of providing accommodations and pleasant living conditions for the employees of the company, railroad, or stores.¹²⁶ These settlements were labeled primary purpose or mining towns. Pocahontas, Virginia, originated as a primary purpose or mining town.¹²⁷ However, after 1890 it evolved into a lively service or multi-based town.¹²⁸ By then it was the largest town within a 50-mile radius.¹²⁹ George W.

¹²¹ The Town of Pocahontas, Virginia was the first town constructed in the Pocahontas coalfield region. The construction of mining towns began with Pocahontas in 1882, and ended with the construction of neighboring Bishop, Virginia during the early 1930s.

¹²² Shifflett, 49.

¹²³ P.M. Conley, *History of the West Virginia Coal Industry* (Charleston, WV: Education Foundation, INC, 1960), 74; Builder Levy, *Images of Appalachian Coalfields* (Philadelphia, PN: Temple University, 1989, 15. The development of mining towns and settlements increased rapidly during the 1880s. From 1880 to 1888, there were 15 new mining operations and 8 newly constructed mining towns.

¹²⁴ Hibbard, 15.

¹²⁵ Conley, 73.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 73.

¹²⁷ Gillenwater, 113.

¹²⁸ Service or multi-based towns were settlements whose primary function was to offer goods and services to surrounding towns. No mining towns in the coalfields were constructed to be service or multi-base towns.

¹²⁹ Gillenwater, 118.

Peterkin of the Episcopal Church, who visited Pocahontas, Virginia, in 1892, provided a detailed description of the developing town in the early 1890s:

I have rarely, if ever, seen a more busy place than Pocahontas, what, with six openings for coal, which they are working vigorously, piling up the coal in great stacks, and the building of many houses in the town, and preparing the bed for the railway, and building coke ovens, and straightening the course of a trouble-some run, and driving a tunnel for the railroad, and other things going on, they seem to be about as busy in Pocahontas as people get.¹³⁰

Gillenwater defined a mining town as an agglomeration of dwellings and other structures grouped around a mine.¹³¹ The housing, often provided by the coal company, was built for accommodations and not profit. In fact, after taxes, insurance, and necessary repairs, there was often a deficit.¹³² Many mines opened in unsettled areas with no existing homes or infrastructure. Therefore, coal operators were left with the responsibility of constructing towns and homes because they were the only ones with the capital and organization to perform the task.¹³³

The construction of mining towns began in the 1880s, peaked during the 1920s, and ended during the Great Depression.¹³⁴ Such a community was typically unincorporated, with the coal company owning the land on which the buildings were erected.¹³⁵ The majority of dwellings in Pocahontas were built by the coal company and occupied by its employees.¹³⁶ The company usually controlled aspects of the miner's daily life through such institutions as the company store, the

¹³⁰ Conley, 74.

¹³¹ Gillenwater, 39.

¹³² Conley, 75.

¹³³ Tams, 51.

¹³⁴ Shifflett, 33.

¹³⁵ Throughout the Pocahontas coalfield region, coal operators constructed the majority of mining settlements.

¹³⁶ Walker, 23.

church, the school, the post office, and even the burial grounds.¹³⁷ Corbin described many mining towns as having had a political system different from the American tradition of representative politics.¹³⁸ Since many traditional mining towns were unincorporated, there were no local political officials, no mayor, and no town council. Consequently, this allowed the coal operator power to govern completely in some mining towns.¹³⁹ However, Pocahontas was incorporated by the Virginia Legislature in the winter of 1884 and, with a political structure in place, failed to exhibit some of the authoritarian political characteristics of a typical mining town.¹⁴⁰

The Arrival of Immigrants in the Coalfields

The region was sparsely populated at the time that many of the mines throughout the region were being established. With the number of mining operations steadily increasing, coal operators had no choice but to look outside the region for workers. Many coal operators preferred immigrant labor because it was widely believed that they would be harder workers, more dependable, and easily controlled.¹⁴¹

In West Virginia, the first constitution provided for the appointment of an immigration officer who advertised the local work opportunities throughout Europe, and arranged for the transportation of foreign workers to the coalfield

¹³⁷ Gillenwater, 39.

¹³⁸ Corbin, 11. Dotson, 44. Dotson's study recommended that coal towns should be incorporated when large enough and that the citizens of the town should control their government. He stated that although it was unlikely that the government would be run as efficiently as it was under the control of the company, the principles of democracy would be practiced and instilled into its youth.

¹³⁹ Corbin illustrates that in many coal camps the coal operator banned newspapers critical of the coal establishment. In some camps, postal workers were considered company officials, and censored mail that might contain political or union propaganda.

¹⁴⁰ Haller, 9. Corbin, 11. Pocahontas has a mayor council organization of town government. A mayor, elected by the people, is the chief executive and official representative of the community. Eight citizens represent the law-making body.

¹⁴¹ Eller, 173.

regions.¹⁴² The current wave of immigration then being experienced by the United States also assisted in luring foreign workers to the coalfield areas. To attract these potential workers, coal companies sent labor agents to New York to greet immigrants who had just been processed through the Ellis Island Immigration Station.¹⁴³ The labor agents in New York took requests for workers from coal operators or from West Virginia State immigration officers. Upon arrival, large numbers of immigrants, usually of the same nationality, would be grouped and sent to a certain area or specific coalfield for employment.¹⁴⁴

To recruit the workers needed for the Pocahontas mines, labor agents went to Castle Garden, New York. There they found and employed hundreds of Hungarian, Swedish, and German miners. Upon arrival in Pocahontas, these immigrants were immediately put to work opening the Pocahontas Number 1 Mine by grading, clearing underbrush, and removing the tall timber that engulfed the town.¹⁴⁵ The majority of these new arrivals were Hungarian, and they brought with them many of their native customs.¹⁴⁶ Many of these customs are still prevalent in the town today.¹⁴⁷

Coal operators also recruited African-American laborers in order to supply the growing demand for miners. They were recruited by full-page ads in black publications promising no racial discrimination and a salary of two to five dollars a day.¹⁴⁸ Some African-Americans arrived to work on the railroad and stayed to work in the mines.¹⁴⁹ Others arrived when coal operators began to recruit in the

¹⁴² Conley, 81. The West Virginia State Board of Public Works appointed the immigration officers, but the coal companies paid salaries and expenses.

¹⁴³ Levy, 15.

¹⁴⁴ Gillenwater, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Jones, 17.

¹⁴⁶ Haller, 19.

¹⁴⁷ Upon arrival, many of the Hungarian immigrants held on to their native customs with hopes of returning to their homeland.

¹⁴⁸ Eller, 170.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 165.

southern states. Thus, the African-American population in the coalfields began to increase.¹⁵⁰

Native-born whites remained the principal source of mine labor in Southern Appalachia. These native born whites came from the mountains, while others came from the older coalfields to the north. Though at first they were reluctant to enter the mines, these native mountaineers would eventually account for the majority of miners employed in the region. Many local mountaineers hesitated to enter the mines and leave their former jobs or farms to take up such a hazardous occupation. However, personal necessity or the lure of “big money” eventually attracted them.¹⁵¹

Jews also arrived in the coalfield region spurred by economic motives. The first Jewish presence in the coalfield region was found in Pocahontas, Virginia. Once exploited in the sweatshops or forced to work as street peddlers, they migrated to the coalfields from the large eastern cities like New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston.¹⁵² They made their living there at the beginning of the coal boom as merchants, peddlers, and saloon owners.¹⁵³

The cultural diversity of the coalfields enabled these groups to more readily blend together. Thus, with the large groups of immigrants and native African-Americans arriving in the coalfields on almost a daily basis, such individuals established a definite and lasting presence in mining towns.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ In neighboring McDowell County, African-American miners accounted for 45 percent of the mining workforce.

¹⁵¹ Eller, 165-166.

¹⁵² “Jewish Merchants in the Coalfield,” *Goldenseal*, Spring 1990, 34.

¹⁵³ Deborah R. Weiner, “Middlemen of the Coalfields: The Role of Jews in the Economy of Southern West Virginia Coaltowns, 1890-1950,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, Spring 1998, 32.

¹⁵⁴ Shifflett, 67.

The Wild Frontier

Haller described life in the early days of the town as resembling the “wild frontier”.¹⁵⁵ It was not uncommon for local residents to hear the sound of gunfire in the streets or the loud voices of drinkers and carousers at night.¹⁵⁶ Pocahontas became known for its saloons, or “blind tigers.”¹⁵⁷ Lathrop described in her letters the fear that often plagued early residents at night:

Paydays were always rather hectic, or rather the nights were, for by that time, the men had visited the saloons on the outskirts of the town, and were using their firearms in the most reckless way. I have frequently gone into a closet fearing a stray bullet would come through the window when some man was going past “shooting wild” as they called it.¹⁵⁸

Men came from all over to “stock up” on whiskey, filling their jugs to transport back home.¹⁵⁹ Those who did not arrive in town on a horse or mule did so by passenger train.¹⁶⁰ These trains were usually overcrowded with men who would “stampede” and “deluge” the saloons upon arrival.¹⁶¹

Opposition to the indiscriminate sale of whiskey came from citizens throughout the town who wished for a peaceful and stable environment. The local newspaper, the *Pocahontas Headlight* denounced the custom of frivolously selling alcohol. Week after week, various papers condemning the practice published editorials and news articles.¹⁶² Finally, the Virginia General Assembly passed a

¹⁵⁵ Haller, 9.

¹⁵⁶ “Pocahontas No. 1 Retires,” 1955, 524.

¹⁵⁷ There were no licensed saloons in Tazewell County or neighboring Mercer and McDowell Counties. These counties were dry. However, alcohol was sold in Pocahontas, Virginia. The town’s liquor establishments were called “blind tigers”.

¹⁵⁸ Lathrop, 37.

¹⁵⁹ “Pocahontas Pickings,” *Clinch Valley News*, 7 April 1916, 1. The *Clinch Valley News* reported that three men actually walked 84 miles to Pocahontas to get a supply of liquor. They walked back carrying two gallons each.

¹⁶⁰ There were two scheduled trains per day – one in the morning and one in the evening.

¹⁶¹ Jones, 71.

¹⁶² “Will Pocahontas Put Liquor on the Bum,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 26 August 1905, 1. “Pocahontas Pastors and the Saloons,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 3 March 1906, 1.

special law allowing the Town of Pocahontas, Virginia, to grant licenses to regular saloon dealers. With the additional revenue, the town was able to finance a police force. With the presence of a police force and the regulation of saloons, Pocahontas settled down to become a law-abiding town.¹⁶³

During the 1890s, over 75 stores, restaurants, and saloons developed, and were concentrated along Center Street. The population was 2,953, and Pocahontas was the largest town within a 50-mile radius.¹⁶⁴ By 1890, Pocahontas had become a service town specializing in entertainment.¹⁶⁵ There were at least 65 saloons and houses of prostitution operating in the town, with many located along Center Street.¹⁶⁶

Saloons characterized the earlier days of coal mining when drinking and gambling was common among the young single males who dominated the first generation miners.¹⁶⁷ The ratio of single to married men had a major impact on the character of town life. Thus, the higher concentration of unmarried males and the prevalence of drinking and gambling provided a greater chance that common disagreements would lead to outbreaks of violence.¹⁶⁸

Hibbard described early miners as heavy drinkers.¹⁶⁹ Saloons in the coalfields ran a profitable business thanks to these miners.¹⁷⁰ Shifflett indicated that the consumption of alcohol was a common practice in many mining towns during the pioneer phase of development because of the high concentration of unmarried males and the difficult working conditions in the mines.¹⁷¹ Saloons in

¹⁶³ Haller, 9.

¹⁶⁴ United States Department of Interior, Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States 1890*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891), 388.

¹⁶⁵ Gillenwater, 119.

¹⁶⁶ Haller, 9.

¹⁶⁷ Shifflett, 162.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 174.

¹⁶⁹ Hibbard, 27.

¹⁷⁰ Corbin, 35.

¹⁷¹ Shifflett, 174.

the coalfields offered a temporary escape from the harsh environment of the mines.¹⁷² Consequently, coal operators were early supporters of prohibition. Coal operators perceived that liquor not only lowered moral standards in the camps, but also increased accidents and decreased production in the mines.¹⁷³

By World War I, the growth of families throughout the coal field region would greatly diminish the “wild frontier” image promoted by the frequency of gambling and excessive drinking.¹⁷⁴ In 1914, the State of Virginia voted for prohibition by an overwhelming majority.¹⁷⁵ On April 29, 1916, the saloons in Pocahontas closed their doors.¹⁷⁶ Although there were fears that the loss of revenue caused by the closing of the saloons would reduce the nine-month school term, the town managed to attract new businesses and the school term was never affected.¹⁷⁷

The Company Store and its Role in a Mining Town

Historians considered the company store the center of community life in a coal town.¹⁷⁸ It was the focal point of economic and social activity and a place for residents of the coal town to shop and converse with neighbors.¹⁷⁹

Corbin considered the company store as having the greatest drain upon a miner’s wages. He viewed the company store as a mechanism for the local coal company’s attempt to secure “monopolistic control” of food, clothing, tools, and

¹⁷² Corbin, 37.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 36.

¹⁷⁴ Shifflett, 174.

¹⁷⁵ “Virginia is Dry By a Big Majority,” *Clinch Valley News*, 25 September 1914, 1. “Virginia Votes Dry by an Overwhelming Majority,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 23 September 1914, 1. The prohibition issue carried by a large majority even in Pocahontas where at the time there were 26 saloons-about 1 saloon for every 8-10 voters.

¹⁷⁶ “Drought Coming to Pocahontas,” *Clinch Valley News*, 18 February 1916, 1. “Pocahontas and Future Prospects,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 30 April 1916, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 6. “Pocahontas to Have a Full School Term,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 16 March 1915, 3. “Drought on May 1st,” *Clinch Valley News*, 10 March 1916. A State Senator from Marion, Virginia commented that Pocahontas would have to close its schools if this legislation deprived the community of \$22,000 in revenue. However, State Senator Royal from Tazewell argued that the Bill was necessary and called Pocahontas a “veritable hell on earth” where murder was a common occurrence. The Anti-Saloon League of Virginia offered to put up the money needed to continue school operations for a full term if the Town’s revenue decreased due to prohibition.

¹⁷⁸ Corbin, 33; Eller, 188; Shifflett, 178.

¹⁷⁹ Eller, 188.

powder. It was common for prices in the company store to be high. Wage increases for the miner were often offset by price increases in the company store.¹⁸⁰

However, Tams, who was himself a coal operator, defended the company store by saying that the mining towns needed the infrastructure in order to survive in the wilderness atmosphere that surrounded most early mining towns. He wrote that miners needed food, clothing, and supplies, and there were no stores within a reasonable distance. Thus, the coal operators were the only ones with the capital to supply those needs.¹⁸¹ Still, it is a widely accepted belief that coercion, the scrip system, and distances from other markets forced the miner to trade at the company store.¹⁸²

In February 1884, the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company built a company store on the corner of Water and Center Street.¹⁸³ Drosick described the company store as the “heart of the town.”¹⁸⁴ It was the gathering place for the people in Pocahontas.¹⁸⁵ There, the miner could purchase anything from the cradle to the grave.¹⁸⁶ The store had available food, clothing, furniture, appliances, and a shop to purchase tools and supplies.¹⁸⁷ The clothing store sold the latest in brand name fashion: Arrow and Manhattan shirts, Bostonian shoes, and a Hartz, Schaffner, and Marx representative was available upon request to provide tailor-

¹⁸⁰ Corbin, 33.

¹⁸¹ Tams, 51-52.

¹⁸² Corbin, 33.

¹⁸³ Gillenwater, 118.

¹⁸⁴ Edna M. Drosick. Interviewed by the author, 10 March 2000, interview 2, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, WV, 7.

¹⁸⁵ Louise Leslie, *Tazewell County* (Radford, VA: Commonwealth Press, INC., 1982), 49.

¹⁸⁶ The company store operated the cemetery and offered for sale coffins, caskets, and other funeral services.

¹⁸⁷ Evelyn Brooks Dodge, Ed., *We Remember Pocahontas, Virginia*, by the John W. Brooks Family and Paul Fern, 1996. Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, WV, 14-15. It wasn't uncommon for families to get monthly supplies to cover their basic needs from the company store.

made suits.¹⁸⁸ The company also had a resident buyer in New York City to purchase items requested by patrons of the company store.¹⁸⁹

Pocahontas does not seem to have suffered from the “monopolistic prices” that some historians have written about. Merchandise found in the company store at Pocahontas was sold at nationally advertised prices.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, Shifflett wrote that some coal towns had multiple commercial enterprises. In other words, the company store was not the only moneymaking establishment.¹⁹¹ There was also competition from local stores within the vicinity.¹⁹² Thus, since Pocahontas developed into a service town, there were other stores within the community that sold the same products at competitive prices.

In the early years of mining in Pocahontas, there were reports of subtle coercion by the coal company to shop at the company store. However, coal operators refuted these claims indicating that employees were not compelled to deal at the company store.¹⁹³ The coal company often linked the miner to the company store through the use of scrip and credit.¹⁹⁴ Most company stores used the scrip system. Scrip was a form of currency issued by the coal company. In some coal camps, scrip was issued as wages.¹⁹⁵ Conley described scrip as a convenience for the miner. He writes that miners were paid every two weeks, and law required this to be in legal tender. Scrip was issued between paydays against wages earned, and only upon the request of the miner.¹⁹⁶ In Pocahontas, if the miner waited until

¹⁸⁸ Dodge, 15.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 16.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 15.

¹⁹¹ Shifflett, 188.

¹⁹² Ibid, 184.

¹⁹³ Frank Harman, “A Review of the Pocahontas Strike and its Causes from the Operators’ Standpoint: With a Reply By Junius, 1896”, p. 2, Special Collections, Carol Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

¹⁹⁴ Levy, 17.

¹⁹⁵ Shifflett, 180.

¹⁹⁶ Conley, 78.

payday they were paid in United States currency, and if they asked for an advance then they received scrip.¹⁹⁷

The company store extended credit to miners in difficult times.¹⁹⁸ Many historians believe that the company store's use of this credit expanded the company's control over its labor force.¹⁹⁹ In many coal towns, research also indicates that the miner paid only in scrip were forced to pay "monopolistic prices" for their purchases.²⁰⁰ However, in Pocahontas, other business establishments accepted scrip. Unfortunately, trading with scrip at these other businesses usually meant accepting the policy of having to take a cut, usually 10 percent on the dollar in value.²⁰¹ However, this did not discourage many miners from shopping at these other stores. Though many historians view the company store as controlling its labor force through the use of scrip and the extension of credit, it appears that a coal company employee in Pocahontas could choose the amount of indebtedness he would incur at the company store.

Early Mining in Pocahontas, Virginia

The high quality of Pocahontas coal was well known throughout the world. The bituminous coal mined from these seams had a low degree of ash, sulfur, and other impurities, with a high percentage of carbon and a high calorific value. The thickest seam in the region was found in the Pocahontas Number 1 mine,²⁰² where the seam of coal ranged from ten feet to more than twenty feet thick in some

¹⁹⁷ Dodge, 14.

¹⁹⁸ Conley, 78.

¹⁹⁹ Credit was also extended to the miner by the company store during difficult economic times.

²⁰⁰ Shifflett, 180.

²⁰¹ Dodge, 14.

²⁰² At one time you could enter the Pocahontas Number One mine and travel 10 miles back into the mountain. Over 2880 acres of coal were mined there.

places. Another important characteristic of the Pocahontas Number 1 seam's coal was its superior coking qualities.²⁰³

During the early days, mining was done with black powder, a pick, a shovel, and mules.²⁰⁴ Shifflett referred to this period as the “Hand-loading Era” of coal mining.²⁰⁵ The cycle included undercutting, drilling, blasting, and loading the coal.²⁰⁶ The hand-loading era of mining lasted from the opening of the mines until the 1930s, when mechanical coal loaders were introduced. At the Pocahontas mines, the coal vein was near enough to the surface for the coal to be reached by tunnels.²⁰⁷ There were three mine openings: the East mine on one side of a small stream called Coal Branch, and on the other side of the mine were the West and Baby mines, which connected.²⁰⁸ The mine sections were named by the miners and included such colorful names as: “California”, “Hell’s Half Acre”, “Wheel of Fortune”, “Brooklyn”, “Gibraltar”, and “Africa”.²⁰⁹

Shifflett described the early mines as competitive places where time and production determined earnings, status, and social mobility.²¹⁰ Inside the mines, the “room and pillar” technique was the standard method of drift mining.²¹¹ This method required each miner to be paid based on the amount of coal that he mined each day. Each miner had a room where he would tunnel into the coal seam. “Rooms” were as high as the seams of coal, and had a width of 24 feet. Miners would make three or four-foot cuts into the mine, bore holes into the face, and load

²⁰³ Gillenwater, 17-18. Coke is the hard residue left after the most volatile elements in coal are driven off. It is used as a reducing agent in the smelting of pig iron and as a fuel. At one time there were over 200 coking ovens in Pocahontas, Virginia.

²⁰⁴ “Pocahontas No. 1 Retires” 1955, 524.

²⁰⁵ Shifflett, 85.

²⁰⁶ Eller, 178.

²⁰⁷ This type of mine is known as a drift mine. In a drift mine, a worker would walk through a tunnel to his workspace.

²⁰⁸ Jones, 18.

²⁰⁹ “Pocahontas No. 1 Retires” 1955, 525.

²¹⁰ Shifflett, 85.

²¹¹ Tams, 36.

the hole with black powder. After the right amount of powder was applied to the hole, a one to two-foot fuse was hung outside. When the fuse was lit, the miner yelled, “fire in the hole”, and the coal was broken down into manageable pieces by the subsequent explosion.²¹² The miner then loaded his car full of coal. A brass “check” bearing the miner’s payroll number was placed in the bottom of the car. Mules from underground stables were then used to haul the coal car from the mines. A “check man” at the tipple would weigh the coal, and the check was removed, allowing for crediting of the tonnage to the appropriate miner.²¹³ Then, the cycle of undercutting, drilling, blasting, and loading for the miner would begin again.

A drift mine was a dangerous place to work. The labor conditions there were cramped, difficult, unpleasant, and constantly changing. Coal miners worked in the dark, standing in pools of cold water, performing tasks over long hours in constant danger and uncertainty.²¹⁴ Oftentimes, fatigue caused miners to disregard caution and safety. The early miner was paid based on the coal mined for that day.²¹⁵ Since miners were not paid to secure the safety of their work areas, their efforts were usually concentrated on coal production.²¹⁶ In 1889, a miner employed by the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company made \$1.05 a day plus 75 cents per car of 2.5 tons.²¹⁷

The threat of falling coal, rocks and “widow makers”²¹⁸ from above and the potential for explosions of methane gas and coal dust placed the miner’s life in

²¹² The placement of the hole and the amounts of black powder used were important to the miner's productivity for the day. Too little and the coal chunks would be too large causing the miner additional work. Too much and there would be an excess of slack- a fine coal for which the miner received no compensation. Too much powder would also weaken the roof of the mine.

²¹³ Eller, 178.

²¹⁴ In spite of these conditions, many miners spoke fondly of their work.

²¹⁵ The salary amounted to an average of two dollars a day. These wages varied from mine to mine.

²¹⁶ Shifflett, 101.

²¹⁷ Ross Weeks, Jr. *Virginia's Tazewell County: A Last Great Place* (North Tazewell, VA: Clinch Valley Printing, 2000), 202.

²¹⁸ “Widow makers” were petrified tree trunks found in the roofs of coalmines.

constant danger.²¹⁹ Workers disabled from mine accidents were evicted from company houses. When a miner was killed, his family had no choice but to move from the coal town.²²⁰ Edna Drosick, a local historian, described how her mother and six children were forced to move out of their home in Pocahontas and relocate to Kentucky after a slate fall claimed the life of her mother's first husband:

Then, when a husband was killed in the mines and their wasn't a son to take his place, you were not permitted to stay in the coal company's house. They (coal company) just loaded up my mother, the body, and children, and sent them back to Kentucky.²²¹

Although mine explosions accounted for a small fraction of miners killed, they were more often publicized than the daily fatalities that came from falling slate or coal. One of the worst of these mine explosions occurred in Pocahontas, Virginia on March 13, 1884.

The Pocahontas Mine Explosion, 1884

Eller described the most feared and well publicized mine accidents as being those explosions that sometimes killed dozens and even hundreds of men.²²² Shifflett related mine explosions to dramatic events that riveted the nation's attention.²²³ Although most of the drift mines of the Appalachian coalfields were free of natural gas, the accumulation of methane gas and coal dust was a dangerous by-product of coal mining.²²⁴

One of the worst disasters in Virginia's mining history occurred in Pocahontas, Virginia, on March 13, 1884. At around 1:20 A.M., five loud explosions were heard coming from the East Mine.²²⁵ There, a methane gas and

²¹⁹ Shifflett, 50.

²²⁰ Levy, 16.

²²¹ Drosick, 2000, 2.

²²² Eller, 179.

²²³ Shifflett, 103.

²²⁴ Eller, 179. James Elliot Vawter, "Discussion of the Methods of Mining in the Pocahontas Coalfield" (B.S. Thesis, Virginia Tech, June 1910), 4.

²²⁵ Shifflett, 102.

dust explosion had claimed the lives of the entire night shift, and turned the site into an inferno. One hundred and fourteen miners had perished.²²⁶ Like a cork in a champagne bottle, a doomed steam engine and its cars shot from the mine, catapulting its engineer 100 yards to his death. The scorched countryside was covered with a half inch of coal dust.²²⁷

Consequently, a fire that followed these explosions prevented any immediate rescue attempt to recover the bodies or look for survivors. To extinguish the fire, all entrances were closed and the mine was flooded. Meanwhile, relatives of the deceased organized public rallies at the local church to pressure company officials into opening the mine so that the bodies could be recovered and a proper burial could be provided for their dead.²²⁸ After two weeks, the mine was drained, and recovery teams began to search for the deceased.²²⁹ The bodies of the miners were found both in groups and alone. The positions of their bodies indicated that their death had been quick and unexpected. Many of the miners died during their dinner break. As Haller would later say of the explosion: “The Giant had destroyed the creatures that were tearing at his vitals.”²³⁰

The investigation that followed determined that the explosion was probably caused by a miner’s open lamp that had ignited a small amount of methane gas, which in turn set off a large quantity of coal dust.²³¹ Though *The Virginias*,²³² which reported on the accident, did not draw a conclusion on the cause of the

²²⁶ Local residents later claimed that over 150 miners had died in that accident. The Pocahontas Cemetery, a Virginia Historical Landmark, was first utilized after this explosion. Annually, on the last Saturday in April, the miners killed in this explosion are honored with a candlelight ceremony in the cemetery.

²²⁷ “The Pocahontas Coal Mine Explosion”, *The Virginias*, 1884, 1-2.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1. During one of these rallies, an attractive daughter to one of the deceased miners offered to marry any man that would lead a recovery team into the mine. When she failed to get a response, she called them all cowards and left in frustration.

²²⁹ Haller, 9.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²³¹ Eller, 179.

²³² *The Virginias* edited and published by Jed Hotchkiss, was a magazine devoted to the mining and industrial development of Virginia and West Virginia. The magazine published a detailed account of the 1884 mine explosion soon after the accident.

disaster at the mines, the magazine did publish a statement to the effect that most mining accidents occurred as a result of miner negligence.²³³ The following passage was written:

The known causes of explosions and fires in mines are very numerous. Accidents most of them are called, but they are generally the result of willful and inexcusable carelessness or of stupid and surprising ignorance on the part of the miners; violation of the known rules of the mine and the repeated caution of those in charge.²³⁴

Though there seems to be no connection existing between the establishment of schools in Pocahontas and this tragic mining accident, Corbin believed that such catastrophes and mishaps created a desire for a more literate workforce. Thus, this desire, among other reasons, would secure the coal companies' support of schools throughout much of the coalfield region.²³⁵

Early Schools in Pocahontas, Virginia

Corbin wrote that the coal company's interest in education was derived from the need for a literate workforce to reduce accidents, to increase productivity, and to reduce mobility.²³⁶ Eller indicated that traditional institutions for social stability, such as schools and churches, came late to early mining communities. Early coal operators were less likely to invest in establishing and upgrading the educational system since most of the early miners were single men. As the industry matured, a more family-based labor force arrived. This created pressure for coal operators to establish schools and churches.²³⁷ However, it wasn't long after the settlement of Pocahontas that the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company contributed to the addition of institutions such as schools and churches.

²³³ On the contrary, Shifflett's opinion was that the early mining system of compensation was to be partially blamed for accidents and catastrophes. Shifflett writes that the miners did not always use the safety knowledge they had because the system did not pay them for time spent to insure the enforcement of safety measures.

²³⁴ "The Pocahontas Mine Explosion", *The Virginias*, 1884, 1-2.

²³⁵ Corbin, 70.

²³⁶ Ibid, 70.

²³⁷ Eller, 187.

In the mining town, the coal company would often provide the land, the building, and the supplies for school operations.²³⁸ The deduction of an educational fee from the miner's monthly wages financed some this process.²³⁹ This was typically known as making contributions "over the payroll."²⁴⁰ Contributions from the miners "over the payroll" supported the construction and operation of the first church and schoolhouse in Pocahontas, Virginia.²⁴¹ The coal company required these contribution.

The first church was established in 1884.²⁴² The church belonged to the company and all denominations were represented. Each employee made a contribution "over the payroll" to pay for its construction. In the same year, the Christ Episcopal Church was organized as a mission of the Pulaski Parish. The Reverend Benjamin F. Dennis, an Episcopal Priest, held services in the company church building. The church was shared with the Baptists and the Methodists. Since most of the officers in the company were Episcopalian, the company did much to aid in the development of the church. Since there were no provisions at this time for a public school in Pocahontas, the church elected to establish a parish school. The company supported these endeavors to establish schooling for the youth of the community. In 1885, one of the officers, Mr. C.H. Clark,²⁴³ of Philadelphia, gave the Episcopal Church a tract of land to build a church and a parish school.²⁴⁴ A log cabin schoolhouse was built with financial assistance from

²³⁸ Tams, 52.

²³⁹ Eller, 187.

²⁴⁰ Charles T. Davis, *Autobiography of Charles Thomas Davis: and a History of the Town of Pocahontas, Virginia and Pocahontas Fuel Company* (Chattanooga, TN: Bryant Printery, 1948), 6; Davis was an African-American who worked in Pocahontas, Virginia for the Pocahontas Fuel Company for over 58 years.

²⁴¹ Davis, 6. Dotson, 34. Dotson's study indicated that in the mining communities of Kentucky, the coal company taxed men "over the payroll" to secure additional funds for operating schools, extending the school term, or to supplement the regular course of study.

²⁴² Haller, 25.

²⁴³ C.H. Clark and family were principle stockholders of the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company.

²⁴⁴ Pocahontas Self Study-Evaluation, II, 11. Tazewell County Deed Book #25, 578 (Tazewell, VA: Tazewell County Court House).

Mr. Clark, and was appropriately titled the C.H. Clark School.²⁴⁵ An apartment was built in the upstairs loft of the cabin to accommodate the teacher.²⁴⁶ The school's location was on the upper end of West Water Street.²⁴⁷ Episcopal diocesan records reveal that 30 children were enrolled in the log cabin schoolhouse in 1887. Miss Luella Armstrong was the first teacher. These records indicate that in 1890, 34 children attended the parish school. The records go on to show that the last mention of the parish school was in 1895.²⁴⁸ Since the diocesan record of the church indicates that the Reverend Henry S. Lancaster last mentioned the parish school in a report in 1895, it may be assumed that the responsibility for the school passed from the church to the public sometime between 1895 and the turn of the century.²⁴⁹ By 1912, it was reported that the "old log school" had outlived its usefulness and was falling in decay.²⁵⁰ In 1913, an exchange of properties between the Pocahontas Consolidated Collieries Company and the Christ Episcopal Church resulted in the church and the school building being relocated to the corner of East Water and Moore Street.²⁵¹ The structure was disassembled. Each log was numbered with red paint so that the cabin could be reassembled.²⁵² The church restored the log structure at its new location, and the school was converted into an attractive rectory.²⁵³

Although information regarding the parish school is somewhat limited, Haller emphasized its importance. She expressed that "no work of the Church has ever been of as much value to the town as its parish school."²⁵⁴ Williams described

²⁴⁵ Haller, 25.

²⁴⁶ Weeks, 223.

²⁴⁷ Davis, 6.

²⁴⁸ Haller, 25.

²⁴⁹ Pocahontas Self Study-Evaluation, II, 12.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

²⁵¹ "Log School House Link to the Past," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 10 August 1913, 6.

²⁵² Drosick, 2000, 2.

²⁵³ Haller, 29.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 25.



The C.H. Clark School was a log cabin parish school established by the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company and the Christ Episcopal Church. In 1913, the school was disassembled and moved to its present location on East Water Street. The log cabin school stands today as a historic landmark in Pocahontas. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Virginia)

an early episcopal education as consisting of biblical instruction, imparting of a moral code, regular worship, and participating in the school community. The religious elements were assumed to be relevant to the total education of the child.²⁵⁵ However, Weeks described the affiliation of the church in Pocahontas to be nominal with most of the expenses borne by the coal company.²⁵⁶ The log cabin rectory stands today as a historic landmark in Pocahontas.

The first public school in Pocahontas was established in a building that was commonly referred to as the 6:30 Hall.²⁵⁷ This building was located on the corner of East Water and Moore Street across from the Christ Episcopal Church. Its name was derived from the many dances and community socials that were held there.²⁵⁸ The building was shared with the Town of Pocahontas, and was home to Pocahontas High School prior to the 1909-1910 school year. In October 1909, the students were moved from the 6:30 Hall into the newly constructed brick building overlooking the town at the top of East Water Street.²⁵⁹

When the public school was no longer in operation there, the 6:30 Hall eventually became known as the Athletic Club Hall. There the school and community hosted many of their athletic events.²⁶⁰ Prior to the construction of a gymnasium at the high school, the athletic teams at Pocahontas High School used the Athletic Club Hall. Later, when the new high school gymnasium was completed, the building was no longer needed. Therefore, the Athletic Club Hall was dismantled and the wood was used to build the duplex home that sits on that site today.²⁶¹

²⁵⁵ John Page Williams, *A History of Church Schools in the Diocese of Virginia Volume 1: The Working Out of a Partnership, 1920-1950* (Richmond, VA: Church Schools in the Diocese of Virginia, 1999), 3-5.

²⁵⁶ Weeks, 223.

²⁵⁷ Brewster, 128.

²⁵⁸ "Pocahontas Pickings," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 4 May 1913, 7.

²⁵⁹ "Pocahontas Day by Day," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 27 October 1909, 2.

²⁶⁰ "Pocahontas Pickings," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 28 December 1911, 3.

²⁶¹ Brewster, 128.



The 6:30 Hall housed the first public school in Pocahontas, Virginia. The building was later used for athletic contests. Its name was derived from the dances and other social events that were held there during the evenings.

Segregation in the Coalfields

Many historians believe that the coal operator attempted to create a “judicious mixture” of white, African-American, and foreign miners. However, this did not prevent racial or ethnic conflict. It only meant that each group would receive equal pay, equal work, similar housing, rental fees, and educational opportunities.²⁶² Segregation existed throughout the southern coal fields. In the coal mines, the lack of management positions for African-Americans was the primary form of job segregation.²⁶³ However, it was far different from that of the northern coal fields where mining operators maintained the policy of exclusion and refused to hire African-American workers.²⁶⁴

Segregation did not exist in the Pocahontas mines. There, whites, African-Americans, and foreign coal miners worked together in harmony. Carter described all the workers as looking the same when they came out of the coal mines.²⁶⁵ However, there was very little mixing in daily life.²⁶⁶ Segregation did exist in the Pocahontas community as it did throughout much of the South. African-Americans and some foreign immigrants were not permitted to enter the social institutions designed for the white population.²⁶⁷ In the local theater, an African-American would be permitted to enter through the same door as whites. However, they were forced to sit in the balcony seats while the white patrons sat below.²⁶⁸ In

²⁶² Connie L. Rice, “The ‘Separate but Equal Schools of Monongalia County’s Mining Communities,’” *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, Fall 1996, 323.

²⁶³ Price Van Meter Fishback, “Employment Conditions of Blacks in the Coal Industry, 1900-1930” (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1983), 3.

²⁶⁴ Corbin, 68.

²⁶⁵ Deloris Carter. Interviewed by the author, 21 April 2000, interview 5, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, WV, 4.

²⁶⁶ Around 1905, African-Americans were disfranchised under the provisions of the Town’s constitution.

²⁶⁷ Shifflett, 64.

²⁶⁸ Carter considered this ironic considering that the best seats in the movie house were found in the balcony.

restaurants, African-Americans were allowed to order food and beverages, but were not allowed to eat on the premises.²⁶⁹

As for schooling, the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company assisted in the construction of two schoolhouses there, one for the white children and one for the African-American children.²⁷⁰ Gillenwater's study reflects that it was typical for most mining towns to be designed with separate facilities for white and African-American schoolchildren.²⁷¹ Historians have contended that these facilities were separate but not equal.²⁷² Davis wrote that in Pocahontas there were no public places that did not make the same provisions to accommodate African-Americans.²⁷³ However, Carter pointed out that the African-American school had an outdoor toilet and lacked many of the supplies and athletic equipment that the white students took for granted.

There was a time when we used to roll up paper to make balls and take a stick or branch to play baseball. We also used empty cans to play football. We fixed the cans so that they would not cut us. We also shot marbles at the playground behind the school.²⁷⁴

A recent study by Rice indicated that African-American schools were often unequal with white schools throughout the coalfields in such areas as facilities, materials, curriculum, discipline, teacher qualifications, teacher/student ratio, and supervision.²⁷⁵

The first African-American school was constructed on the lower end of Water Street. The African-American coal miners made contributions "over the payroll" for the building of a one room school. This practice continued long after

²⁶⁹ Carter, 2000, 4.

²⁷⁰ Lathrop, 36.

²⁷¹ Gillenwater, 97.

²⁷² Rice, 324.

²⁷³ Davis, 10.

²⁷⁴ Carter, 2000, 3.

²⁷⁵ Rice, 324.

the construction was complete. At the miner's request, contributions continued for the benefit of the school.²⁷⁶ Coal companies would match the contributions made by the miners and then retain ownership of the establishment to ensure its proper use.²⁷⁷

Education was important to the African-American coal miners as it provided them with a sense of dignity and pride that made it possible for them to co-exist with whites on a relatively equal basis. The adopted curriculum provided African-Americans with knowledge of their black heritage.²⁷⁸ Carter recalled African-Americans in Pocahontas as being especially proud of their heritage:

The black people in Pocahontas were poor but proud. We were always being taught black history in schools, homes, and churches. During Black History Week, the students recited speeches and songs reflecting our African-American heritage were sung. We celebrated our black history, and our heritage was taught everywhere.²⁷⁹

Later, a larger four-room brick building was constructed to meet the needs of a growing African-American student population.²⁸⁰ The miner's deductions were increased to pay for the new building's construction. Upon completion, Tazewell County Public Schools committed to providing funding for two teachers, though the miners had requested three teachers. Thus, the contributions from the miners continued, and a third teacher was added at their own expense.²⁸¹ In 1894, the land and building were transferred from the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company to the trustees of the African-American school for the sum of \$1.00.²⁸² Eventually, the contributions from the miners stopped, and the building was turned over to

²⁷⁶ Davis, 3.

²⁷⁷ Eller, 187.

²⁷⁸ Corbin, 72.

²⁷⁹ Carter, 2000, 3. Carter, a retired teacher, attended the African-American elementary in Pocahontas from 1946-1950.

²⁸⁰ This school became later known as the Pocahontas Graded School.

²⁸¹ Davis, 4.

²⁸² Tazewell County Deed Book #36, 567 (Tazewell, Virginia: Tazewell County Courthouse).

Tazewell County Public Schools. From the time the contributions stopped, Tazewell County Public Schools appeared to assume responsibility for the education of African-American schoolchildren in Pocahontas.²⁸³

Rice's study revealed that African-American students in coal mining communities found it difficult to continue their education beyond grade school. Local school districts would not provide transportation for students wanting to attend secondary school outside their respective areas.²⁸⁴ In Virginia, access to secondary schools for an African-American student was disproportionate to the opportunities provided for whites. In 1920, all but three counties in Virginia had high school facilities. However, only 16 counties in Virginia had high school facilities for African-Americans. Link described the lack of secondary opportunities for blacks in Virginia as "discriminatory" and the "clearest indicator of the baneful consequences of the Jim Crow laws." White educational reformers rationalized this "unequal treatment" by remarking that African-Americans did not require the sophisticated education offered by the high school.²⁸⁵

Prior to 1939, some African-American students who attended the Pocahontas Graded School completed their education at the conclusion of the seventh grade. Then, a graduation and promotion ceremony was held at the Community Methodist Church for all students. However, most African-American students who wished to continue their secondary education would walk or provide their own transportation to neighboring Bramwell, West Virginia.²⁸⁶

Tazewell County High School was constructed for African-American students to complete their secondary education in 1939. The six-room building was located in Bluefield, Virginia. African-American students from all over Tazewell

²⁸³ Davis, 4.

²⁸⁴ Rice, 330.

²⁸⁵ Link, 189.

²⁸⁶ Carter, 2000, 6.

County and neighboring Bland County attended school there.²⁸⁷ Bus transportation from Pocahontas was provided by the Tazewell County Public Schools.²⁸⁸ The bus ride was often difficult during the winter months. Carter recalled the bus being cold and the road to Bluefield being slick and dangerous.²⁸⁹

Tazewell County High School was eventually expanded to include 12 classrooms, a music room, a library, and a combination auditorium and gymnasium. The school closed in 1965 when all of Tazewell County Public Schools integrated.²⁹⁰

The African-American population arrived in Pocahontas to work in the mines where they would be paid higher wages than was found elsewhere. As in other Southern communities, they had developed their own interests, churches, and schools. However, with the closing of the mines in Pocahontas, the majority of the African-American population left. Despite this decline, a new segregated elementary school was built in the mid-1950s. The school was a five-room building with bathrooms and an office. An average of around 100 children was enrolled there in seven grades until the school was integrated with Pocahontas Elementary School.²⁹¹ After integration in 1965, the school housed both the white and African American school children in Pocahontas until the facility was closed in 1971. The building was then used as an industrial arts complex for the high school from 1972 until 1991.

In conclusion, African-American schooling in Pocahontas was well supported by both the parents and the African-American community. The Town of Pocahontas provided the school with a yearly donation, usually to pay for a full

²⁸⁷ Tazewell County Historical Society, *Tazewell County Heritage Vol. 1: Tazewell County, Virginia 1799-1995* (Summersville, WV: Walsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 39.

²⁸⁸ Brewster, 128.

²⁸⁹ Carter, 2000, 6. Carter graduated from Tazewell County High School in 1954. She returned there to teach in 1961.

²⁹⁰ Tazewell County Historical Society, 39.

²⁹¹ Walker, 30.

time custodian. However, this donation was not equivalent to the monetary support given to white schools by the Town.²⁹² The African-American schools in Pocahontas also seemed to be left out of the bond issue money that expanded the white schools during the mid-1920s. This was in spite of the fact that the African-American residents of Pocahontas would have to pay taxes to support the bond initiative.²⁹³ Although it was reported to the Town Council in 1923 that the four-room school was allegedly condemned, none of this money was used to make improvement or repairs.²⁹⁴ In spite of this evidence of “separate but unequal” treatment of African-American schools in Pocahontas, there seemed to be a great deal of pride among its patrons, and many doctors, lawyers, ministers, and civil engineers attended there.²⁹⁵

²⁹² Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 4 October 1950; Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 12 September 1951. The Town of Pocahontas paid the school janitor \$50 per month with a \$100 donation at the conclusion of the school year. In 1951, \$550 was allocated for custodial expenses.

²⁹³ J.S. Browning “States Opposition to Town’s Progress,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 1925, 4.

²⁹⁴ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 11 July 1923.

²⁹⁵ Carter, 2000, 5. Davis, 10.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE GROWTH OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY, 1909-1955
The Early High School in Pocahontas

The early high school in Pocahontas operated in a building known as the 6:30 Hall. The school consisted of Grades 1-11 with the school term lasting for approximately nine months.²⁹⁶ The school opened on the first Monday in September and closed the last week in May.²⁹⁷ Teachers were contracted to work 180 days for an average salary of \$40 to \$50 dollars per month.²⁹⁸ This salary did not include the cost for room and board, which was an extra expense independent of their teaching contract.

The 1907-1908 school year began with an enrollment of 200 students. The high school was under the leadership of its principal, Professor George L. Byrom.²⁹⁹ He was assisted by the following teachers: Sally Whitman, of Pulaski County, Virginia; Jennie Bracy, of Prospect, Virginia; Rosa Garnett, of Farmville, Virginia; Lillian Thompson, of Bluefield, West Virginia; and Mrs. W.W. Kellie, of Pocahontas, Virginia. It was a common practice for teachers from outside Pocahontas to board with town residents from September to May, then return to their respective homes for the winter and summer breaks. The year was expected to be a promising one as the local paper expressed optimism for the upcoming school term. The school was described as having “bright prospects” for success, and it was hoped that Pocahontas High School would soon become “one of the best high schools in Southwest Virginia.”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 14 July 1911. Schools that received financial assistance from the State of Virginia operated under their guidelines. Accredited high schools in Virginia were required to operate for nine months. The incorporated towns in Tazewell County worked with the three school boards to finance high school operations for the additional two months.

²⁹⁷ “Pocahontas Pickings,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 30 May 1915, 9.

²⁹⁸ Pocahontas School Records, Pocahontas High School, Pocahontas, Virginia, 1910-11.

²⁹⁹ The title of professor derived from the fact that administrators at this time were also classroom instructors.

³⁰⁰ “Social Pocahontas,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 1907, 2.

Between 1900 and 1920, the bituminous coal industry of Southern Appalachia enjoyed its years of boom and expansion.³⁰¹ The increase in coal production at the Pocahontas mines led to an influx of workers and their families.³⁰² By 1909, this growth experienced by the community created a need for a new high school building. In April of that year, the Town of Pocahontas advertised bids for the construction of a new public school, estimating the cost of completion at \$20,000. The project was to be finished in time for the upcoming school year.³⁰³ The facility would be a modern brick building overlooking the Town of Pocahontas at the head of East Water Street, behind the Catholic Church.³⁰⁴ Mr. A.G. Kiser was contracted to oversee the construction of the building.³⁰⁵ The Pocahontas Consolidated Collieries Company contributed the property on which the new school would be built.³⁰⁶ The groundbreaking ceremony was held in May, and a large force of workmen rushed the project to completion.³⁰⁷ However, the new building was not the only change that would take place in 1909. Professor Byrom, who had been Principal of the high school for two years, accepted a job at the Park Street School in Roanoke, Virginia. Byrom was praised as a “master of his profession” who had led the high school during a time of substantial growth. The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* reported that he had raised the school’s standards to new heights and that his departure had caused much regret among the school board members and patrons of the school. The last full year in

³⁰¹ Shifflett, 67. To further promote the coal industry, the Pocahontas coalfields gained exclusive rights to supply the coal for the steam shovels building the Panama Canal.

³⁰² “History of Pocahontas-Flat Top Coalfield,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 27 July 1907, 2.

³⁰³ Floyd Black. “Social Life at Pocahontas,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1909, 7.

³⁰⁴ The hill where the school was built was known as White Oak Hill or School House Hill. The town’s residents later called the little street going to the school Murriels’ Lane.

³⁰⁵ “Walter Kiser is Seriously Injured,” *Clinch Valley News*, 23 July 1909, 2. Kiser’s crew suffered a near fatality in July when his son Walter fell from the second floor of the building.

³⁰⁶ Tazewell County Deed Book #76, 428-429 (Tazewell County Courthouse). The Town of Pocahontas purchased the high school and the property on August 12, 1912 from the Pocahontas Consolidated Collieries Company for the sum of \$10.

³⁰⁷ Floyd Black. “Social Life at Pocahontas,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 9 May 1909, 6.

the 6:30 Hall culminated with a commencement exercise at the Pocahontas Opera House under Byrom's direction.³⁰⁸

Closing Exercises at Pocahontas High School

The closing exercise in Pocahontas was a special time when the school and community would celebrate the accomplishments and successes of the school year.³⁰⁹ The purpose of this exercise was to stimulate educational pride, demonstrate the quality of work done in the schools, and to rally citizens to think more highly of schooling within the community.³¹⁰ The ceremony was held in the Pocahontas Opera House until 1928 when it was moved to the newly constructed gymnasium and auditorium.³¹¹ The Opera House, built in 1895, was the first theatre in the Pocahontas Coalfields and attracted Broadway plays and Vaudeville acts as well as educational presentations.³¹² A baccalaureate sermon was delivered there on the Sunday prior to the closing ceremony.³¹³

The exercises consisted of many awards, presentations, and accolades. The large crowds present would be provided with entertainment prepared by the students and teachers at the school. The students sang songs, recited poetry and children's stories, and played piano solos.³¹⁴ The program often included plays and performances. Plays such as "Aunt Diana's Quilting Party" or "A Kentucky Belle",

³⁰⁸ "Social Life at Pocahontas," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 12 June 1909, 3.

³⁰⁹ The ceremony today is referred to as graduation or school commencement.

³¹⁰ Joseph A. Avent, "The County School Commencement," *The Virginia Journal of Education*, 1 November 1915, 126-128.

³¹¹ Drosick, 2000, 9. Carroll F. Wolfe, Ed., *Tazewell County Celebrating a Proud Heritage* (Tazewell, Virginia: Image Printing, 1999), 41.

³¹² Karen Kaplan "Opera House Perhaps the Most Famous Pocahontas Landmark," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 15 August 1982, 11c.

³¹³ Speech by Charles Aubrey Ellett, written for the 1945-1950 class reunions, [Ca. August 30, 1980], Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 5.

³¹⁴ "Pocahontas Paraphrased," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 24 May 1908, 8.

a three-act comedy, were performed.³¹⁵ There were even debates presented by members of the two rival debate clubs within the school.³¹⁶

During the proceedings, many awards and presentations were given. Students that achieved the A-B honor roll or made improvements in writing were the recipients of \$5.00 in gold. Awards were also given to the top achievers in English, Latin, Composition, Math, and Debate.³¹⁷ Certificates of promotion were also disseminated among students who successfully completed the previous grade.

With so many activities planned, the closing exercises sometimes lasted over a period of several evenings. The opera house would be filled to capacity for each night's performance.³¹⁸ An admission fee, ranging from five cents to twenty-five cents was charged to pay for the ceremony's expenses.³¹⁹ The graduation exercise was held on the final night.³²⁰ Critics of the closing exercise complained that the two or three evening performances and ceremonies were costly affairs that added strain and pressure for teachers and a loss of instructional time for the students. The *Virginia Journal of Education* described the process of having a sequence of ceremonies at the end of the school year as being "obnoxious."³²¹

Within a few years, the closing exercises became a commencement or graduation ceremony. During these ceremonies, graduating students were each presented a high school diploma for the successful completion of eleven years of schooling. The principal delivered a short address to the class of graduates, reported on the progress of the school to the community, and handed out

³¹⁵ "A Kentucky Belle; High School Comedy Provokes Lots of Fun," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1915, 6.

³¹⁶ The issue of women's suffrage was debated during the closing exercises of 1909 and 1914. The two rival debate clubs were the Chautauqua Literary Society and the Ciceronian Literary Society.

³¹⁷ Floyd Black. "Social Life at Pocahontas," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 6 June 1909, 3.

³¹⁸ "Pocahontas Pickings," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 30 May 1915, 9.

³¹⁹ "Pocahontas Pickings," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 1916, 7. The proceeds went towards the rent for the opera house, the printing of programs, and the traveling expenses and entertainment for the guest speaker.

³²⁰ There was no charge to attend the graduation ceremony.

³²¹ "Are Final Exercises Overdone?" *The Virginia Journal of Education*, May 1916, 467-468. *The Virginia Journal of Education* recommended that the exercises be cut short for the benefit of the teachers.

diplomas.³²² Attire for these early ceremonies did not include the traditional caps and gowns that are worn today. Ellett, a 1924 graduate of Pocahontas High School, recalled purchasing a new suit for graduation,³²³ while Elizabeth Bailey Hughes, a 1928 graduate, described her father purchasing her special dress in New York City. “At the time I graduated we didn’t have caps and gowns. We wore dresses and suits. My father, who traveled to New York City regularly on buying trips for Pocahontas Fuel Company, brought a dress special for graduation. It was made in Paris, France.”³²⁴ Though the tradition of wearing suits and dresses would eventually be transformed to caps and gowns, the entertainment of the large crowds in attendance and the celebration of the accomplishments of the students of Pocahontas High School continued.³²⁵

The Growth of the High School

The public school system in Pocahontas developed along with the growth of the community.³²⁶ The 1909-1910 school year began under a newly appointed Principal, Professor P.S. Barnes of Danville, Virginia. However, the new building was still under construction. Therefore, the school year began with classes being conducted at the 6:30 Hall.³²⁷

In October, arrangements were made to begin moving equipment, supplies, and the heating apparatus from the 6:30 Hall to the new building. Teachers and students, excited about the change, did not seem to mind the several days of school cancellations needed for this transition to be completed. On Tuesday October 27,

³²² Special guests sometimes handed out diplomas. For example, in 1914, the Superintendent of Tazewell County Public Schools W.A. Thompson handed out diplomas.

³²³ (Speech by Ellett [ca. 1980]), 5.

³²⁴ Karen Kaplan “Clubhouse Teachers Get Together,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 29 August 1982, 2A.

³²⁵ “Pocahontas Pickings,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1914, 2. Today, graduation ceremonies are held in the Gaza Kovach Auditorium. The graduates sit on the stage and the school principal gives out diplomas.

³²⁶ R.L. Humbert, ed. *Industrial Survey for Southwestern Virginia, Vol. 2: Tazewell County* (Engineering Extension Division: Blacksburg, VA, 1930), 95.

³²⁷ Floyd Black “Social Life at Pocahontas,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 1909, 3.

1909, the students and teachers moved into the new Pocahontas High School.³²⁸ The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* reported that the building had been completed at the cost of \$25,000.³²⁹ The new building was a single two-story sandstone brick structure overlooking the Town of Pocahontas. The school itself was a part of the town's physical landscape and would grow to become an integral component in the lives of the residents of the community.

The following summer, Professor J.B. Martin of Farmville, Virginia replaced Professor Barnes.³³⁰ In the early years of the high school, there was a great deal of faculty turnover. At the start of the 1910-1911 school year, none of the teachers remained from the 1907-1908 school term. Some accepted positions at other schools, while others would pursue other professions or marry.³³¹ However, the local school board reported a large number of applicants for teaching positions, and expressed difficulty selecting from among so many qualified teachers. The school during this period also experienced steady growth. In 1910, the faculty expanded to include three more teachers, and by 1912, the student population was up from the previous year by 55 students.³³²

As the school continued to grow, there seemed to be a statewide problem in rural schools with students dropping out short of completing the requirements for a high school diploma. Hager recalled the problem existing in Pocahontas: "We had a lot of dropouts when I went to school. Some of them went to work in the mines, some joined the armed forces, while others left and got jobs in factories throughout

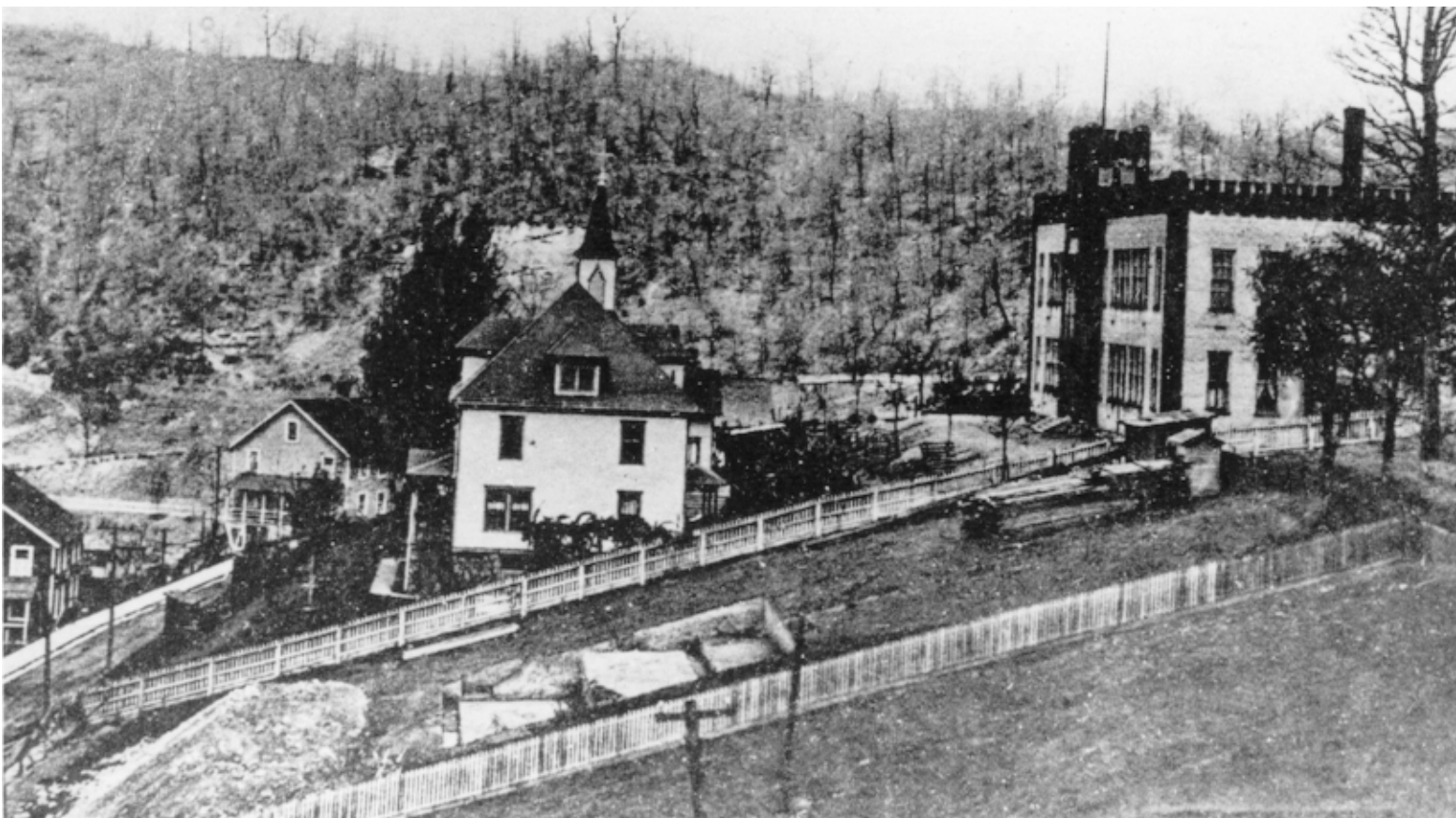
³²⁸ The school consisted of grades 1-11. The high school department included grades 8-11.

³²⁹ "Pocahontas Day By Day," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 27 October 1909, 3.

³³⁰ J.B. Martin later served as principal of Tazewell High School.

³³¹ "Teacher Club Closed for the Summer," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 5 June 1927, 8. Female teachers were prohibited from marrying.

³³² "Pocahontas Day By Day," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 1910, 2. "Pocahontas Pickings," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 5 May 1912, 4. The enrollment in the school had jumped from 167 in 1911 to 222 in 1912. By 1911, only 32 of these students had reached the high school level.



Pocahontas High School was constructed in 1909. The single two-story sandstone building was completed at the cost of \$25,000. The structure overlooked the Town of Pocahontas and was a part of the town's physical landscape. (Photo courtesy of Grubb Photo)

the country.”³³³ Ellett described his high school class as starting with 30 students but recalled only two members graduating in 1924.³³⁴ Elizabeth Pugh, a member of the Pocahontas High School Yearbook staff in 1938, described her class as starting with 60 freshmen in 1934 but graduating only 19 in 1938.³³⁵ Wright recollected that out of the large elementary class that he started with, only thirteen graduated in 1944.³³⁶

A 1919 study by the Virginia Education Commission revealed that most students in Virginia would remain in school until the age of thirteen, but drop out rapidly after that. In fact, only half of the students enrolled remained in school up to the age of sixteen. After the age of fourteen, the study recognized that there were numerous forces to draw children out of school.³³⁷

Link described attendance among students in the rural schools of Virginia as being irregular because children represented a large part of the rural work force.³³⁸ Shifflett wrote that the practice of underage boys working in the mines was widespread.³³⁹ The company’s policy induced the miner to send older children into the mines rather than to school.³⁴⁰ As the miners’ sons reached a certain age, usually between twelve and fourteen, they began to work in the mines under their father’s supervision. In the Pocahontas mines, it was common for young men to assist their fathers mining coal.³⁴¹ However, the situation improved with the

³³³ Maxine H. Hager. Interviewed by the author, 15 November 1999, interview 1, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 3.

³³⁴ Speech by Ellett [ca. 1980], 5.

³³⁵ Pocahontas High School, *The Pocahontas, 1938*. (Pocahontas High School, Pocahontas, Virginia). The Pocahontas High School Business Department published *The Pocahontas*.

³³⁶ Wayne B. Wright. Interviewed by the author, 21 March 2000, interview 3, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 1.

³³⁷ Virginia Education Commission and Virginia Survey Staff, *Virginia Public Schools: A Survey of a Southern State Public School System* (Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book Company, 1920), 84.

³³⁸ Link, 54.

³³⁹ Shifflett, 95.

³⁴⁰ Corbin, 16. If a child went with the father into the mines, he was allowed more cars to load. Therefore, with the additional coal the father could earn higher wages.

³⁴¹ Jerry Gravely. Interviewed by the author, 23 July 2000, interview 15, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 1. Gravely recalled hearing his father tell of working in

passage of child labor laws. By 1930, those under the age of 14 were prohibited from the mines and those between the ages of 14 and 16 could only work eight-hour days with a certificate of approval from the school attendance officer.³⁴² Fortunately, the minimum age for underground workers was raised to 18 by the early 1940s.³⁴³ This prevented both the coal company and parents from exploiting juvenile labor.

Another problem among rural schools in Virginia was the great disparity among the ages of children at the primary grade level. Throughout the rural schools of Virginia, students from the ages of fourteen through sixteen were scattered throughout the primary grades, and a variety of age groups existed at each grade level. Kiser wrote of this problem occurring at Pocahontas High School. She described arriving to teach third grade there in 1921 and discovering that many of her students were larger and close to being her age.³⁴⁴ In fact, two of the students from her class married later that year.³⁴⁵ Further evidence of a scholarship problem at the school was the failure rate of some of the classes. Eula Mae Gullion, a member of the Pocahontas High School Class of 1939, described her freshman class, as having 15 out of 37 students fail to advance to their sophomore year.³⁴⁶

An examination of school records revealed that there were some older students mixed with the younger students at the primary grade level. The age of students registered in the second grade at Pocahontas High School during the

the mines at the age of 13 to help his grandfather to mine coal. When his father's older brother died, his father used his brother's birth certificate to become employed by the Pocahontas Fuel Company.

³⁴² Humbert, 54.

³⁴³ Shifflett, 100.

³⁴⁴ Kiser was nineteen and had completed just one year of college.

³⁴⁵ Kiser, 15.

³⁴⁶ "The Pocahontas," 1938.

1921-1922 school year ranged from seven to fourteen. In the fourth grade, the student's ages ranged from eight to fifteen.³⁴⁷

The Virginia Education Commission suggested that the situation could be improved with the establishment of an earlier entrance age for students starting schools, tighter compulsory attendance laws, and provisions for better grading and instruction to improve the progress of students in the primary grades.³⁴⁸ However, a study conducted in 1927 reported that the problem still existed.³⁴⁹ Therefore, after reviewing Pocahontas High School records, it is evident that many students at the primary grade level failed to reach the high school. It is assumed that when the older students reached a certain age, they would become frustrated with their progress. Thus, the students probably dropped out of school to pursue work in the coalmines or to marry and start a family. However, the situation changed following World War II. Pocahontas High School records indicated a substantial growth in student population during the second half of the 1940s. In the wake of a post-war school age population boom, the high school enrollment at Pocahontas High School increased from 144 students in 1945 to 275 in 1946.³⁵⁰ Walker recalled that her graduating class in 1947 was one of the largest to graduate at Pocahontas High School.³⁵¹ Some members of that graduating class had been drafted during the war and returned to finish their education. In fact, throughout Tazewell County many service men returned to complete the requirements for their high school diploma.³⁵²

³⁴⁷ Pocahontas School Records, Pocahontas High School, Pocahontas, Virginia, 1921-1922.

³⁴⁸ Virginia Education Commission and Virginia Survey Staff, 92.

³⁴⁹ Virginia Commission to Survey the Educational System, *Public education in Virginia* (Richmond, VA: State Printing Office, 1928), 121-122.

³⁵⁰ Pocahontas School Records, Pocahontas High School, Pocahontas, Virginia, 1945-1946.

³⁵¹ Bessie G. Walker. Interviewed by the author, 19 June 2000, interview 11, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 4. "Pocahontas High School Seniors Get Diplomas," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 9 June 1946, 8. The previous year's graduating class consisted of 25 members. Eight of those were ex-servicemen who had returned from the war.

³⁵² J.L. Walthall, "Tazewell Schools: A Sentimental Journey," *Clinch Valley News*, 28 October 1970, 1. Walthall was Tazewell County Superintendent of Schools from 1947 to 1965.

Walker remembered her graduating class consisting of around sixty students, a substantial increase over the number of graduates from the previous year.³⁵³

Bus Transportation in Pocahontas

A factor contributing to the growth of Pocahontas High School was the addition of bus transportation. Public transportation not only contributed to the growth of the school, but it provided secondary educational opportunities to those students living in the outlying areas of Boissevain and Abbs Valley.

Link described transportation in the rural areas of Virginia as a factor in increasing regular school attendance. By extending transportation to the outlying areas, students gained access to secondary schools that were often miles away and well beyond walking distance.³⁵⁴

The first school bus purchased in Tazewell County was for the Pocahontas area. The bus provided transportation for those students who had attended the Coal Branch Primary School, which had closed in 1926.³⁵⁵ The Tazewell County School Board purchased a Chevrolet bus from the Riverside Motor Company for the sum of \$1,184.75.³⁵⁶ At the January 1927 meeting of the Tazewell County School Board, the bus purchased for Pocahontas was given a “jolly tryout” by the Tazewell County Board of Supervisors and the School Board members.³⁵⁷ At the April meeting, it was requested by patrons from the Pocahontas area that bus service be extended to Boissevain for those students attending Pocahontas High School. Though these student were not granted bus service at the conclusion of the 1926-1927 school term, the parents were assured by the School Board members that the extension of bus service would be implemented the following school

³⁵³ Walker, 2000, 4.

³⁵⁴ Link, 140-141. School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 12 August 1926. Students living within a two-mile walk from school were not afforded public transportation in Tazewell County.

³⁵⁵ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 8 July 1926.

³⁵⁶ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 14 September 1926.

³⁵⁷ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 26 January 1927.

year.³⁵⁸ In 1929, Grady Carper, who taught mathematics at Pocahontas High School, was paid \$25 per month for transporting students from the rural areas surrounding the school.³⁵⁹ In 1930, transportation had expanded, which required the purchase of an additional bus for the Pocahontas area.³⁶⁰ By the 1950s, there was bus transportation along the main road from Abbs Valley to Pocahontas. However, many students still had to walk several miles to a designated bus stop.³⁶¹ Today, the bus routes in the Pocahontas area cover not only the main roads, but also the rural routes that include hollows and mountain ridges.

During the 1920s, few children in the rural areas of Tazewell County attended high school.³⁶² Isolation and bad roads created an aversion to equality of learning for some students and caused irregular and broken school attendance.³⁶³ The advent of bus transportation in Pocahontas contributed to improved attendance of those students living in the rural areas.

The Role of the Teacher in the Community

The instructional staff at Pocahontas High School was considered well trained and made up of some of the “finest teachers” in the State of Virginia. In the June 1, 1916 issue of the *Virginia Journal of Education*, State Inspector A.L. Lincoln reported that the faculty at Pocahontas was, in his opinion, one of the strongest in the state.³⁶⁴ Upon his return in 1917, Lincoln once again commended both the faculty and the community there writing that: “The people of Pocahontas take pride in their schools, and depend on the local school board to provide the best teachers possible.”³⁶⁵

³⁵⁸ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 20 April 1927.

³⁵⁹ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 6 December 1929.

³⁶⁰ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 12 August 1930.

³⁶¹ Gravely, 2000, 7.

³⁶² Harman, Crockett. “Tazewell Schools Recalled Since 1922,” *Clinch Valley News*, 7 October 1970, 7.

³⁶³ Link, 139.

³⁶⁴ “News Notes From Headquarters,” *The Educational Journal of Virginia*, 1 June 1916, 540.

³⁶⁵ “Taking Pride in School,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 1917, 3.

Only well-trained, capable applicants were selected to become members of the teaching staffs in Tazewell County. The employment of such a staff of capable teachers was attributed to the progress made in the educational system.³⁶⁶ Teachers were required to attend all of the Tazewell County Teacher's Association meetings when notified by the Division Superintendent. While at those meetings, teachers received training regarding operating procedures such as scheduling, salaries, and teaching requirements.³⁶⁷ Pocahontas High School Principal C.C. Caldwell reported to the *Virginia Journal of Education* that a meeting of the Tazewell County Teachers' Association was held in Graham, Virginia, on the 26th and 27th of January, 1917. "There was over 75 percent of the county's personnel in attendance," Caldwell noted. The teachers arrived in Graham on Thursday night and were entertained with a play presented by the senior class at Graham High School. The next day, the teachers spent the balance of the day in department meetings. In the high school department meeting, Caldwell wrote that many "live topics and problems were discussed." The conclusion of the meeting featured an informal reception and an address by State Superintendent Stearns. Stearns spoke of Tazewell County's first class efforts to "eradicate illiteracy."³⁶⁸ He also commented that the teachers of Tazewell County were underpaid and that it was a fact that the caretakers of the horses and cattle of the county were paid more than the teachers who were entrusted with the responsibility of training their children.³⁶⁹

The citizens of Pocahontas accorded much respect to their teachers.³⁷⁰ As Maxine Hager recollected, "We knew better than to not respect our teachers in the community. If I was disrespectful to anyone there, my parents would have

³⁶⁶ Humbert, 96.

³⁶⁷ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County School Board, 27 July 1912. Weeks, 227. In 1912, teachers were paid a stipend of \$2 per day for attendance.

³⁶⁸ Pendleton, 669. Pendleton wrote that in the 1915 school census that Tazewell County ranked third in the State of Virginia for the lowest rate of illiteracy in ages 10-20 years old.

³⁶⁹ "School News," *Virginia Journal of Education*, 1 April 1917, 387.

³⁷⁰ Drosick, 2000, 6. Wright, 2000, 5-6.

certainly taken care of me and I knew that.”³⁷¹ At that time, trouble at school meant trouble at home as well.³⁷² Betty Daugherty remembered that if students were punished at school, they knew better than to go home and tell because their parents would punish them again.³⁷³

Often, prominent citizens of the town hosted dinner parties in honor of the teachers at the school.³⁷⁴ The teachers of the community were treated like family. The community made it a priority to make them feel welcome. They were invited into homes and churches.³⁷⁵ Brooks recalled that during the winter when school was cancelled, the teachers were invited to his home for hot chocolate and cookies.³⁷⁶ Bessie Walker, a 1948 graduate of Pocahontas High School, recalled on several occasions paying social visits to her teachers at the Teacher’s Clubhouse.³⁷⁷

The faculty of Pocahontas participated in various fundraisers designed to supplement the finances for the benefit of Pocahontas High School and its students. The community supported the faculty’s endeavors. In 1927, the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* reported that the ladies of the Pocahontas faculty organized a benefit card party. The event was held in the main dining room of the Pocahontas Inn and described by the *Telegraph* as the “social event of the year.” About 150 Pocahontas residents competed at such card games as bridge and rook. The proceeds from the party went towards improving the grounds at the school.³⁷⁸ In 1929, the faculty of the school presented a play titled “Adam and Eve.” Earnings

³⁷¹ Hager, 1999, 3.

³⁷² Mullins, 124.

³⁷³ Betty and Veronica Daugherty. Interviewed by the author, 9 June 2000, interview 11, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 6.

³⁷⁴ “Honors Faculty of Pocahontas Schools,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 1922, 23. “Honors Dr. Newman and Faculty,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 5 June 1927, 8.

³⁷⁵ Walker, 2000, 4.

³⁷⁶ Dodge, 19.

³⁷⁷ Walker, 2000, 3. The Teacher’s Clubhouse is described later in Chapter Five.

³⁷⁸ “Teachers Card Party a Brilliant Success,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 1927, 8.

from the play's performance went towards benefiting the Athletic Association and the Library Fund.³⁷⁹

The departure of the faculty at the conclusion of the school term left a void in the social life of the community, causing regret among their many friends and acquaintances.³⁸⁰ Each year, large crowds would gather at the train station to bid the teachers farewell. Some of those teachers would return to spend their summer vacations in Pocahontas.³⁸¹

Course Offerings in a Mining Town

Dotson wrote that in some mining communities an effort was made to enrich the curriculum with instructional opportunities in music, art, and home economics.³⁸² In many coal camps, the company mandated curriculum standards that included the basic subjects and even included classes on coal mining.³⁸³ However, Pocahontas High School strictly followed the curriculum guidelines mandated by the State of Virginia. There were no mining courses taught to the students at the school. However, the coal company offered classes to adults in the community seeking their mining certification.³⁸⁴

The Pocahontas Fuel Company assisted the school system in the dissemination of textbooks. New textbooks could be purchased at the company store, which had been chosen by the school board as a book depository.³⁸⁵ The company store had a section set aside and stocked with schoolbooks. Each year, students were given a list of adopted books on the first day of school.³⁸⁶ The textbooks were purchased by students at state contracted prices and no profit was

³⁷⁹ "Faculty to Present Play," *Poca Hi Echo*, April 1929, 3.

³⁸⁰ "Faculty Pocahontas Hi Depart for Homes," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 1 June 1924, 18.

³⁸¹ "All of Faculty Leave For Homes," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 5 June 1927, 8.

³⁸² Dotson, 34-35.

³⁸³ Corbin, 129. In neighboring West Virginia, the State Board added a course in coal mining to its public school curriculum.

³⁸⁴ Drosick, 2000, 6. Wright, 2000, 2.

³⁸⁵ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 4 June 1936.

³⁸⁶ A list of the books required was distributed to each student

realized by the company store.³⁸⁷ The Pocahontas Fuel Company carried the books as a service to the school and community.

Many students purchased second-hand books. Walker recalled that the books were not changed often, thus allowing students to purchase and exchange used textbooks with one another.³⁸⁸ Often, parents were unwilling or unable to purchase the required textbooks. Occasionally, the Tazewell County School Board would help by purchasing books for such a child. In some instances, the teachers would find old copies of books for the student. When all other aid had been exhausted, the teacher would at times purchase needed books with their own personal funds.³⁸⁹

Athletics and Leisure in the Coalfields

Along with the school's growth came the expansion of its athletic programs. In the early years of the school, basketball seemed to be the sport that gained the most attention from within the community. Dotson described basketball as being the most popular sport in many mining communities.³⁹⁰ It was not uncommon for the high school team to challenge the Pocahontas Athletes, the town's team. Games were often played before large crowds in the Athletic Club Hall, with the proceeds from ticket sales going towards some designated cause.³⁹¹

In the early years, the high school's basketball games were often played under less than ideal conditions. Ellett recalled one game played at Witten's Mill on an outdoor court that was covered with snow and rocks one inch in size. "It

³⁸⁷ School Records, Pocahontas High School, Pocahontas, VA, 1921-1922.

³⁸⁸ Walker, 2000, 3.

³⁸⁹ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County School Board, 9 September 1933. In 1933, the School Board appropriated \$400 to assisted poor students throughout the county with the purchase of textbooks. Owen Bowman, "A Study of a Small School in the Mountains of Virginia" (Masters Thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 1953), 43-44.

³⁹⁰ Dotson, 27.

³⁹¹ "Pocahontas Day By Day," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1909, 2. Proceeds from one game in 1909 went towards securing the V.P.I. Basketball Team for a future appearance.

snowed. One of our players fell and hurt his knee. We finished the game with four players and won.”³⁹²

In town, games were played at the Athletic Club Hall. The ceiling there was eleven feet high with an auditorium stage on one end and a wall on the other.³⁹³ There were no basketball coaches and the high school provided little support for its teams.³⁹⁴

Baseball was another popular sport in Pocahontas. The game had been unknown prior to the mining of coal in Appalachia. However, when the coal operators and railroad workers arrived, they brought with them their interest in the game.³⁹⁵ In nearly every coal town in the region there was baseball.³⁹⁶

The early high school baseball teams also received little financial support from the school. Individual players purchased their uniforms, balls, bats, and paid for their train or taxi fare for out of town trips.³⁹⁷ Whenever the Pocahontas High School team traveled, they were often greeted with hospitality, which might include a warm meal and overnight lodging. When Pocahontas traveled to Northfork, West Virginia, by train for a baseball game, they would spend the night with families from the opposing team. The families in Pocahontas would reciprocate this hospitality.³⁹⁸

In 1922, the Pocahontas Baseball Park was completed and described as “one of the best parks in the coalfield.” The seating capacity for the park was 2,500.³⁹⁹ There, semi-professional games were played between Pocahontas and other coalfield teams.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹² Speech by Ellett [ca. 1980], 3.

³⁹³ Pocahontas Day By Day,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1909, 2.

³⁹⁴ Speech by Ellett [ca. 1980], 4.

³⁹⁵ Stuart McGehee, “Bluefield Baseball: The Tradition of a Century,” *Goldenseal*, Spring 1990, 50.

³⁹⁶ Mullins, 89.

³⁹⁷ Speech by Ellett [ca. 1980], 4.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

³⁹⁹ “Baseball Park Filled In, Fenced, and Rolled,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 1924, 17.

⁴⁰⁰ “Pocahontas Baseball Park is Completed,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1922, 13.

Each coal town had its own baseball team that was supported by the company. The Pocahontas Baseball Association consisted of teams throughout the Pocahontas coalfield region. Sunday afternoon baseball became a local cultural tradition and the games were attended by nearly everyone in town. The American Legion Post No. 14 sold concessions with products ranging from peanuts to non-alcoholic beer. Opening day was a community event as prizes were awarded to the players by local businesses for home runs, base hits, stolen bases, runs scored, and the first error committed. During the 1925 event, prizes consisted of shoes from the Army Store, a silk tie by Saul Miller, a suit dry cleaning by American Dry Cleaning and Tailoring Company, a box of cigars by Obbagy Brothers, and a haircut, shave, tonic, and shower bath by Coleman's Barber Shop.⁴⁰¹

Mullins wrote that talented semi-professional baseball players were often recruited by the coal company and hired at the mines for their athletic prowess.⁴⁰² It was reported by the *Telegraph* that Major League scouts regularly attended baseball games throughout the coalfields. One of the Pocahontas players, "Lefty" Dye, was given an opportunity to play for the Cincinnati Reds when their scouts discovered him pitching against a team from Princeton.⁴⁰³

The first record of the "Indians" being used as a mascot for the athletic teams in the town appeared in a 1927 article of the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*. In this article, the semi-professional baseball team was referred to as the Pocahontas "Indians". However, it is uncertain as to whether the town or the school used the name first.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰¹ "Poca Team Opens Baseball Season," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 1925, 15.

⁴⁰² Mullins, 89.

⁴⁰³ "Lefty Dye Reports to Cincinnati Reds," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 4 March 1923, 28.

⁴⁰⁴ "Baseball Today," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 1927, 8.

By 1927, football and track had joined basketball and baseball as athletic offerings at the school.⁴⁰⁵ The early athletic teams of Pocahontas High School were competitive with the other schools in the county. The school newspaper, *Poca Hi Echo*, reported that the 1928-1929 girls' basketball team had capped an undefeated season by winning the Tazewell County championship held at Bluefield College. That season the girls' team defeated all of the county high school teams and outscored their opponents by a combined score of 275 to 143.⁴⁰⁶ In 1932, both the boys and girls basketball teams won the Tazewell County Championship in the same tournament held at Bluefield College.⁴⁰⁷

The early athletic teams at Pocahontas High School were successful and well supported by the community. However, the teams received little financial support from the school itself. Therefore, the early athletic programs at the school operated with assistance from the Town of Pocahontas and the Pocahontas Fuel Company.⁴⁰⁸ The town and coal company provided the school with needed equipment, uniforms, and coaching supplements.

In the years that followed, the community actively supported a few sports at the school. These sports provided deep satisfaction both for participants and spectators.⁴⁰⁹ In recent years, basketball and football have been the major competitive sports since they are the ones in which Pocahontas students have excelled. Although both sports would struggle from small numbers, declining enrollments, and lack of funding, the teams have experienced moments of success

⁴⁰⁵ "Track Team Returns From State Contest," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 1927, 8. "Bulldogs Crush Pocahontas High," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 4 November 1927, 3.

⁴⁰⁶ "Poca Girls Win County Cup," *Poca Hi Echo*, 1929 April 1.

⁴⁰⁷ Graham Andrews. "Pocahontas Boys and Girls Retain Tazewell County Cage Titles," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 13 March 1932, 1-B.

⁴⁰⁸ David Kovach. Interviewed by the author, 27 June 2000, interview 12, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 4. The Pocahontas High School Athletic teams played their contests on coal company property where the current school is located today. The Pocahontas Fuel Company also supported the school by placing ads in each year's school athletic program.

⁴⁰⁹ Walker, 42.

in both county and district competition. The boy's basketball team won the county championship in the Tazewell County Basketball Tournament in 1972 and the football team posted a 9-1 record during the 1990 season.⁴¹⁰ In spite of the record of the athletic teams of the past, they have always thrived on the psychological support of the Pocahontas High School communities.

Coal Company Support

The amount of support given by the coal companies contributed to the perception of the community towards the local school.⁴¹¹ Corbin wrote that the coal companies worked vigorously to improve the quality of public education at the local level.⁴¹² Throughout the region, the coal company had a reputation for supporting its local schools.⁴¹³ They did so by subsidizing teachers' salaries, deeding land for construction, building schools, and donating equipment. Coal companies provided local schools with support and financial assistance.⁴¹⁴ Mining towns also supported the extension of school operation longer than other non-industrial communities. Dotson believed that the coal operator understood that a longer school term was needed to ensure proper training. Therefore, the coal company supported the extension of school operations from seven to nine months.⁴¹⁵ However, in most mining communities, it was not common for the coal company to involve itself in the formation of school policy or the day-to-day operation of schools.⁴¹⁶ The operation of schools in Pocahontas was left up to the school administration.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁰ Rodney S. Reid. Interviewed by the author, 28 May 2000, interview 9, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 4.

⁴¹¹ Dotson, 14.

⁴¹² Corbin, 71.

⁴¹³ Mullins, 85.

⁴¹⁴ Corbin, 127.

⁴¹⁵ Dotson, 53. Dotson also mentions that the coal operator viewed the children in the camps as a problem when school was not in session.

⁴¹⁶ Dotson, 27. Mullins, 101.

⁴¹⁷ Pocahontas High School operated under the direct administration of the school principal and under the general supervision of the county superintendent.

In Tazewell County, the Pocahontas Fuel Company stood for the liberal funding of education. As its largest taxpayer, the company believed that adequate funding for education should either come from general tax levies or through bond indebtedness.⁴¹⁸ In fact, paying taxes was one of the most important ways that the Pocahontas Fuel Company supported education.⁴¹⁹

Another way that the coal company supported education in Pocahontas was through the donation of items needed by the school and its students. When it came to the children at the school, the Pocahontas Fuel Company was always charitable. Drosick recalled that the Pocahontas Fuel Company donated outside playground equipment for the school. During the depression era, the company provided food for the school's Home Economics department so that Mrs. Hannah Haga and her students could prepare meals for the underprivileged elementary students. Maxine Harman Hager remembered what a rewarding experience it was to serve the small students with hot soup and sandwiches.⁴²⁰ At Christmas time, the company provided each student with bags of oranges, nuts, candy, and apples. The Pocahontas Fuel Company always made sure that families had food at Christmas time. The coal company also provided scholarships to qualifying students attending college.⁴²¹ Hager recalled the miners also assisting the students at the school.

“When the seniors wanted to take a trip to Washington D.C., the miners passed around a paper through the mines and added to the amount of money already collected. We had enough money so that all of the children could go. We had more money than we needed, and we had extra money to give to the students. We had a marvelous trip. The coal miners made that trip possible.”⁴²²

⁴¹⁸ A.S. Greever, “Pocahontas Votes Big Bond Issue,” *Clinch Valley News*, 13 March 1925, 1.

⁴¹⁹ Mullins, 87.

⁴²⁰ Hager, 1999, 4.

⁴²¹ Drosick, 2000, 4.

⁴²² Maxine Harman Hager, Interviewed by the author, 15 November 1999, interview 1, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, WV, 3.

Low salaries and a lack of desirable housing in the coal fields made it difficult to secure qualified teachers in some areas. Often, the reputation of the coal town alone was enough to discourage some teachers from applying for employment there. Dotson described the average homes in most mining communities as not attractive enough for a young female who had been ambitious enough to prepare herself to teach.⁴²³ Charlotte “Pinky” Caldwell Giesen, a teacher at Pocahontas High School during the late 1920s, explained the apprehensions of her parents when she accepted a job teaching in a coalfield school: “I remember how disturbed my parents were when I first went to Pocahontas in 1927. It was as if they thought if I went there I would become smutty both outside and inside. But they gradually understood how much white gold there was in that black bottom.”⁴²⁴

In an effort to secure the most capable teachers, the coal company supplemented teachers’ salaries and built houses called “teacherages” for the female teachers to occupy.⁴²⁵ Kaplan identified several teachers at Pocahontas High School recalling having received a \$10 yearly bonus directly from the Pocahontas Fuel Company in addition to the subsidy provided by the Town of Pocahontas.⁴²⁶ The Pocahontas Fuel Company also built a boarding house on West Water Street for the female teachers to occupy.⁴²⁷

The Teachers’ Clubhouse

Dotson’s study identified the larger mining communities as providing so-called clubhouses for their clerical, medical, and teaching staffs. These buildings were described as comfortable, well arranged, with modern conveniences available

⁴²³ Dotson, 25-26.

⁴²⁴ Kaplan, “Clubhouse Teachers Get Together,” 2A.

⁴²⁵ Corbin, 127.

⁴²⁶ Kaplan, “Clubhouse Teachers Get Together,” 2A. Kaplan reported on the Teacher’s Clubhouse reunion held at the Pocahontas Opera House in 1982.

⁴²⁷ Brewster, 128. “High Schools Will Reopen on September 7,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1922, 7.

at a fair boarding price.⁴²⁸ The houses were equipped with bedroom suites, kitchen-dinette furniture, and a living area.⁴²⁹

The “Teacher’s Clubhouse” was built in 1922 in order to provide adequate housing for teachers arriving in Pocahontas.⁴³⁰ The home was reported by the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* to be “the most modern and complete building of its kind in this section of the State.”⁴³¹ The coal company hired a hostess to clean the house, prepare the meals, and watch over the teachers.⁴³² The teachers shared the rent, utilities, and housekeeping expenses. The food was purchased at the company store where the teachers enjoyed a nice discount. The final bill was then divided up among all the clubhouse occupants. The coal company paid the electric bill.⁴³³ Haga recalled \$25 of her \$110 a month salary going to pay her share of the expenses at the clubhouse.⁴³⁴

The coal companies guarded the reputation of their teachers. Their conduct was closely observed and high moral standards were demanded. In most mining communities, teachers were expected to do social work, teach Sunday school, and assist with community activities.⁴³⁵ Wayne Wright, a Pocahontas High School graduate of 1944, recalled the strict dating policy enforced by the company.

In my courting days, I went with one of the teachers who lived at the clubhouse. When you dated a teacher, they would allow you to go into the parlor. There, a “lady of the house” would sit around watching you. They were very protective of the teachers who lived there.⁴³⁶

⁴²⁸ Dotson, 25-26.

⁴²⁹ Corbin, 127.

⁴³⁰ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 4 October 1922.

⁴³¹ “High School Will Reopen on September 7,” 1922, 7.

⁴³² Kaplan, “Clubhouse Teachers Get Together,” 2A.

⁴³³ Drosick, 2000.

⁴³⁴ Kaplan, “Clubhouse Teachers Get Together,” 2A.

⁴³⁵ Dotson, 30.

⁴³⁶ Wright, 2000, 5.

Mrs. Hannah Haga also recalled the coal company being protective of the reputations of teachers living in the clubhouse:

When you came to work here you had to live at the clubhouse. Every night the hostess would lock the door at 11:00 P.M. You couldn't marry. The men teachers stayed at Mr. Ellett's place, but they ate their meals at the clubhouse. And some of the employees of the Pocahontas Fuel Company were allowed to eat there.⁴³⁷

In Tazewell County, the school board was also protective of their employee's image. The school board ordered that no married female applicants would be contracted for the 1932-33 school year. If a teacher married or was found to be secretly married, then her contract was automatically canceled.⁴³⁸ However, Brewster wrote that many of the teachers who came to Pocahontas met eligible bachelors, married, and decided to make the Town of Pocahontas their home.⁴³⁹

The Town's Support

A.S. Greever portrayed the Town of Pocahontas as being progressive in the area of financial support for its schools. The liberal funding of education there provided the town with a system of schools that was depicted as "equal to the best." Greever described the town as having taken the lead in Tazewell County in putting up local funds for her school.⁴⁴⁰ In the earlier years the officials of the coal company had been most influential in running the town. This influence secured the town's commitment to providing the best schools for its residents.⁴⁴¹

In 1923, the Town of Pocahontas sold the high school property and building to the Tazewell County School Board for the sum of \$5,000.⁴⁴² However, the town continued to provide the financial support needed for the school to continue the

⁴³⁷ Kaplan, "Clubhouse Teachers Get Together," 2A.

⁴³⁸ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 12 May 1932.

⁴³⁹ Brewster, 129.

⁴⁴⁰ Greever, "Pocahontas Vote Big Bond Issues," 1. Greever served as Superintendent of Schools for Tazewell County from 1917-1945.

⁴⁴¹ Walker, 29.

⁴⁴² Tazewell County Deed Book #101, 132 (Tazewell, VA: Tazewell County Courthouse).

school's operation for nine months. The town financed the school for many years without charging tuition. In 1917, A.L. Lincoln noted that Pocahontas High School was the only school in Tazewell County that did not charge its students tuition.⁴⁴³ The town also provided salary supplements for teachers and coaches.

The most revealing documentation of the Town's support of education was a resolution recorded by the Town Council on April 2, 1924. In that resolution, the town called for an increase in the school levy, the support of a nine month school term, favorable teacher salaries, the appropriation of money by the town council to supplement teacher's salaries, and the endorsement of any tax increases necessary to provide a full and complete term of school. The council members expressed the belief that they were acting in accordance with the known sentiment of the community. A copy of this resolution was forwarded to both the Tazewell County School Board and the Tazewell County Board of Supervisors.⁴⁴⁴

On February 1, 1928, the Pocahontas Town Council passed another resolution supporting an increase in the school levy from \$1.25 to \$1.75 on the assessed real estate and tangible personal property in Tazewell County.⁴⁴⁵ Council members indicated that the maximum levy of \$1.25 was not enough to conduct schools for a full nine-month term without charging tuition. The Town Council believed that requiring patrons to pay tuition in order to operate Pocahontas High School for the full nine months was discriminatory and deprived underprivileged students of their right to an education.⁴⁴⁶ The tuition charged for high school

⁴⁴³ "Taking Pride in School," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 1917, 3. The Tazewell County School Board authorized the incorporated towns to charge tuition to students attending high school. The tuition money was used by the towns for teaching supplements and the extension of the school term.

⁴⁴⁴ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 24 April 1924.

⁴⁴⁵ The resolution was mailed to the Tazewell County Board of Supervisors, State Senator Samuel Thompson, and Delegate J.W. Witten. The Pocahontas School Committee also visited the Tazewell County School Board to express their support for an increase in the levy.

⁴⁴⁶ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 6 July 1927.

students was viewed by some as a barrier to the education of all students.⁴⁴⁷ In Tazewell County, the high school principals were instructed by the Tazewell County School Board to drop those students who had not paid their tuition.⁴⁴⁸ In March, the Virginia General Assembly passed a special act enabling the Tazewell County Board of Supervisors to hold an election that would decide on an increase in the school levy.⁴⁴⁹ It was decided that the special election would be held on June 19, 1928.

The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* reported that with the community growing and demands for adequate facilities increasing that more revenue was needed for the operation of schools in Tazewell County.⁴⁵⁰ The *Telegraph* printed the following passage in support of the school levy: “Public schools are our most useful institutions and the development of our county and state depends on education and capital and the more closely the two affiliate the more progress we will make.”⁴⁵¹

Prior to the election, J.T. Crabtree, Chairman of the Tazewell County School Board, published a report containing facts and figures relative to the financing of schools for the seven-month period. Crabtree wrote that with the proposed increase in the school levy, the county could eventually operate schools for nine months without the assistance from the incorporated towns or the excessive high school tuition.⁴⁵² The increase in revenue would also be applied towards janitorial services

⁴⁴⁷ Education Commission of Virginia, 184. “Pocahontas Class Celebrates Reunion,” *Clinch Valley News*, 9 August 1972, 14. The 1927 study by the *Educational Commission of Virginia* revealed that many families would not send their children to high school because of this tuition and recommended that the charges be done away with. In Pocahontas, the graduates of the class of 1927 recalled that the average tuition charged by the town was between 3 to 5 dollars per month. This amount had to be paid in advance or students were not allowed to attend class.

⁴⁴⁸ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 8 September 1923.

⁴⁴⁹ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 8 May 1928. “Time For Vote on Levy Nears,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 22 April 1928, 5.

⁴⁵⁰ “Drive For Levy to be Launched,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 1928, 2.

⁴⁵¹ “More Interest in Levy Election,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 10 June 1928, 9.

⁴⁵² “Why School Levy Should be Voted,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 17 June 1928, 5. At the time of Crabtree’s publication, Tazewell County had thirty schools that continued for nine months with local support that consisted of donations and tuition. Fifty-five schools operated for only seven-months.

and fuel costs, principals and assistant principal salaries, and the reduction of one and two room schools.⁴⁵³

The proposed school bond levy increase was defeated in Tazewell County by around 500 votes. However, in Pocahontas where only a third of the voters turned out, the levy increase passed by a small margin. The outcome was disappointing to the incorporated towns and rural communities in Tazewell County that hoped the county would assume total fiscal responsibility for the operation of schools.⁴⁵⁴ Though the county as a whole did not commit to the idea of an increase in the school levy, the Town of Pocahontas continued to provide support for its schools.

Throughout Tazewell County, the incorporated towns worked with the school board to provide high schools.⁴⁵⁵ Each year, a contract was drafted between the Town of Pocahontas and the Tazewell County School Board that outlined the town's support in running the schools for the eighth and ninth month. The contract provided that the town pay for the extension of school operations, the employment of a custodian, supplement teacher's salaries, and payments for lights, power, and water.⁴⁵⁶ In Pocahontas, the Town donated \$6,031.45 to assist with the operations of the school for the 1927-1928 school year.⁴⁵⁷ In 1929, \$5,802.58 was allocated for school operations. This accounted for 22 percent of the Town's total budget, which was derived from general taxes, interest, licenses, and fines.⁴⁵⁸

The Town of Pocahontas supplemented the monthly pay of teachers and coaches at Pocahontas High School. The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* reported in 1916 that the council allocated \$245 to supplement teacher salaries.⁴⁵⁹ In 1928, the

⁴⁵³ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 8 May 1928.

⁴⁵⁴ "Proposed School Bond Levy Loses," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 20 June 1928, 1.

⁴⁵⁵ Mullins, 114.

⁴⁵⁶ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County School Board, 12 May 1931.

⁴⁵⁷ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 8 May 1928.

⁴⁵⁸ Humbert, 79.

⁴⁵⁹ "Pocahontas Pickings," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 1916, 8.

Town Council supplemented the salaries of teachers at Pocahontas, allocating \$3,465 in bonuses.⁴⁶⁰ Grady Carper, who taught math at Pocahontas High School from 1928-1930, recalled that the Pocahontas Town Council had worked out a subsidy for teachers from what was called a “sinking fund.”⁴⁶¹ This sinking fund was separate from the usual school expenditures.⁴⁶² In 1945 and 1946, the Town Council reported that teacher salaries were supplemented at the rate of \$10 per month for certified teachers and \$5 per month for non-certified teachers.⁴⁶³ The Town also provided needed items such as furniture, fixtures, and mattresses for the female teachers at the Teacher’s Clubhouse.⁴⁶⁴

The Great Depression caused an economic crisis in the coalfields as it swept throughout the country.⁴⁶⁵ During this period, the town council considered eliminating salary supplements. A motion was made and Mayor Crawford voted against the proposal casting the deciding vote. Nonetheless, it was decided on by the council to decrease the supplements by 50 percent. As the town recovered from the effects of the Depression, salary bonuses continued as they had before. However, the town did make an effort in the same meeting to pay the tuition of students living within the town’s limits. A list of those children was requested of the school, and the town covered the tuition cost for each student.⁴⁶⁶ Consequently, the town’s employee’s salaries were reduced by 20 percent to finance the elimination of this tuition payment.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁰ School Board Minutes, 8 May 1928.

⁴⁶¹ Kaplan, “Clubhouse Teachers Get Together,” 2A.

⁴⁶² Humbert, 79.

⁴⁶³ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 12 July 1945. Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 4 September 1946.

⁴⁶⁴ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 11 November 1942. Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 6 August 1944.

⁴⁶⁵ Shifflett, 200.

⁴⁶⁶ The standard tuition charged at high schools throughout the county was fixed at \$28 for the term and \$7 for the quarter, payable in advance. Students who lived outside the town limits had to pay this tuition charge.

⁴⁶⁷ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 3 August 1932.

At the conclusion of 1932, the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia authorized a cut in school appropriations to balance the state's budget.⁴⁶⁸ As a result, the Tazewell County School Board voted to shorten the school term to seven months. However, the teachers in the county agreed to work one week for free and the towns provided the additional revenue needed to continue high school operations for nine months.⁴⁶⁹

During the 1933-1934 school year, the Governor with authorization from the General Assembly reduced state appropriations for local schools by 30 percent. The decrease in state funding for education and the lack of local revenue due to delinquent taxes threatened the school term.⁴⁷⁰ However, the state secured \$750,000 in federal aid so that all high schools could operate for the normal term.⁴⁷¹ Later in 1933, a motion was made and carried that the Town of Pocahontas would no longer assume any part of the expenses in connection with Pocahontas High School.⁴⁷² From this point forward the school was fully operated with state and local funds. Although it is perceived that the town chose to abdicate fiscal responsibility for the operation of the schools in Pocahontas, there is evidence that the Town of Pocahontas continued to provide monetary support in the form of gifts and salary supplements.

Each year, the town expressed its appreciation to the high school coaches by providing them with yearly bonuses. In 1937, it was noted in the *Town Council Minutes* that Tony Lotito and Emily Simpson received \$100 and \$50 bonuses for performing their coaching duties.⁴⁷³ In 1938, each coach received \$50 as a token of

⁴⁶⁸ "School Term Cut to Seven Months," *Clinch Valley News*, 16 December 1932, 1.

⁴⁶⁹ "Schools to Run Full Nine Months," *Clinch Valley News*, 5 February 1933, 1.

⁴⁷⁰ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 9 August 1933.

⁴⁷¹ Pearson and Fuller, 1299.

⁴⁷² Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 1 November 1933.

⁴⁷³ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 5 May 1937. Lotito later became the first Municipal Recreation Director for Bluefield, West Virginia. The city's park there is known as the *Tony Lotito Park*. Lotito was a 1925 graduate of Pocahontas High School.

the town's appreciation for their "outstanding service to the youth of Pocahontas."⁴⁷⁴ Coaches were also supplemented \$35 a month for a duration of 10 months for their endeavors.⁴⁷⁵

Zolly Toth described the athletic programs at Pocahontas High School as struggling near the end of the Great Depression.⁴⁷⁶ "Herb Miller was the football coach there, and for a while we didn't know if we could have a team, because times were hard. We had to buy our own shoes and socks to play the games." However, Toth recalled Carl Snavelly taking the helm and the situation improving. "There was enough money to buy our socks and equipment."⁴⁷⁷ Apparently, a portion of the additional money used for these improvements came from the town. In 1941, Coach Snavelly's efforts to provide for the team culminated with a visit before the council. Snavelly asked for and was granted the funding needed to purchase new uniforms for the high school football team.⁴⁷⁸

It was a common occurrence for the principal of the high school to appear each year before the council to request money for the upcoming school term. In 1945, R.T. Carter went before the group to request funds for a proposed cafeteria.⁴⁷⁹ The council provided the school with a \$500 donation and a \$500 loan to go towards the school's first lunch program.⁴⁸⁰ During the 1950s, Gaza Kovach regularly appeared before the council to request money for coaching supplements.⁴⁸¹ Each year, the town council provided \$1,800 to supplement the

⁴⁷⁴ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 6 April 1938.

⁴⁷⁵ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 12 July 1945.

⁴⁷⁶ Toth went on to play college football at Louisiana State University. As a running back in the National Football League, Toth participated in the first NFL Pro Bowl game.

⁴⁷⁷ Hypes, Larry, "Toth Carried Poca Football to the NFL," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 18 January 1998, D-5.

⁴⁷⁸ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 10 September 1941.

⁴⁷⁹ R.T. Carter served as Principal of Pocahontas High School from 1945 through 1951.

⁴⁸⁰ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 12 August 1945. The Federal Lunch Program was instituted in 1943. The cafeteria was located in the basement of the old high school.

⁴⁸¹ Gaza Kovach served as Principal of Pocahontas High School from 1952 through 1971.

salaries of the coaches and the band director.⁴⁸² In 1958, Kovach went before the council for the last time. Though the town granted the school the usual amount of \$1,800, the members conveyed that it would be the last time that monetary support would be provided to the school for such purposes. Sinking revenues as a result of the closing of the mines in Pocahontas prevented the town from providing further support for the school.⁴⁸³ Therefore, there has been little evidence since then of the town providing financial support for the high school.

The Expansion of Pocahontas High School

As a consequence of the influx of school age children into Pocahontas, the single two-story building no longer provided the adequate classroom space needed to meet state requirements. The school was in need of certain repairs, improvements, and additions.⁴⁸⁴ The growth experienced by the high school had created a need for additional classrooms, and these classrooms were often rented throughout the town in unsuitable dwellings.⁴⁸⁵ The building was described as being “severely taxed” with cramped conditions. In September of 1922, A.S. Greever, Superintendent of Tazewell County Public Schools, accompanied Dr. Harris H. Hart, State Superintendent of Instruction to Pocahontas to make an estimate of what improvements were needed.⁴⁸⁶

In 1923, the State’s plan to build a new addition to Pocahontas High School was temporarily placed on hold. State Superintendent of Instruction Dr. Harris H. Hart explained to the Tazewell County School Board that the “exorbitant prices demanded for labor and materials” was the direct cause for the delay. However, in consideration of the pressing needs at Pocahontas, Hart advised the building of the

⁴⁸² Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 6 April 1953. Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 2 September 1953. Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 5 May 1954.

⁴⁸³ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas 9 July 1958.

⁴⁸⁴ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 14 January 1925.

⁴⁸⁵ Greever, “Pocahontas Votes Big Bond Issue,” 1.

⁴⁸⁶ “Pocahontas Schools Reopen on Thursday,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 1922, 18.

addition. He suggested that the board accept the architectural plans that had been developed by the Pocahontas Fuel Company. The building's construction would be contingent on whether the addition could be built for \$20,000, and that the money could be secured from the Literary Fund. Their visit prompted citizens to be hopeful that relief to the inadequate school situation was on the way.⁴⁸⁷

In January of 1925, an ordinance was issued that called for a bond issue election in the amount of \$90,000. One-third of this amount was to be used to expand and repair the school facilities in Pocahontas.⁴⁸⁸ The bond issue election was set for March 10, 1925.⁴⁸⁹ The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* carried editorials and letters that argued both sides of the referendum. J.S. Browning, an independent coal operator from Boissevain, accused the town of having “a champagne appetite on a beer budget.”⁴⁹⁰ Even the debaters of Pocahontas High School argued over the proposed bond issue. The debate, designed to bring awareness to the voters, was well attended. During the debate, one student remarked: “If \$100,000 could be spent on a wedding in Chicago, cannot then Pocahontas invest the trifling sum of \$30,000 in the greatest institution, the hope of tomorrow, the public school.”⁴⁹¹

On Election Day, the Town of Pocahontas rallied in support of the bond issue. The mines were shut down and the students were dismissed to lobby in support of the cause. Professor Crowgey, the schoolteachers, and all of the students formed a parade carrying banners that read “Vote for the Bond Issue.” They marched from the schoolhouse to Town Hall where the voting took place.⁴⁹² The following day it was announced that the bond issue had carried by a safe majority.

⁴⁸⁷ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 31 May 1923.

⁴⁸⁸ The remaining \$60,000 was used to dredge Laurel Creek, for street improvements, and to liquidate bond indebtedness.

⁴⁸⁹ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 14 January 1925.

⁴⁹⁰ J. S. Browning “States Opposition to Town’s Progress,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 1925, 4.

⁴⁹¹ “Bond issue Subject of High School Debate,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 12 February 1925, 11.

⁴⁹² “Bond Issue Carries,” *Clinch Valley News*, 13 March 1925, 5.

Of the 290 votes cast, 232 citizens voted for the bond issue while 58 voted against the initiative.⁴⁹³

The bond issue assisted in financing the construction of the first high school gymnasium in Tazewell County.⁴⁹⁴ It also assisted in providing an elementary school that was located beside the high school. The elementary school would house students in grades first through sixth, while the seventh grade remained in the high school building. The two buildings would be maintained by Tazewell County Public Schools.⁴⁹⁵

The County provided \$26,000 towards the completion of the project. Of that amount, \$22,000 was derived from the Literary Fund, while \$4,000 was added from the amount owed when the county purchased the high school property from the town back in 1923.⁴⁹⁶ The bond issue provided approximately \$29,726.87, and there was \$3,000 in various donations. The total amount raised for construction was \$58,726.87. The total cost for the construction of the new elementary school was \$37,000. The construction of the new gymnasium was \$20,300. The lot for the elementary school was purchased from George Rosenbaum for \$750.00, and the cost for the engineer came to \$125.00.⁴⁹⁷ The remaining balance of \$551.87 was applied towards the cost of bricking up the windows of the high school building, lights, and two hand basins for the gymnasium. The total cost for the completion of the project was \$58,726.87.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹³ “Only One-fifth of Voters Oppose Bond Issue,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 12 March 1925, 11.

⁴⁹⁴ Greever, “Pocahontas Votes Big Bond Issue,” 1.

⁴⁹⁵ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 5 November 1924.

⁴⁹⁶ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 21 January 1926. Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 1 July 1925.

⁴⁹⁷ Tazewell County Deed Book #101, 137 (Tazewell, VA: Tazewell County Courthouse). Tazewell County Deed Book #113, 519 (Tazewell, VA: Tazewell County Courthouse). Rosenbaum sold the property lying between Pocahontas High School and his residence for the construction of Pocahontas Elementary School.

⁴⁹⁸ Town Council Minutes, Town of Pocahontas, 11 August 1926.



The expansion of Pocahontas High School during the late 1920s led to the addition of Pocahontas Elementary School (left) and the first gymnasium/auditorium in Tazewell County (right). (Photo courtesy of the Library of Virginia)

Dotson's study revealed that by the 1930s, many of the school buildings throughout the coalfields were considered out of date.⁴⁹⁹ However, thanks to the support of the school system, coal company and the Town of Pocahontas, the school facilities in Pocahontas consisted of two modern brick school buildings with a gymnasium and auditorium to serve the educational and recreational needs of the school and community.⁵⁰⁰ Furthermore, the construction of the buildings was just in time as the Great Depression and World War II forced a general suspension of new school construction throughout the State of Virginia.⁵⁰¹

The Typical Day at Pocahontas High School

The typical day for a student or teacher in the early years of Pocahontas High School began with a scenic walk to school.⁵⁰² Maxine Hager described the walk as an opportunity to socialize with her fellow students. Virginia Kiser wrote that walking to school each day was a "picturesque scene."⁵⁰³ "We were always accompanied by loud music from the piano players. Each home we passed played a different tune. The cows, geese, and ducks often walked in the center of the street, while the children, dogs, and teachers chose the sidewalks."⁵⁰⁴ Bessie Walker remembered walking up Water Street and climbing up a big flight of cement steps. "There were hundreds of steps. That's how everyone who walked went to school. When you reached the top of the steps there was a nice playground. You had the option of staying out on the playground, but generally in bad weather you went inside and reported to your homeroom teacher."⁵⁰⁵ Jerry Gravely, a Pocahontas High School graduate of 1958, recalled the boys in the school arriving sometimes 45 minutes early to get in a game of football or tag. When it was cold, Principal

⁴⁹⁹ Dotson, 30-31.

⁵⁰⁰ Humbert, 96.

⁵⁰¹ Buck, 480. Pearson and Fuller, 1303.

⁵⁰² Hager, 1999, 1. Kiser, 3.

⁵⁰³ Virginia Strange Kiser served as a teacher at Pocahontas High School for the 1921-1922 school year.

⁵⁰⁴ Kiser, 3.

⁵⁰⁵ Walker, 2000, 1.

R.T. Carter would open up the gym for the boys to play basketball or roughhouse.⁵⁰⁶ Upon entering the building, the first thing students noticed were the oiled floors in the hall.⁵⁰⁷ Wright remembered the floors always being oiled. “The floors were slick and we would run and slide in the oil.”⁵⁰⁸

The school day at Pocahontas High School began at 8:45 AM.⁵⁰⁹ The day commenced with a homeroom period where the teacher would check the roll.⁵¹⁰ During the 1945 school year, Principal R.T. Carter held an assembly in the gym each Friday morning to give the students a “pep talk” and to make announcements concerning school activities. Pastors within the community also held devotional periods periodically.⁵¹¹

Students at the school were expected to be on time. C.C. Caldwell, Principal of Pocahontas High School from 1914-1919, was reported to have given a reward for the homeroom that had no tardy pupils for the week. The reward was a one-hour holiday from school.⁵¹² Following the homeroom period, students would then change from class to class.⁵¹³ Walker remembered that it was the librarian’s job to ring a hand bell for class changes and dismissal.⁵¹⁴ Students were given three minutes to change classes. This limited amount of time required students to carry their books, and go to their lockers in the morning, at lunch, and before they departed for home.⁵¹⁵

Around noon, students were given one hour for lunch. The students who lived in town would go home to eat. However, those students who lived outside of

⁵⁰⁶ Gravely, 2000, 2.

⁵⁰⁷ Drosick, 2000, 2. Kovach, 2000, 5. Wright, 2000, 2.

⁵⁰⁸ Wright, 2000, 2.

⁵⁰⁹ Drosick, 2000, 3.

⁵¹⁰ Hager, 1999, 1.

⁵¹¹ “Regular Assembly Held,” *The Pocahontas Indian*, November 1945, 2.

⁵¹² “Pocahontas Pickings,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 5 September 1916, 3.

⁵¹³ Hager, 1999, 1.

⁵¹⁴ Walker, 2000, 2.

⁵¹⁵ Gravely, 2000, 2-3. Reid, 2000, 5.

town either packed their lunch or did without. As mentioned earlier, the Pocahontas Fuel Company during the Great Depression era donated food to the school's Home Economics department for those students who could not go home to eat.⁵¹⁶ The federal school lunch program was established in 1943 and soon Pocahontas High School had a cafeteria added to its facilities.⁵¹⁷ The school newspaper, *The Pocahontas Indian*, reported that the addition of a cafeteria was to the delight of everyone, especially the bus students.⁵¹⁸ The paper estimated around 350 students eating in the lunchroom each day.⁵¹⁹ The cooks arrived each morning at 6:30 AM to prepare lunch. Kovach recalled that the early start was needed because the cafeteria workers prepared their own food from scratch. "Back then they made their own hamburger and hot dog buns. They did all the cooking. Very little was bought."⁵²⁰

The school day ended around 3:30 PM.⁵²¹ In the early years, there was very little social life after school. Edna Drosick and Maxine Hager recalled that there weren't a large number of activities for students to participate in. However, students loved to dance though the policy forbade them from doing so at the school.⁵²² The Tazewell County School Board had ordered that no public dances were to be held on school property. However, teachers were encouraged to chaperone dances held off campus so that no disturbances occur.⁵²³ Walker recalled the American Legion lending the students a room in the basement called the "Dig-In". After home games, the students would have dances there. The room was equipped with a jukebox, and the students were charged only two or three

⁵¹⁶ Drosick, 2000, 4.

⁵¹⁷ Walker, 2000, 2.

⁵¹⁸ The cafeteria staff consisted of two popular African-American cooks, Helen and Rosy.

⁵¹⁹ "School Cafeteria Opens," *The Pocahontas Indian*, November 1945, 1.

⁵²⁰ Kovach, 2000, 3.

⁵²¹ Drosick, 2000, 3.

⁵²² Hager, 1999, 2.

⁵²³ "School Term Cut to Seven Months," 1932, 1.

dollars for electricity.⁵²⁴ Hager recollected how skilled the dancers were from Pocahontas. “When people mentioned Pocahontas High School, people thought about dancing because we were such good dancers. They didn’t realize that was all we had to do.”⁵²⁵ However, Hager added that by the time that she returned as a teacher during the 1940s, the school had more activities for students. These activities included a May Day festival conducted by the Physical Education Department, a Junior-Senior Prom, a 60-piece band, and many exciting clubs and organizations.⁵²⁶

The Decline of the Coal Industry in Pocahontas

The building of mining towns, which began with Pocahontas in the early 1880s, and peaked during the 1920s, ended during the Great Depression.⁵²⁷ The availability of automobiles, credit, and improved roads freed the miner and his family from the company town.⁵²⁸ Consequently, very little residential or business construction took place in Pocahontas after 1920.⁵²⁹ The miners could now afford to live in rural areas within driving distances of the mines. Thus, communities such as Abbs Valley and Boissevain began to grow.

In Pocahontas, the Great Depression had forced many miners out of work. However, the start of World War II had invigorated the coal industry due to the Lend Lease Policy and the rearming of our own nation.⁵³⁰ Tazewell County coal production peaked in 1943.⁵³¹ However, coal’s economic dominance was nearing the end in Pocahontas. Following World War II, competition from alternative fuel

⁵²⁴ Walker, 2000, 6.

⁵²⁵ Hager, 1999, 2.

⁵²⁶ Ibid, 1999, 4. “Band Makes Progress, *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 1 June 1947, 6. A band was organized during the 1946-1947 school year under the direction of Jack Dishman. Dishman, a graduate of Pocahontas High School, was a well-known local musician and popular bandleader.

⁵²⁷ Shifflett, 33.

⁵²⁸ Hibbard, 15.

⁵²⁹ Gillenwater, 119.

⁵³⁰ Tams, 70.

⁵³¹ Hibbard, 30.

sources such as gas, oil, and hydroelectric power reduced the demand for coal.⁵³² Mechanization also made it possible to produce more coal using less labor.⁵³³ The more coal that could be excavated, the faster a mine could be worked out.⁵³⁴ The change to a more mechanized mining operation also reduced the coal company's labor force and was a factor in the economic depression that gripped Central Appalachia during the 1950s.⁵³⁵

The Industrial Survey conducted in 1929 warned that it would become necessary for the Town of Pocahontas to attract other forms of manufacturing if the population was to be maintained.⁵³⁶ However, the town had relied heavily on the coal industry and was ill prepared for the changes and transformations that would result from the retirement of the Pocahontas No. 1 mine in 1955.

⁵³² Levy, 7.

⁵³³ Howard J. Carswell, "Strides in Mine Mechanization Increase Production of Operations," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1950, 4. The trend toward mechanization began during the 1920s. By 1950, only three percent of coal production continued to be hand cut.

⁵³⁴ Shifflett, 33.

⁵³⁵ Lilly, 4.

⁵³⁶ Humbert, 16.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MODERN HIGH SCHOOL, 1955-1991

The Construction of a Modern High School

As already demonstrated, a rise in the student population during the late 1940s created overcrowded conditions at the Pocahontas Elementary School and Pocahontas High School. The wartime increase in the birthrate had accounted for a consistent growth in school enrollment that began to take effect during the late 1940s.⁵³⁷ Also, there were many ex-servicemen who returned to high school to complete their studies.⁵³⁸ In fact, the graduating class of 1947 was reported to be the largest in the history of Pocahontas High School.⁵³⁹

As an elementary student, David Kovach recalled attending classes in the Pocahontas Baptist Church. The utilization of the local church came as a result of the lack of classroom space in the existing buildings.⁵⁴⁰ In 1947, the Tazewell County School Board paid the Pocahontas Baptist Church \$1,500 for use of their Sunday school rooms for classroom space.⁵⁴¹ By 1950, this amount had increased to \$2,000 per year, as additional rooms were needed.⁵⁴² However, relief from these overcrowding conditions was on its way.

Shortly after his election, Governor John S. Battle carried out an election promise and recommended the allocation of \$75 million of state aid to the localities for school construction. The General Assembly approved Battle's proposal, and transferred an additional \$11 million from a sinking fund to the

⁵³⁷ "U.S. Enrollment in Schools Rises," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 8 September 1955, 8.

⁵³⁸ Walthall, "Tazewell Schools: A Sentimental Journey." 1970, 8. Buck, 397-398. The *G.I. Bill of Rights* led, in Virginia, to the establishment of the *Committee on Veterans' Education*. One of the first activities of this committee was to prepare, in 1945, a bulletin entitled *Educational Opportunities in Virginia*, which was designed for veterans returning from the war. This bulletin gave a brief description of the opportunities for education in the colleges and high schools of Virginia.

⁵³⁹ "High School Graduating Class is One of the Largest in History," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 1947, 10.

⁵⁴⁰ Kovach, 2000, 1.

⁵⁴¹ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 11 September 1946.

⁵⁴² School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 13 July 1950

Literary Fund for school construction loans.⁵⁴³ In August 1950, the Tazewell County School Board announced that \$450,000 would be allocated for the construction of a new public high school building in Pocahontas. The money was authorized by the Virginia General Assembly House Bill No. 96, which provided state grants to assist the localities in the construction of public school buildings.⁵⁴⁴

In 1953, the Tazewell County School Board purchased from the Pocahontas Fuel Company a 14-acre lot for the sum of \$18,100 as the site for the new school.⁵⁴⁵ The site was located just west of the Town of Pocahontas and had served as the athletic field for the school and community. By 1954, the school was under construction on the 14-acre lot, and the cost of the building was estimated to be approximately \$600,338. The facility was designed to include an auditorium with a seating capacity of 500; a gymnasium, with a seating capacity of 640; a kitchen and cafeteria with a seating capacity of 200; a library; an office suite; a music room; a home economics department; a science department; and ten additional classrooms. In the fall of 1955 it was announced that the new Pocahontas High School would be opened for the first time.⁵⁴⁶ Louise Blizzard, a teacher at the school since 1948, remembered the facilities being so much more modern than the school on the hill.⁵⁴⁷ However, Jerry Gravely recalled it being difficult to give up something that had been a part of your life for so long. “I saw girls leaving the old school crying. It was a sad occasion.”⁵⁴⁸ Kovach recalled that with the construction of the new school the overcrowding conditions were remedied since the elementary school was able to utilize the old high school building.⁵⁴⁹ However,

⁵⁴³ Pearson and Fuller, 1303.

⁵⁴⁴ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 9 August 1950.

⁵⁴⁵ Tazewell County Deed Book #214, 256-257.

⁵⁴⁶ “12,000 Pupils Expected for County Schools,” *Clinch Valley News*, 19 August 1955, 1.

⁵⁴⁷ Louise J. Blizzard. Interviewed by the author, 2 May 2000, interview 6, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 4.

⁵⁴⁸ Gravely, 2000, 3.

⁵⁴⁹ Kovach, 2000, 1.



Old Pocahontas High School as it stands today, a victim of decades of neglect and vandalism. (Photograph taken by the author)

the school building would soon outlive its usefulness. The structure was donated to the Town of Pocahontas in 1967 and used as a recreational facility.⁵⁵⁰ In 1971, the building was auctioned off and purchased by A. Eugene Edmonds for \$1,500.⁵⁵¹ In 1982, it was reported by the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* that the once remarkable structure of the community had become an eyesore.⁵⁵² Today, the building stands in ruin, a victim of years of neglect. However, one can imagine the influence and the majestic presence the school must have presented at the height of the coal industry in Pocahontas.

The Transition Years

During the 1950s, the Pocahontas Fuel Company began to sell off its residential property and either discharged or transferred most of its employees.⁵⁵³ The coal industry that had dominated the life of the community from its earliest years had declined. In 1955, the Pocahontas No. 1 mine, which had produced over 44,000,000 tons of coal, was closed.⁵⁵⁴ As a result, there began a decline in the population and economic conditions of the community.⁵⁵⁵

The population of Pocahontas, which had totaled 2,410 in 1950, had decreased to 1,313 by 1960.⁵⁵⁶ However, there seemed to be an increase in the population of the other two communities served by Pocahontas High School. Although affected by the closing of the mines, the communities of Abbs Valley

⁵⁵⁰ Brewster, 149.

⁵⁵¹ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 4 April 1972.

⁵⁵² Karen Kaplan, "Historic Pocahontas Push is Not Without Problems," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 1 August 1982, 11C.

⁵⁵³ Walker, 1964. This period saw an overall decline in coal towns throughout the Pocahontas coalfield region. Coal companies began to sell off camp houses to individual miners. The companies found the homes difficult to maintain and shifted the responsibility for taxes, repairs, and other services to the miner.

⁵⁵⁴ "Pocahontas No. 1 Retires," 1955, 1.

⁵⁵⁵ Pocahontas High School, *Evaluation Narrative Report*, October 1968, 4. This report was a self-study conducted by the faculty of Pocahontas High School. The study was designed to improve the educational programs of the school.

⁵⁵⁶ Jim Thweatt. *A Survey of School Building Needs: Tazewell County, 1971* (State Department of Education: Richmond, Virginia, 1971), 4.

and Boissevain had an estimated population of 2,500.⁵⁵⁷ Employment opportunities were available to its residents in the coalmines of Bishop, Virginia, or in the shops and mines at Gary, West Virginia, some 25 miles north.⁵⁵⁸ Their inhabitants were much younger than the residents of Pocahontas and had a greater proportion of school age children. Thus, it was reported in 1968 that only 18 percent of the school population were residents of Pocahontas. The remaining 82 percent came from the outlying communities of Abbs Valley and Boissevain, Virginia.⁵⁵⁹

Following the closing of the mines, businesses began to move out of Pocahontas. By 1962, there were only a few privately owned businesses left.⁵⁶⁰ Gillenwater's study described the town in the aftermath of this decline as possessing many vacant buildings existing in a poor state of repair.⁵⁶¹ Furthermore, Levy identified the typical mining town during this period as "cluttered depressed villages void of any community spirit." However, Pocahontas was different in that regard from the typical mining town. The Pocahontas Fuel Company's office and store were still located there, and the town possessed a favorable climate, stable social conditions, and a physical layout which tended to favor comfortable and healthful living, an improvement over conditions usually found in coal mining culture.⁵⁶² Pocahontas did not appear likely to become a ghost town, but rather its assets were causing it to become a haven for the retired, elderly population.⁵⁶³

⁵⁵⁷ "Evaluation Narrative Report," 1968, 4.

⁵⁵⁸ Walker, 31.

⁵⁵⁹ "Evaluation Narrative Report," 1968, 10. School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 9 September 1969. Tazewell County Historical Society, 28. The decrease in school age population in Pocahontas, Virginia is best reflected by the declining enrollment of Pocahontas Elementary School. In 1954, prior to the closing of the mines, Pocahontas Elementary had an enrollment of 433, but by 1969 that number had decreased to 179. Likewise, the increase of school age children in the communities of Abbs Valley and Boissevain are reflected by the increase of instructors at the two schools. The number of teachers at Boissevain Elementary School grew from four in 1924 to nine in 1960. The one room school constructed at Abbs Valley in 1940 grew from two teachers at its inception to nine teachers in 1949. A new modern brick building was constructed at Abbs Valley in 1963, and the two schools were consolidated.

⁵⁶⁰ Walker, 30.

⁵⁶¹ Gillenwater, 119.

⁵⁶² Walker, 30.

⁵⁶³ Ibid, 31.

During the 1970s, the Town of Pocahontas began to capitalize on its historic coal-mining heritage. In 1972, the town was placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and National Register of Historic Places.⁵⁶⁴ Since then, there has been a plan in place to turn the town into an exhibition for tourists seeking to learn what life was like in an early coal town.⁵⁶⁵ In 1989, that plan received a boost when the Pocahontas Exhibition Mine was reopened after a five-year hiatus.⁵⁶⁶ The mine is considered by some to be the focal point for the revitalization of the tourism industry in Pocahontas. Following its reopening in 1989, the mine attracted more than 4,000 tourists and incurred more than \$22,000 in revenue for its opening season.⁵⁶⁷ Though many of the buildings show neglect and disrepair, there is hope from community leaders that soon tourism will revitalize the town. Some feel that there is enough left of the architectural fabric to illustrate the town's historically significant qualities. However, without substantial funding by private and public sources, efforts by the local residents to preserve the historical integrity of the mining town may never be possible.⁵⁶⁸

Due to the closing of the mines, the downward economic trend was perhaps best reflected in the number of families in Pocahontas that were dependent on welfare from local agencies. In 1968, Bessie Walker reported that some forty families were dependent on public assistance. In addition, some twenty-five to thirty families received income from the kind of work where employees received

⁵⁶⁴ Robert Freis, "Where Everyone Knew His Place." *Inform*, 1992 Fall, 28-30.

⁵⁶⁵ Babette Pascasio, "Virginia Officials Look at Pocahontas Restoration," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 1991, 5. Since being placed on these registers, Pocahontas has received numerous grants from the Historic Resource Office to restore the opera house, the Presbyterian Church, and the Emma Yates Library.

⁵⁶⁶ The Pocahontas Exhibition Mine was first opened in 1938. The mine had closed in 1984 when the cost to insure the project escalated to \$15,000 per year. However, the mine reopened in 1989 with assistance from the Town of Pocahontas, the Tazewell County Board of Supervisors, the Pocahontas Women's Club, and volunteer laborers needed to make the necessary repairs in the mine. The laborers made the repairs necessary to acquire a new policy at an annual rate of \$3,879 per year.

⁵⁶⁷ Jeannie Soos, "Pocahontas Mine: Reopening Teaches Lesson in Perseverance," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 1990, 6.

⁵⁶⁸ Freis, *Where Everyone Knew His Place*, 1992, 30.

only sub-standard wages.⁵⁶⁹ However, not all of the inhabitants of Pocahontas were poor. There were many families having average and near average incomes.⁵⁷⁰

The opportunities for employment in the community were inadequate to the demands of the graduating classes. Therefore, many of the graduates were forced to leave to seek gainful employment.⁵⁷¹ This situation was common throughout the Central Appalachian coalfield region as many residents during the 1950s and 1960s migrated to urban industrial areas in the north and midwest.⁵⁷² This migration of graduates would contribute to the steady decline of school age residents throughout the next several decades.

During this era of transition, Pocahontas High School was under the strong leadership of Gaza Kovach. Kovach, a former graduate and resident of Pocahontas, served as Principal from 1952 until 1971. Bessie Walker considered Kovach to be the “hardest working principal” ever to serve at the school. He was enthusiastic, resourceful, and dedicated to both his school and community.⁵⁷³ Kovach’s work ethic was a throwback to earlier days when the immigrants first occupied the coal towns. The coal company housing was an improvement over his parents’ dwellings in their native homeland. Therefore, the Kovach children were taught to take care of their possessions. This is where Kovach’s philosophy towards his school began to emerge. Kovach’s son David believed that his pride and ownership in the school were a result of his father’s immigrant upbringing, and he tried to instill this pride in the students and their parents.⁵⁷⁴ Veronica Daughtery credited the pristine condition of the building today to the pride and ownership that Kovach had in the

⁵⁶⁹ “Evaluation Narrative Report,” 1968, 5.

⁵⁷⁰ Walker, 26.

⁵⁷¹ “Evaluation Narrative Report,” 1968,12.

⁵⁷² Everett A. Lilly, “Leaving Clear Fork Valley: A Story of Appalachian Migration” (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1997), 4. Levy, 8.

⁵⁷³ Walker, 2000, 5.

⁵⁷⁴ Kovach, 2000, 5. Kovach’s parents were Hungarian immigrants.

school's facilities.⁵⁷⁵ Florence Crouch, a custodian at Pocahontas High School, recalled Kovach disciplining her for having her foot on the wall. "I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing and he caught me with my foot on the wall. He didn't like that. He jumped all over me."⁵⁷⁶ Kovach considered it important that Pocahontas, as the smallest school in Tazewell County, look better than the larger high schools at Graham, Tazewell, or Richlands. It was not beneath him to mow the grass, paint, or clean out lockers. Consequently, walking across the gym floor in street shoes was not tolerated, and carving your initials in the library table meant that you were punished and required to purchase a new one or to help him refurbish the old one.⁵⁷⁷

Kovach's leadership style was described by several as authoritarian and often dictatorial.⁵⁷⁸ Walker recalled Kovach having to give his final consent on every decision. "No one did anything without his approval." He was also a strict disciplinarian who could be both iron handed and gentle. Kovach began each year by reciting the rules to the student body. From then on students were expected to tow the line.⁵⁷⁹ Kovach's son David recalled his father as being especially hard on family members attending school there.

My brother and I were constantly under a microscope. People were always watching to see if we got preferential treatment. One comment he made to me when I went from elementary school to high school was; "If you are within two rooms of trouble, I'm going to punish you. That way everybody will know that you are not going to get away with anything." Once, I walked into the bathroom and smoke rolled out. He caught the smokers and I was taken to the office and paddled too. I wasn't smoking. I was just using the bathroom. That was just his style. He didn't want us to get away with anything.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁵ Veronica Daughtery, 2000, 8.

⁵⁷⁶ Florence J. Crouch, interviewed by the author, 9 June 2000, interview 10, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, WV.

⁵⁷⁷ Veronica Daughtery, 2000, 8. Kovach, 2000, 5.

⁵⁷⁸ Blizzard, 2000, 2. Walker, 2000, 5.

⁵⁷⁹ Veronica Daughtery, 2000, 2. Reid, 2000, 2.

⁵⁸⁰ Kovach, 2000, 4.

Like many principals during this period, Kovach frequently used the paddle. Rodney Reid, a Pocahontas High School graduate in 1972, recalled there being very few suspensions. Furthermore, Reid remembered Kovach being especially concerned with the appearance of male students. “If you needed a hair cut, he took you downtown and got your haircut for you.”⁵⁸¹

Perhaps Kovach’s greatest impact might have been centered on the students and their instructional and career goals. In an era where opportunities in the coal industry were dwindling, Kovach inspired and motivated students to seek higher aspirations in their post-graduate endeavors, encouraging students to go further in their education than Pocahontas High School. He also motivated those students choosing to go out into the workforce to acquire the basic skills necessary to earn a successful living. David Kovach recalled his father being equally proud of the student that graduated from Pocahontas High School and entered the work force with the ability to balance a checkbook or fill out an income tax booklet. “He was as proud of those kids as he was the academic achiever.” Maxine Hager remembered Kovach as being very supportive of the teachers’ efforts to improve instructional practices and student achievement.

My best memory of this support was when I was teaching seventh grade. We had some students who had experienced problems in the sixth grade. Together, Gaza and I purchased special reading materials and used familiar situations to create interest. We rejoiced in May when we tested the students. They had progressed far above grade level. He helped make it possible.⁵⁸²

Roberts reflected on Kovach’s love for the children that attended the school. “He had two loves in his life besides his family. One was Pocahontas High School and

⁵⁸¹ Reid, 2000, 2.

⁵⁸² Hager, 2000, 5.

the other was the children that attended there.”⁵⁸³ In the area of continuous improvement, Kovach led by example. Prior to his death in 1975, he had taken a leave of absence from Tazewell County Public Schools to pursue a doctoral degree in education.

Pocahontas High School has been fortunate to have many capable school administrators who have contributed to the continued success of the school program. However, because of the level of his commitment and longevity with the institution, Gaza Kovach emerges as the educational leader of the modern era having had the most lasting influence on the school today. His legacy is a continued source of pride within the community, and among the teachers and students from Pocahontas High School.

The Implementation of a Twelve Year System

With the construction of four new high schools in Tazewell County during the mid-1950s, the School Board was ready to announce the expansion of its educational program. In what was called a surprise resolution, the Tazewell County School Board adopted the 12-year school system, with implementation set for the fall of 1958.⁵⁸⁴ The *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* called the decision “the most important and far-reaching educational step taken in recent Tazewell County history.”⁵⁸⁵ The proposal was designed to bring Tazewell County in line with the other school systems that had adopted the plan advocated several years before by the State Board of Education.⁵⁸⁶ The plan received unanimous approval from the Tazewell County School Board.⁵⁸⁷ The launching of *Sputnik* by the Soviet Union in 1957 had created public concern about the quality of education throughout the

⁵⁸³ Roberts, 2000, 2.

⁵⁸⁴ “School Board Announces Intentions of Starting 12-Year System in 1958,” *Clinch Valley News*, 4 April 1958, 1.

⁵⁸⁵ “Tazewell County Adopts 12-Year School System,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 2 April 1958, 1.

⁵⁸⁶ Walker, 33.

⁵⁸⁷ “Tazewell County Adopts 12-Year School System, 1958, 1.

United States.⁵⁸⁸ A resolution passed by the School Board indicated that they felt justified in their actions due to the growing nationwide demands placed on public education.⁵⁸⁹ The transition was made statewide when Nelson County added the new grade in 1960.⁵⁹⁰

The extra year needed for the implementation of the plan was added at the eighth grade level. As a result, Pocahontas High School acquired a five-year educational program. The change took place beginning with the seventh grade class in 1958. This group was required to attend an additional year of high school. There was no ninth grade class during the 1958-1959 school year since eighth grade students from the previous year were promoted to the tenth grade.⁵⁹¹ Consequently, there were no graduates of Pocahontas High School in 1962.⁵⁹² However, the situation became standardized during the 1962-1963 school year, as there were five classes of normal size in the high school.⁵⁹³

The new 12-year system, with the accompanying curricular additions, enhanced the enrollment at Pocahontas High School.⁵⁹⁴ As a result of the mine closures in Pocahontas, the enrollment at the high school had dropped from 424 in 1957 to 358 by 1962. However, with the additional grade, the enrollment increased to 445 for the 1963-1964 school year.⁵⁹⁵ During the 1962-1963 school year, Pocahontas High School was restructured to include grades eight through twelve.

⁵⁸⁸ Homer H. Hickham, Jr. *October Sky* (New York, New York: Random House Publishing, 1998), 29-30. Homer Hickham described the effect that the launching of *Sputnik* had on the neighboring coal town of Coalwood, West Virginia, which was located north of Pocahontas. He recalled how the Russian satellite was the topic of conversation throughout the coal camp. Following the launch, Big Creek High School Principal R.L. Turner read a resolution over the intercom that had been passed by the Big Creek Student Council. The resolution called for a commitment to academic excellence for the remainder of the school year.

⁵⁸⁹ "Tazewell County Adopts 12-Year System, 1958, 1.

⁵⁹⁰ Mullins, 116.

⁵⁹¹ "Tazewell County Adopts 12-Year School System," 1958, 1.

⁵⁹² There were few graduates in Tazewell County that year aside from a few students that transferred in from other school systems.

⁵⁹³ Walker, 33.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 34.

⁵⁹⁵ Pocahontas School Records, Pocahontas High School, Pocahontas, Virginia, 1957-1964.

Accordingly, the absence of a junior high school within the community allowed students to continue coming directly from the two feeder elementary schools.⁵⁹⁶

The statewide purpose for this new grade was to emphasize careful student guidance and to promote opportunities for pupils to explore their interests and talents. Therefore, students could make wiser decisions concerning their future vocation.⁵⁹⁷ Consequently, the number of high school credits required for graduation was increased for the freshman class from 16 to 20 based on a new five-year high school program in 1959.⁵⁹⁸

In the early years of the school, primarily the basic subjects were taught. However, the additional grade and the added educational requirements paved the way for the accession of a more diverse curriculum and the advent of vocational education at Pocahontas High School. By 1962, the school had over 50 course offerings, of which 16 were required and 36 elective. Over half of the students were enrolled in vocational education courses.⁵⁹⁹ Vocational opportunities at the school were later enhanced through the construction of the Tazewell County Vocational School, which provided students in the eleventh and twelfth grades the opportunity to receive training in five initial programs that included cosmetology, masonry, auto mechanics, electricity, and carpentry.⁶⁰⁰

The Continued Support and Influence of the Coal Company

The Pocahontas Fuel Company continued to support Pocahontas High School after the mines there closed in 1955. The Pocahontas Fuel Company retained its offices in Pocahontas, Virginia. Kovach recalled the company assisting his father with the construction of the football stadium, providing materials and

⁵⁹⁶ The two feeder elementary schools were the newly consolidated Abbs Valley-Boissevain Elementary School and the Pocahontas Elementary School. Pocahontas Elementary School was consolidated with Abbs Valley-Boissevain Elementary School in 1971.

⁵⁹⁷ Buck, 461.

⁵⁹⁸ Tazewell County Heritage Book, 24.

⁵⁹⁹ "Evaluation Narrative Report," 1968, 17-18. Walker, 53.

⁶⁰⁰ "Tazewell Board Considers Vocational-Tech School," *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 1964, 3.

aiding with its construction.⁶⁰¹ Bill Stone, Principal of Pocahontas High School from 1972-1981, recalled the Pocahontas Fuel Company treating the school as if it were an arm of the company. “The Pocahontas Fuel Company used to be the greatest supporter of schools in Tazewell County. If I needed a bulldozer or lumber, the company would help us almost instantly. They were so supportive that we tried not to abuse them when they would offer their help. If we had a problem with the water, they would send us bottled water.” However, Stone remembered that support ending when the Pocahontas Fuel Company moved their offices out of Pocahontas.⁶⁰²

During the early 1970s, support for the instructional program at Pocahontas High School came from a prosperous coal operator who had at one time lived in the area. Having left the region years earlier, Oakey Alexander, a former employee of the Pocahontas Fuel Company, never forgot the place where he got his start. In an effort to improve the quality of education in the community, Alexander endowed Pocahontas High School with a grant to create a vocational program and facility. The \$125,000 grant was given to Concord College in Athens, West Virginia to disseminate among Mercer and Tazewell County schools for the implementation of educational programs. The grant was designed to promote greater opportunities in vocational education for students enrolled in the eighth, ninth, and tenth grade at Pocahontas High School.⁶⁰³ In 1972, the industrial arts complex was added to the school facility and was located in the former African-American elementary school one-mile east of Pocahontas High School.⁶⁰⁴ The Industrial Arts complex operated until 1991, when it was relocated to a mobile unit

⁶⁰¹ Kovach, 2000, 4.

⁶⁰² Billy R. Stone. Interviewed by the author, 10 May 2000, interview 7, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 2.

⁶⁰³ “Pocahontas Schools Will Receive Grant,” *Clinch Valley News*, 7 October 1970, 3.

⁶⁰⁴ “Self-Study Evaluation,” 1980, Section II, 13.

adjacent to the current high school. Today, Pocahontas High School operates the only secondary industrial arts program in Tazewell County.

The Consolidation Issue

In the early part of the 20th Century, high schools with graduating classes of fewer than twenty students typified schooling in many places. However following World War II, American education began to reorganize and consolidate.⁶⁰⁵ Consolidation in Virginia accelerated during the post war years. The 1940s and 1950s saw a reduction in the number of high schools in Virginia. In 1940, there were 624 high schools enrolling 122,073 students. In 1957, there were 417 high schools enrolling 227,314 students.⁶⁰⁶

During the 1950s and 1960s, a wave of school consolidation occurred as a result of a report produced by James S. Conant of Harvard University. The Conant Report indicated that high schools had to be large enough to provide a comprehensive and diverse curriculum. Throughout the nation, many school systems followed Conant's recommendations and, as a result, many large high schools were built during the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁰⁷ Larger schools were considered advantageous for high schools because it was believed that students attending them could be offered a variety of courses, expanded athletic and social activities, and could gain access to needed libraries and laboratories. The consolidation movement in Virginia continued to gain momentum despite opposition from the rural communities.⁶⁰⁸ However, the progress of such consolidation depended on improved highways and pupil transportation.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁵ Alan Peskin, *The Imperfect Union*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

⁶⁰⁶ Pearson and Fuller, 1304.

⁶⁰⁷ James S. Conant, *The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 1959), 249.

⁶⁰⁸ Buck, 459.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 459. Pearson and Fuller, 1304. In 1942, the state legislature provided \$500,000 to aid local school divisions in meeting the cost of pupil transportation and increased that amount to \$3.5 million in 1950.

Though Pocahontas faced the hardship of losing its primary employer when the mines closed in 1955, the student enrollment at Pocahontas High School remained steady for several decades. The enrollment remained consistent mainly because of the shift in population to the residential areas of Abbs Valley and Boissevain, Virginia and the altering of the grade structure at the high school level.

During the late 1940s, the population from mining towns began to relocate to the rural outlying areas. The residents of the rural communities of Abbs Valley and Boissevain found work in the neighboring mines of Bishop, Virginia and the shops and mines at U.S. Steel in Gary, West Virginia. However, after a brief flirtation with prosperity during the 1970s, the coal industry began to decline once again during the early 1980s.⁶¹⁰ In 1982, the mining operations in Bishop, Virginia were closed. As a result, many families began to leave these communities in search of work. This scenario was typical throughout Southwest Virginia as the region's population dropped ten percent between 1980 and 1990.⁶¹¹

Another reason for the high school's steady enrollment was the alteration of its grade structure. In 1971, Pocahontas Elementary School was closed and the students that attended there were transferred to Abbs Valley-Boissevain Elementary School.⁶¹² As a result, the elementary school suffered from overcrowding conditions.⁶¹³ Thus, the seventh grade was relocated to Pocahontas High School at the start of the 1972-1973 school year to remedy the problem.⁶¹⁴ This caused the student enrollment to climb from 369 in 1971 to 453 in 1972 as a result of the additional grade. Furthermore, from 1972 on, a steady decline in the

⁶¹⁰ Levy, 18.

⁶¹¹ Mullins, 148.

⁶¹² School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 1 June 1971. Thweatt, 4. During the same year, the Virginia Department of Education conducted a survey of school building needs in Tazewell County. The committee saw no need for new construction or additions for Pocahontas High School in the foreseeable future. However, they did determine that if the enrollment continued to decline, it would be necessary to alter the school structure and the attendance area in order to provide pupils with a high quality education program.

⁶¹³ Billy R. Stone, 2000, 6.

⁶¹⁴ Tazewell County Heritage Book, 26.

student enrollment at Pocahontas High School occurred. By the end of the decade, the enrollment had dropped to 341.⁶¹⁵

As the student population at Pocahontas High School continued to decline during the 1980s, rumors of consolidation were prevalent throughout the three communities served by the school. In 1987, the Tazewell County School Board released its “six-year plan” which forecasted the distinct possibility that Pocahontas High School might face future closing.⁶¹⁶ Bessie Walker, Principal of Pocahontas High School from 1987 to 1991, remembered the maintenance of the school being neglected during that period. She recollected being told that the reason for this was that the board was considering closing the school in the near future. During those years, Walker denied herself vacations out of fear that she would come back and find that the school had been closed.⁶¹⁷ As the 1980s came to a conclusion, a series of events jeopardized the school’s future. These events would hold the communities of Pocahontas, Abbs Valley, and Boissevain in a state of uncertainty, while the fate of their high school rested in the hands of school and public officials.

During the fall of 1989, it was discovered that neighboring Graham High School had suffered structural damage from sinkholes beneath the building.⁶¹⁸ The students at Graham High School were temporarily housed at Graham Middle School, and a “split schedule” was instituted.⁶¹⁹ However, the students returned to the high school in January after the facility was declared temporarily safe and portions of the building were condemned. Amidst speculation that the condition of

⁶¹⁵ “Self Study Evaluation 1979-1980,” 9.

⁶¹⁶ William Archer, “Progress in the Valley,” *The Marketer*, 1 July 1987, 4.

⁶¹⁷ Walker, 2000, 7.

⁶¹⁸ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 13 November 1989. Several architectural firms reported that the building suffered from a reactivated sinkhole in the school’s north wing and cracking in the interior and exterior of the structure.

⁶¹⁹ Mary Rice, “Graham High on Early Shift,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1989, 1. Students of Graham High attended school in the morning hours while students of Graham Middle attended school during the afternoon.

the building would worsen, Tazewell County Superintendent of Schools Frank Cosby began to explore the option of constructing a new Graham High School.⁶²⁰

In June 1990, within the communities of Pocahontas High School rumors were running rampant concerning possible consolidation. Don Payne, Tazewell County Supervisor from the Northern District, received a copy of a letter sent from Cosby to Tazewell County Administrator Lavern Bechtel that read: “The Board of Supervisors are requested to approve the School Board’s application for literary loans of \$3.5 million to fund a new Graham High School, which would also serve Pocahontas High School.”⁶²¹ Immediately, Payne began to contact members of the community to inform them of Cosby’s plan.⁶²² John Roberts, a resident of Abbs Valley, recollected receiving a phone call from Mr. Payne. “Mr. Payne contacted me and told me what Mr. Cosby had on the agenda. Mr. Payne and I started calling people in the community. Others joined in with the phone survey and we formed an organization called SOS, which stood for “Save our School.” Roberts, who was elected President and spokesperson for the group, recalled donations being taken up at the first meeting. “We felt like we might have to have legal advice so we took up donations and collected \$787 for legal fees.”⁶²³

Opposition to Cosby’s plan of consolidation surfaced throughout the communities of Pocahontas High School. Roberts described the communities as being in an uproar “from one end of Pocahontas to the other end of Abbs Valley.”⁶²⁴ Meanwhile, the Board of Supervisors for several meetings had refused to grant Cosby permission to apply for the \$3.5 million from the Literary Fund and

⁶²⁰ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 12 February 1990. During its February meeting, the Tazewell County School Board voted to authorize the Superintendent to submit an application for literary loans and VPSA bonds necessary to construct a new school at Graham.

⁶²¹ Andrea Rose, “Supervisors Put GHS Plans on Hold,” *Clinch Valley News*, 13 June 1990, 1.

⁶²² Beth Grindstaff, Interviewed by the author, 14 July 2000, interview 15, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 2.

⁶²³ John Roberts, Interviewed by the author, 17 July 2000, interview 14, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 3.

⁶²⁴ Roberts, 2000, 3.

\$7.5 million in bonds. Supervisor Don Payne accused Cosby of attempting to close Pocahontas High School without the parents and residents of the community knowing what was happening. Thus, the construction of a new Graham High School was put on hold until a public hearing could be held and the people could have their say on the issue of consolidation of Pocahontas and Graham High Schools.⁶²⁵ The public hearing was set for July 16, 1990 at Graham Middle School.⁶²⁶

On the night of the public hearing over 800 citizens, many from the Pocahontas area, turned out to voice their concern and opposition to the closing of Pocahontas High School. School Board member Beth Grindstaff described the crowd that night as hostile.⁶²⁷ Abbs Valley resident John Roberts depicted the mood of some of the residents in attendance as being comparable to a “lynch mob.”⁶²⁸

The highly emotional public hearing lasted two hours while parents of Graham High School students expressed concern for the safety of their children and the residents from the Pocahontas area turned out to voice opposition to consolidation.⁶²⁹ Pocahontas Town Council member Jeannie Soos spoke out on the negative effect that consolidation would have on the Town’s efforts to rebuild a declining economy around tourism. Furthermore, Soos said that closing Pocahontas High School would reduce property values and encourage its residents and businesses to relocate.⁶³⁰ Another issue addressed by the crowd was safety concerns regarding pupil transportation. The roads between Bluefield and

⁶²⁵ Andrea Rose, “Supervisors Nix GHS Funding,” *Clinch Valley News*, 11 July 1990, 1.

⁶²⁶ Eddie-Lee Isom, “School Plan Awaits Input,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 10 July 1990, 10.

⁶²⁷ Grindstaff, 2000, 1.

⁶²⁸ Roberts, 2000, 6.

⁶²⁹ Eddie-Lee Isom, “New Graham High School: Where?” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 17 July 1990, 1.

⁶³⁰ Andrea Rose, “Supervisors to Pick New School,” *Clinch Valley News*, 18 July 1990, 1.

Pocahontas were considered by some to be dangerous. Many were worried about the long bus trips their children would have to take.⁶³¹

Some residents from the Pocahontas area spoke, giving their approval to a regional school at Falls Mills. Roberts, a proponent of constructing a consolidated high school on a neutral site, believed that a regional school would give both groups a chance to come in and start afresh creating a single identity.⁶³² However, that idea was later dropped as preliminary construction costs for the site in Falls Mills were estimated as being too high. At the conclusion of the public hearing, the Board of Supervisors approved the request by the Tazewell County School Board to apply for the loans necessary to construct the new Graham High School provided that the proposed site was agreed upon by a majority of both boards. By August, the controversy over the site selection was resolved as the Board of Supervisors accepted the School Board's plan to construct the new facility on Graham High School's football practice field adjacent to the school.⁶³³ However, no decision was made to close Pocahontas High School and the consolidation issue remained unresolved.⁶³⁴

“Hammer Time”

As the 1990-1991 school year began, the future status of Pocahontas High School remained uncertain. However, as autumn was approaching, the outlook for the school's football team looked surprisingly optimistic.

⁶³¹ Isom, “New Graham School: Where?” 1990, 10. Jim Talbert, “Cosby Says Consolidation Possible.” *Clinch Valley News*, 13 June 1990, 1. At the June 1990 school board meeting, Superintendent Frank Cosby provided the board with transportation figures regarding the consolidation of Pocahontas High with Graham High School. According to estimates compiled by Transportation Director Ray Wimmer, the longest distance a student would be bused was 21.8 miles from Abbs Valley to Bluefield. The longest travel time was estimated to be no more than an hour and five minutes. Consolidation would also mean the purchase of two additional buses.

⁶³² Roberts, 2000, 5.

⁶³³ Andrea Rose, “GHS Site Controversy Resolved.” *Clinch Valley News*, 1 August 1990, 1. Jim Talbert, “Report Details Site Selection at Graham.” *Clinch Valley News*, 25 July 1990, 3. The Site Selection Committee reported to the Tazewell County School Board that the site in Falls Mills had an inadequate water supply and a high excavation cost. It was also reported that it would cost an additional \$3.1 million to develop the site for school construction. The property at Falls Mills was supported by many from the Pocahontas area and was one of nine proposed sites examined by the committee.

In subsequent years, the high school's football teams had struggled for survival due to an often small and declining school enrollment. Throughout the school's modern history there were few championships to celebrate and at times the school failed to produce sufficient numbers to field a team. For example, after a successful 9-1 season in 1953 under the direction of R.S. Hager, the school's football team struggled to attract the numbers needed to sustain the team following the closing of the Pocahontas mines in 1955.⁶³⁵ The boys in grades 8 through 11 were neither mature nor large enough to compete against schools in its vicinity, nearly all of which had much larger student bodies from which to recruit players. As a result, Pocahontas High School did not have a competitive team for six years, from 1957 to 1963.⁶³⁶ The high school experienced a similar problem in 1975 when the team failed to produce the number of participants needed to field a squad.⁶³⁷ However, the Tazewell County School Board granted Principal Bill Stone approval to reinstate the football program for the 1976-1977 school year. Stone wrote to the School Board that he expected to have a minimum of the 25 participants needed to meet the recommended Virginia High School League standards.⁶³⁸ During the 1980s, the Pocahontas High School Indians were considered one of the worst teams in Virginia, amassing at one time a 26 game losing streak.⁶³⁹ However, with 12 starters returning and the largest number of participants in years, the combination of community spirit in the summer's fight against consolidation along with the optimism surrounding the upcoming season

⁶³⁴ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 16 July 1990.

⁶³⁵ Larry Hypes, "1953 Indians Blazed Warpath." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 3 October 1990, 1B.

⁶³⁶ Walker, 43.

⁶³⁷ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 4 April 1975. The Virginia High School League recommended a minimum of 25 participants.

⁶³⁸ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 2 December 1975.

⁶³⁹ Chris Morris, "Wyatt's Indians Ready for Battle." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 9 September 1990, 1B. Brad Lifford, "In Small Town of Pocahontas Football is Serious Business." *Bristol Herald Courier*, 25 October 1990, 1B.

would serve as a catalyst in the revival of community pride and support for the school's football team.⁶⁴⁰

The 1990 Pocahontas High School football team rolled to a 9-1 regular season record. Throughout the season, community support for the school and team was renewed. The streets in the Town of Pocahontas were ornamented with orange and black (the school's colors), and the town's businesses decorated their windows with Indian regalia to reflect their school spirit and community pride.⁶⁴¹ "Hammer Time", the team's unofficial motto, was painted everywhere.⁶⁴² Head Coach Bobby Wyatt described the success of the team as "just what the doctor ordered for the town."⁶⁴³ Following games, residents of the Pocahontas High School community danced in the parking lot and lined the main drag of the town "hooting and hollering" at every car that passed.⁶⁴⁴ One writer described that spirit in the town as the "likes of which hadn't been seen since the coal boom." When the team returned from a win at Herndon, West Virginia, over 200 residents greeted them. Wyatt recalled that most of these fans had just returned from the game. "I'd say we had about five times more people than Herndon there."⁶⁴⁵ Roberts also remembered large crowds attending road games that season. "The crowd of people followed these youngsters no matter what school you went to."⁶⁴⁶ At the conclusion of the regular season, parents and fans presented the team with a dinner at the Pocahontas Methodist Church, which was followed by a dance at the historic Pocahontas Opera House to honor Pocahontas's first playoff team since 1978.⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁰ Shawn Roop, "Pocahontas Indians Appear Strong with 12 Starting Players Returning." *Tazewell County Free Press*, 8 August 1990, 5.

⁶⁴¹ Chris Morris, "Indians Hope to Hammer Raiders." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 21 September 1990, 1B.

⁶⁴² Roberts, 2000, 7.

⁶⁴³ "Pocahontas Goes to 4-0 With 7-6 Win." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 22 September 1990, 6. Jim Talbert, "Wyatt Gets Statewide Recognition." *Clinch Valley News*, 26 December 1990, 9. The Associated Press named Coach Bobby Wyatt as the 1990 Virginia Class A Coach of the Year.

⁶⁴⁴ Dale Mullins, "Pocahontas Wins Indian War, 21-13." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 1990, 1C.

⁶⁴⁵ Lifford, "In Small Town of Pocahontas," 1990, 5B.

⁶⁴⁶ Roberts, 2000, 7.

⁶⁴⁷ Larry Hypes, "Poca Big Help to County's Big Year." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 13 November 1990, 6B.

Support for the school's football program came not only from the local communities, but from the surrounding area as well.⁶⁴⁸ At one point in the season, Wyatt remarked that there was probably no one in Tazewell County that wanted Pocahontas to lose.⁶⁴⁹ Local papers each week heralded the heroics and last minute wins of the team and praised both the coaches and players. Though talk of consolidation for the time being was secondary to success of the football program, Roberts believed that consolidation was in the back of the players and coaches minds. "I think what it brought to mind on the children was they realized this may be the last year they would play for Pocahontas High School. However, to my knowledge that was never discussed openly to the players."⁶⁵⁰ Consequently, the only consolidation that took place between Graham and Pocahontas that year was on October 11, 1990. In a photograph titled "Undefeated on the Gridiron," the senior players and cheerleaders, principals, and head coaches from two top ranked teams in Southwest Virginia posed for a photograph for the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*. In the picture, members from each school proudly displayed a banner that proclaimed that both teams' records were an identical 6-0.⁶⁵¹

Reynolds theorized that the rural high school had become the social and recreational center with sports teams, marching bands, and plenty of hoopla to raise the enthusiasm of the residents for the local institution.⁶⁵² Peshkin believed that school activities help to create a feeling of liveliness within the small community where there is little else happening of a public nature. As a consequence of these activities, there is the development of pride in "our" students,

⁶⁴⁸ Lloyd Combs. "Black Diamond Quietly Awaits Key Showdown." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1990, 1B.

⁶⁴⁹ Lifford, "In Small Town of Pocahontas," 1990, 5B.

⁶⁵⁰ Roberts, 2000, 7.

⁶⁵¹ Phil Farmer. "Undefeated on the Gridiron." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 12 October 1990, 1.

⁶⁵² David A. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa*. (Iowa City, Iowa: The University of Iowa Press, 1999), 238-239.

“our” teams, and “our” school.⁶⁵³ Though Pocahontas High School would lose in the first round of the Virginia High School League playoffs, the 1990 season was a memorable time for the residents, and perhaps a turning point for the community in the restoration of such collective pride and school spirit.

The Consolidation Issue is Laid to Rest

In October 1990, the Tazewell County School Board accepted the architectural plans presented by School Superintendent Frank Cosby and approved them to be sent to the Virginia Department of Education for authorization.⁶⁵⁴ As plans to construct the new school at Graham proceeded, the cost of the planned 125,000 square foot facility began to escalate. The original cost estimate for the school was \$10 million.⁶⁵⁵ However, by August 1991, the cost for construction had risen to an estimated \$16.8 million. Meanwhile, opposition to the construction of a new Graham High School had gained momentum due not only to the rising cost of construction, but also as the result of a number of opinions concerning the feasibility of repairing the existing building.

In July 1991, Eastern District School Board member Jim Dudley, who had been a supporter of constructing a new school, was not re-appointed to the Tazewell County School Board. Instead, Supervisor Jack Reasor replaced Dudley with David Kovach, a former Pocahontas High School graduate and son of former Pocahontas High School principal Gaza Kovach.⁶⁵⁶ However, other changes were on the horizon. Due to his retirement, the July 1991 meeting of the Tazewell County School Board would be Superintendent Frank Cosby’s last. Woodrow

⁶⁵³ Peshkin, 161-162.

⁶⁵⁴ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 10 October 1990.

⁶⁵⁵ School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 8 July 1991.

⁶⁵⁶ Kovach, 2000, 9.

Mullins, Jr. had recently been hired as the new Superintendent of Schools effective August 1, 1991.⁶⁵⁷

During his last meeting, Cosby indicated that the cost of the new school had risen to \$11 million.⁶⁵⁸ He told the board that closing Pocahontas High School might be necessary to fund the new Graham High School. He recommended closing the high school in order to secure an additional \$1 million from literary funds for consolidation. Cosby also commented that an additional \$750,000 could be saved annually in operational costs by closing Pocahontas High School.⁶⁵⁹ He remarked that, in his opinion, the declining enrollment figures warranted closure of the school.⁶⁶⁰

At the August meeting, Southern District Supervisor Don Dunford appeared before the Tazewell County School Board. Several days prior to that meeting, Dunford and Superintendent of Schools Woodrow Mullins Jr. had met with a private contractor who felt that the sinkhole at Graham High School could be repaired for less than \$100,000.⁶⁶¹ Dunford told the School Board that he had visited both Richlands High School and Tazewell High School and discovered that both were in need of major renovations. Upon Dunford's request, the members recessed the meeting, and along with the Board of Supervisors took a joint tour of both Tazewell High School and Graham High School. While touring Graham High School, the group viewed condemned areas, structure cracks, and sinkholes.⁶⁶² During the tour, Mullins informed the group that the cost to build the new school at

⁶⁵⁷ Grindstaff, 2000, 4 Mr. Mullins served as the Superintendent of Schools in Tazewell County from 1991 to 2000.

⁶⁵⁸ Mary Margaret Thompson, "New GHS Won't Happen: Supervisors Say Price Too High." *Clinch Valley News*, 14 August 1991, 1. At the August meeting of the Tazewell County School Board it was revealed that Cosby had already sign a contract in January to construct the school for \$12.5 million. However, each school board member would go on record as saying that they knew nothing of that amount.

⁶⁵⁹ School Board Minutes, 8 July 1991.

⁶⁶⁰ Jim Talbert, "Cosby Recommends Closing Pocy." *Clinch Valley News*, 10 July 1991, 1.

⁶⁶¹ Mary Margaret Thompson, "New GHS Won't Happen." *Clinch Valley News*, 14 August 1991, 1.

⁶⁶² School Board Minutes, Tazewell County Public Schools, 12 August 1991.

Graham had escalated to \$16.8 million.⁶⁶³ The increase in cost was attributed to the expansion in the size of the building.⁶⁶⁴ When the meeting was reconvened later that evening, Dunford formally requested that the Tazewell County School Board pass a resolution asking that the bond money pledged for a new Graham High School building be used to renovate the three high schools in Tazewell County. However, Northern District School Board member Eddie Pauley and Eastern District School Board member David Kovach quickly reminded Dunford that there were four high schools in Tazewell County in need of repair.⁶⁶⁵

Following Dunford's presentation, School Board member Bob Weidner made a motion (and that motion was seconded by Beth Grindstaff) to request that the Board of Supervisors approve that \$7.5 million be used to repair Graham High School and renovate all four high schools in Tazewell County. The School Board cited the increase in the cost of constructing the new facility as its reason for canceling construction and for repairing the existing high school.⁶⁶⁶ However, former school board member David Kovach cited other factors that influenced the Board's decision. Kovach believed that it would have been necessary to close Pocahontas High School in order to construct a new building at Graham. However, he felt that that closure would have created transportation problems for students that lived a great distance from Graham High School. Kovach also recalled that there were some "humanitarian thoughts" about Pocahontas High School that influenced the final outcome. "We looked at the factor of community involvement in the school, the long history of the school, and how the school had become the focal point of that community. As long as we could make it financially feasible to keep Pocahontas High School open, we would do it and keep that community

⁶⁶³ Andrea Rose, "New GHS Plans Scrapped." *Clinch Valley News*, 13 August 1991, 1.

⁶⁶⁴ Jim Talbert, "Graham Building Pricetag Doubled." *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 1991, 8.

⁶⁶⁵ School Board Minutes, 12 August 1991.

⁶⁶⁶ School Board Minutes, 12 August 1991.

alive.”⁶⁶⁷ Kovach thought that closing the school would mean taking the very heart out of the community. “If you take the heart out of the community, the community will die as well as the school. As long as the school is in this community, the community is active and vital.”⁶⁶⁸

Although Grindstaff indicated that the safety of the students at Graham was her first priority, like Kovach she was concerned that closing Pocahontas High School would have been necessary to fund construction of the new school. In retrospect, she felt that repairing the existing building and not closing Pocahontas High School was the right decision. “For the past eight years I have kept up with it to make sure that there were no physical problem with the building. It was in the best interest of Pocahontas because, hopefully, we may see years from now the area grow and move forward with tourism.”⁶⁶⁹

In the aftermath of the School Board’s decision, efforts were made to repair the sinkhole at Graham High School and remodel other school buildings in the county. An estimated \$6.8 million was used to fund this project. Following the repair of Graham High School, the School Board requested that the Superintendent prepare a priority list for projects. In turn, each principal was asked to submit a list of repairs and renovations needed at each school.⁶⁷⁰ Kovach recalled the money being spread around to make improvements in all schools. Consequently, Pocahontas High School was the recipient of new windows, doors, and an improved heating apparatus. Furthermore, despite a decline in enrollment of more than 100 students over the preceding ten years, there has been no further formal

⁶⁶⁷ Kovach, 2000, 9

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 2000, 8.

⁶⁶⁹ Grindstaff, 2000, 5.

⁶⁷⁰ Mary Margaret Thompson, “Plans Set in Motion to Repair All Schools.” *Clinch Valley News*, 21 August 1991, 2.

movement to close Pocahontas High School since the retirement of Frank Cosby.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁷¹ Grindstaff, 2000, 4. Kovach, 2000, 9.

CHAPTER SEVEN
ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS
Pocahontas High School in the 1990s

As Pocahontas High School began the 1990s, its future was still in question. A formal plan to close the school and to consolidate with Graham High School had been in the works. Those plans were contingent on the construction of a new school. Thus, the escalating cost of building a new school at Graham, coupled with the revelation that the problem there was over-exaggerated, and a changing political landscape thwarted the efforts by some in the school system to close Pocahontas High School.

During the 1990s, the student population at Pocahontas continued to decline. The school experienced a 37 percent drop in enrollment during the past decade, and future projections seem to suggest that the school population will continue to decline over the next several years. Nonetheless, Pocahontas High School remains open, and there are no immediate plans to close the school.

Though rumors of consolidation have persisted throughout the communities of Pocahontas High School since the early 1950s, only one formal effort has been made to close the school and to consolidate it with Graham High School. This effort occurred during the early 1990s and failed to materialize as a formal declaration of closure. Therefore, Pocahontas High School remains open despite a declining enrollment and in spite of nationwide consolidation trends.

After conducting both formal and informal conversations and interviews with many of Pocahontas High School's stakeholders regarding the issue of consolidation, the researcher has drawn several broad conclusions on why the school remains open. Pocahontas High School remains open primarily because of the distance from the school's communities to neighboring Graham High School; the dangerous transportation route; the lack of available classroom space at

Graham; and the support of the community as evidenced by the strong reactions during Cosby's efforts to close the school. Another reason for the school remaining open is political. The three communities of the school represent three key precincts out of the eleven voting precincts in the Northern District of Tazewell County.⁶⁷² Prior to the 1999 local elections, the representative from the Northern District on both the Board of Supervisors and the School Board has been appointed or elected from one of these three precincts. Therefore, the communities of Pocahontas High School have always had a voice on their local governing bodies. The researcher feels that this representation has had an influence on the decision not to close the school and to consolidate with Graham High School.

In recent years, improvements have been made to both the facility and the instructional program. These have included the installation of new doors and windows, a new coal furnace, new lights for the football field, and a new roof for the gymnasium. Beginning with the 1995-1996 school year, a fiber optic classroom was installed, affording the school the ability to conduct classes electronically with the three other high schools in Tazewell County. Presently Latin I, Latin II, Advanced Placement Government, Advanced Placement Computer Science, Creative Writing, and Computer Art III are offered from one of four locations in the county utilizing the network.⁶⁷³ Such improvements in the facility and in the instructional program validate the researcher's conclusion that consolidation is not being considered at this time. However, if the enrollment continues to decline, consolidation may become inevitable. At that time, it would be important for educational leaders to learn from the mistakes made during the early 1990s effort to close the school. Mistakes such as failing to allow members of the community to have input in the decision to consolidate only add more fuel to an already

⁶⁷² Tazewell County is made up of five political districts.

⁶⁷³ "School Improvement Model," 1997, 8.

emotionally charged situation. A general understanding of the historical significance of any small rural school to its community should be taken into account when consolidation is being considered. Consolidation should only be considered after patrons of the school are consulted as part of the process and are advised of the advantages and disadvantages of consolidation.

The Relationship between School and Community

From the early years of the school's existence, Pocahontas High School has received much support from its community. The high priority placed on the education by the Pocahontas Fuel Company filtered down to the Town of Pocahontas and its residents. The old Pocahontas High School building was a part of the town's physical landscape and grew to become an integral component in the lives of the residents of the community. The school's location high on a hill adjacent to the mine superintendent's home reflected the social hierarchy of the community.⁶⁷⁴

The public school system in Pocahontas developed along with the growth of the community.⁶⁷⁵ Though isolation and bad roads caused irregular and broken attendance among students from the rural areas surrounding the town, the advent of bus transportation contributed to the growth of the school and improved attendance among those students. This growth led to the construction of a new facility located just west of the Town of Pocahontas, which opened in 1955. By 1968, students from the outlying areas of Abbs Valley and Boissevain accounted for 82 percent of the student population at Pocahontas High School.

Reynolds described the small community high school as a key institution that imparts an important sense of collective identity. This has resulted from the fact that the high school was the one place within the community where shared

⁶⁷⁴ Freis, *Where Everyone Knew His Place*, 1992, 30.

⁶⁷⁵ Humbert, 95.

activities of students, parents, and residents of the community had become institutionalized.⁶⁷⁶ Today, Pocahontas High School belongs not to one community but three, namely the Town of Pocahontas, the one time mining community of Boissevain, and suburban Abbs Valley. The communities are spread out over a ten-mile radius in a geographically isolated section of northern Tazewell County. While the three communities often have diverse interests, the high school serves as a unifying force. Roberts referred to the school as the nucleus of the three communities. “It is the glue and cement that brings the communities together.”⁶⁷⁷ Gravely recalled that no matter in which community you resided, you still were a student or graduate of Pocahontas High School.⁶⁷⁸ Although there seemed to be no rivalries among the residents of Pocahontas, Boissevain, and Abbs Valley, Reid remembered there being a subtle awareness of where each student was from.⁶⁷⁹ Nonetheless, Veronica Daugherty recalled that there was no competition, just cooperation and working together.⁶⁸⁰

Today, those graduates living some distance away still follow the school’s activities. Gravely remarked that they are interested in what goes on and enjoy it when the students at the school do well.⁶⁸¹ Roberts recalled homecoming night football games being packed with older folks who have graduated from Pocahontas High School.⁶⁸²

Walker described Pocahontas High School as taking on a greater importance in the eyes of the community when the mines closed in 1955.⁶⁸³ Kovach concluded that since the community has no primary business or industry, there was nothing

⁶⁷⁶ Reynolds, 242.

⁶⁷⁷ Roberts, 2000, 3.

⁶⁷⁸ Gravely, 2000, 6.

⁶⁷⁹ Reid, 2000, 2.

⁶⁸⁰ Veronica Daugherty, 2000, 2.

⁶⁸¹ Gravely, 2000, 6.

⁶⁸² Roberts, 2000, 7.

⁶⁸³ Walker, 2000, 7.

else to pull it together. Therefore, the school becomes the focal point of the community. “If you close that school, that community becomes just another little community in rural America with nothing going for it. As long as the school is in this community, the community is active and vital.”⁶⁸⁴ The school’s importance to the community is perhaps best signified by the statement made by long time Pocahontas resident Edna Drosick: “If you don’t have any schools, you don’t have any community.”⁶⁸⁵

The Small School Experience

Conant considered small high schools as inherently inferior to larger schools because they could not offer as many foreign languages or advanced courses.⁶⁸⁶ Larger high schools were considered more advantageous because the students could be offered a greater variety of courses, athletic and social activities, and better libraries and laboratories.⁶⁸⁷ However, Pocahontas High School had a diverse curriculum with over 50 course offerings. Though Conant and other researchers have been critical of small schools, many of the residents who attended Pocahontas High School give high marks to the education that they received.

Veronica Daugherty recalled the benefits of receiving more individualized instruction as a result of her small school education.

I remember my freshman year in college English. We were going over the works of Francis Bacon. I was the only one who read and understood it. In fact, one of my classmates was from one of the largest high schools in the state, but if I hadn’t helped her, she would not have passed. I don’t feel one bit inadequate. I felt like I received a good education.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁴ Kovach, 2000, 8.

⁶⁸⁵ Drosick, 2000, 7.

⁶⁸⁶ Conant, 79. Conant considered small high schools as those with graduating classes of less than 100 students.

⁶⁸⁷ Buck, 459.

⁶⁸⁸ Veronica Daugherty, 2000, 7.

Linda Trigg, who has taught at Pocahontas High School since 1969, recalled that the small size at Pocahontas allowed the teacher to get to know each student individually. “You get to know each student and see if they are in need of extra help.”⁶⁸⁹ David Kovach felt that the individualized attention that he received assisted him in future endeavors. “Our teachers could show up our weaknesses, build on those, and make us better academically.”⁶⁹⁰ Further illustrating the accomplishments of the educational program at Pocahontas High School, many graduates have gone on to become successful in their careers. For example, doctors, dentists, engineers, teachers, principals, school superintendents, and scores of others completed their education at Pocahontas High School.⁶⁹¹

Stone felt that the ability of an administrator or teacher to know each student’s name was an important advantage to a small school education. “Nothing is sweeter than a person’s first name. “Hey boy or hey girl” turn people off.”⁶⁹² Though it required a lot of work on behalf of the administrator, Walker believed that this ability to know each student by name reduced the number of discipline problems in school.

I didn’t spend time in the office. Instead, I spent my time going around getting to know my kids. It paid off. You don’t have the discipline problems when children feel they are known, even the children that misbehave. You have the opportunity to learn backgrounds and know why these children misbehave.⁶⁹³

Sometimes a small school staff must be stretched to offer a complete curriculum. Louise Blizzard recalled that the teachers at Pocahontas were often required to teach a variety of subjects.⁶⁹⁴ Likewise, students were also stretched to

⁶⁸⁹ Linda Trigg. Interviewed by the author, 22 May 2000, interview 8, transcript, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia, 5.

⁶⁹⁰ Kovach, 2000, 7.

⁶⁹¹ Daugherty, 2000, 6. Kovach, 2000, 6.

⁶⁹² Stone, 2000, 4.

⁶⁹³ Walker, 2000, 6.

⁶⁹⁴ Blizzard, 2000, 1.

participate in a variety of school activities throughout the year. Gregory and Smith wrote that administrators and teachers know their students in a small high school. This in turn allows the student to become more involved in the school community rather than withdrawing. At small high schools, students must perform more tasks and take on more responsibility. Furthermore, this is important because a small number of students have to play such a wide variety of roles.⁶⁹⁵ In a school the size of Pocahontas High School, many activities would suffer without the participation of a wide base of students. Therefore, teachers, coaches, and students have worked together in a spirit of compromise and cooperation in order to insure that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential and participate in the diverse number of activities necessary to sustain membership in these programs. As an example, it may be necessary for the football coach to cooperate with the band director in order to ensure the survival of both programs.

In conclusion, Linda Trigg spoke of a common joke that is often repeated throughout Tazewell County. Administrators and teachers would often say that if you “mess up” the central office would send you to Pocahontas. However, Trigg has seen teachers who have transferred to Pocahontas comment on how nice it was to teach there. “They would say that they were glad that they came here because they didn’t realize how nice everything was here.”⁶⁹⁶

The Support for Schools in Pocahontas

Researchers have stated that the coal company within mining towns often controlled aspects of the miner’s daily life through such institutions as the company store, the church, the school, the post office, and even the burial grounds.⁶⁹⁷ However, the Town of Pocahontas was incorporated by the Virginia

⁶⁹⁵ Thomas B. Gregory and Gerald R. Smith, *High Schools as Communities: The Small School Reconsidered*. (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1987), 73.

⁶⁹⁶ Trigg, 2000, 6.

⁶⁹⁷ Gillenwater, 39.

Legislature in the winter of 1884 and failed to exhibit some of the authoritarian political characteristics of typical mining towns. Consequently, the coal company did not involve itself in the day-to-day operation of the schools in Pocahontas. The operation of Pocahontas High School was left up to the school administration.

Research has shown that the coal company had a reputation for supporting its local schools. They often did so by subsidizing teachers' salaries, deeding land for construction, building schools, and donating equipment.⁶⁹⁸ In Pocahontas, the coal company was responsible for all of the land used for school construction. They not only deeded the land, but they also provided the town and school system with architectural services and equipment needed during the construction process.

In Tazewell County, the Pocahontas Fuel Company was the largest taxpayer and believed that adequate funding for education should come from general tax levies or through bond indebtedness. In fact, Mullins wrote that paying taxes was one of the most important ways that they supported education in their local communities.⁶⁹⁹ In Pocahontas, it was this psychological support for tax initiatives that helped carry the vote, which allowed the community to expand its educational facilities during the 1920s to include two modern brick buildings along with Tazewell County's first gymnasium and auditorium. The coal company was also interested in attracting the best and most qualified educators to teach in the local schools. Thus, in 1922 the Pocahontas Fuel Company constructed the Teachers' Clubhouse in order to provide suitable accommodations for the instructors arriving to teach in Pocahontas. The coal company hired a hostess to clean the house, prepare the meals, and supervise the teachers living there. The instructional staff at Pocahontas was considered well trained and to be made up of some of the finest teachers in the State of Virginia.

⁶⁹⁸ Corbin, 127.

⁶⁹⁹ Mullins, 87.

However, the coal industry, which had contributed to the growth of the school and community, began to decline. Following World War II, competition from alternative fuel sources and mechanization contributed to this decline. By the 1950s, the Pocahontas Fuel Company began to sell off its property and discharge or transfer most of its employees. In 1955, the Pocahontas Number One mine closed. As a result, there was no longer an industry to support the population of Pocahontas. Therefore, many of its residents began to migrate to urban industrial areas in the north and midwest. The student population at Pocahontas High School began to decline gradually despite the expansion of its grade structure in 1963 and 1972. It should be pointed out that support from the Pocahontas Fuel Company for the school continued until the offices located in the Town of Pocahontas were closed.

The amount of support given by the coal company contributed to the positive perceptions of the community towards the local school.⁷⁰⁰ The coal company's support of schools in Pocahontas filtered down to the town and its residents. The Town of Pocahontas was also portrayed as being progressive in the area of financial support for its local schools. In fact, the town was able to finance the high school for many years without charging tuition. The coal company's belief that education created a more literate workforce influenced the town's commitment to providing the best schools for its residents. The Town of Pocahontas assumed an active role in financing its public schools until the mid-1930s by paying for the extension of school operations, the employment of a custodian, supplementing teacher's salaries, and providing the payment for lights, power, and water. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, the town continued to provide financial support for the high school in the form of salary supplements and donations. However, sinking revenues caused by the closing of the mines prohibited the town from

providing the school with significant monetary support beyond 1958. Since that time, support from the Town of Pocahontas for the high school has been more psychological than monetary in nature.

Conclusion

Beckner observed that the traditional small school was an extension of the community. He noted that it was difficult to determine just where education ended and community life began around the school. “The school was a community responsibility; the community was a school responsibility.”⁷⁰¹ Although some of this connection may have been lost in Pocahontas, the school is one of the few small rural institutions in the State that has survived consolidation. Therefore, it is important for researchers to examine the advantages and disadvantages of a small school education and the important role that these schools play in their communities while they are still in existence.

This study provides a historical context for further small rural school research. Educational leaders and historians can gain a contextual understanding of a small rural school through an historical perspective. The study provides evidence of community and coal company support in Pocahontas. Evidence of this support can provide educational and industrial leaders with a blueprint for future school and industrial partnerships. These partnerships can serve to enhance the support for education and improve the perception of the community towards the local school. The study further illustrates factors that related to the preservation of a school within a community even after the primary industry has closed, and the town is in decline. Any efforts to consolidate Pocahontas High School have been thwarted by community, geographic, and political influences.

⁷⁰⁰ Dotson, 14.

⁷⁰¹ Weldon Becker, *The Case for the Smaller School*. (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1983), 9.

The residents of Pocahontas believe that their small rural school provides the students with individualized instruction, an orderly environment, and a place where students can become involved and participate in various school activities. This study illustrates that Pocahontas High School has a long history of close community ties and support.

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APPENDIX A

Oral History Interviewer's Guide

Prepared By Patrick W. Carlton, Ph.D.

The purpose of an oral history interview is to gather historically significant personal recollections and information on a specific subject. It is important for the interviewer to maintain a low profile and to refrain from expressing his or her opinion or bias. The oral history interview is not a conversation. The role of the interviewer is to jog a narrator's memory. The interviewer must ask pertinent questions, be a good listener, and have empathy for the narrator and what he or she has to say.

There are three parts to an interview:

- I. Research and preparation
 - II. The interview itself
 - III. Paper work and follow-up
- I. Research and preparation
 - A. Contact the narrator. Telephone contact is best, but, if you prefer, write the individual a note. Tell the subject about the project and why he or she was chosen to participate in a taped interview.
 - B. If the narrator agrees to be interviewed, research him and your topic. Helpful resources are the local history librarian, newspapers, oral history files, and other people who know the narrator.
 - C. Make an outline of topics to be covered in the interview.
 - D. Set up an appointment with the narrator. Tell him to allow one and a half to two hours for the interview. Share your outline with him so he can think about what he wants to say. Confirm the appointment in writing.

- E. Familiarize yourself with your equipment. Make sure everything works. Your interviewing kit should include a recorder, microphone and stand, extension cord, two blank tapes, a pad and pencil, and the necessary forms, (release, biographical information, index, and information for the narrator).
- II. The interview itself
- A. Arrange the physical setting of the interview. Select a quiet room away from street noises and noises from fans, air conditioners, telephone, etc. Place the recorder on the floor or out of the narrator's view, and place the microphone between you and the narrator. Be sure the recorder is plugged into a working outlet and the microphone switch is on.
 - B. Show narrator the release form. Explain that after the interview you will ask him to sign the release. (Note the narrator cannot sign the release form before the interview, as there is nothing to be released at that time.)
 - C. Get the narrator to relax by chatting with him. However, avoid talking about the interview topics until you are ready to record.
 - D. Begin the interview. Start the recorder and allow a few seconds of blank take to wind. Give an introduction stating the names of the interviewer and narrator, the date, the place, and topic, and for whom. The introduction may be done ahead of time if you prefer. Start the interview with an open-ended question that the narrator can answer easily at some length.
 - E. Techniques for the interviewer
 1. Ask open-ended questions. Don't talk too much.
 2. Be a good listener; obtain eye contact.
 3. Do not interrupt; don't worry about silences.
 4. Try to avoid bias; try not to lead.

5. Stay on track.
6. Try to think ahead to your next question.
7. Take notes on names and places that need verification and anything that need clarification.
8. When you turn the tape allow 5 to 7 seconds for the blank strip before continuing.
9. If you go to a second tape or when the interview is finished, record that information on the tape.

E. Things to avoid

1. Avoid turning the recorder on and off.
2. Avoid touching the microphone.
3. Avoid group interviews or having others present besides the narrator and you.

G. Completing the interview

1. Ask the narrator to sign a release form.
2. Get biographical information
3. Get photographs and other supplementary material that would be useful.

III. Paperwork and follow-up

- A. Listen to tape and complete index.
- B. Transcribe tape, being sure to put in “counter numbers” each 100 numbers.
- C. Label cassette and fill out cassette box index. Punch out cassette.
- D. Submit cassette, release, and all other forms to the historical archives of your choice.

APPENDIX B

POCAHONTAS HIGH SCHOOL

ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT

I, _____, do hereby give to the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Thomas M. Brewster, and the Eastern Regional Coal Archives for such scholarly and educational uses as those listed above shall determine, the tape-recorded interview(s) recorded with Thomas M. Brewster as an unrestricted gift; and I transfer to those listed above, legal title and all literary and property rights including copyright. I am also granting the previously named parties the right to make it available to the public for such educational purposes as the school, researcher, and archivist judges worthwhile. This gift does not preclude any use, which I may want to make of the information in the recordings myself.

This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties' undersigned.

Signature of person interviewed

Printed name of person interviewed

Date

Street Address

Signature of interviewer

City, State & Zip Code

Printed name of interviewer

APPENDIX C

Principals of Pocahontas High School

1907 George L. Byrom
1909 P.S. Barnes
1910 Julian B. Martin
1913 R.J. Revely
1914 C.C. Caldwell
1919 John Crowgey
1923 Henry Crowgey
1945 R.T. Carter
1951 Lynn Moore
1952 Gaza Kovach
1971 James Groseclose*
1971 Bessie G. Walker
1972 Billy R. Stone
1981 James L. Brewster
1985 Joseph A. King
1987 Thomas J. Whitten*
1987 Bessie G. Walker
1991 Roy L. Meadows
1994 James B. Viers
1997 Thomas M. Brewster

*Both Groseclose and Whitten were appointed principals of Pocahontas High School by the Tazewell County School Board. However, neither of the two ever reported to the school to serve in that capacity.

APPENDIX D

Superintendents of Tazewell County Public Schools

1870 Rev. Jonathan Lyons
1875 James C. Spotts
1882 Rev. James H. Gillespie
1886 Harry M. Smythe
1896 P.H. Williams
1906 W. Archie Thompson
1917 Albert S. Greever
1945 Hugh G. Cassell
1947 James L. Walthall
1965 Lester L. Jones
1984 Frank A. Cosby
1991 Woodrow W. Mullins, Jr.

APPENDIX E

Enrollment at Pocahontas High School

Year	Enrollment	Grades
1911	35	8-11
1912	27	8-11
1913	28	8-11
1916	37	8-11
1917	43	8-11
1918	35	8-11
1922	56	8-11
1923	47	8-11
1924	69	8-11
1925	79	8-11
1926	83	8-11
1927	83	8-11
1928	77	8-11
1929	91	8-11
1930	88	8-11
1931	109	8-11
1932	122	8-11
1933	121	8-11
1934	113	8-11
1935	134	8-11
1936	115	8-11
1937	112	8-11
1938	150	8-11
1939	133	8-11
1940	149	8-11
1941	169	8-11
1942	140	8-11
1943	172	8-11
1944	143	8-11
1945	144	8-11
1946	275	8-11
1947	250	8-11
1948	235	8-11
1949	272	8-11

Year	Enrollment	Grades
1950	295	8-11
1951	357	8-11
1952	305	8-11
1953	332	8-11
1954	363	8-11
1955	416	8-11
1956	412	8-11
1957	424	8-11
1958	398	8-11
1959	389	8-11
1960	369	8-11
1961	353	8-11
1962	358	8-11
1963	389	8-12
1964	445	8-12
1965	447	8-12
1966	457	8-12
1967	439	8-12
1968	409	8-12
1969	434	8-12
1970	393	8-12
1971	396	8-12
1972	473	7-12
1973	436	7-12
1974	426	7-12
1975	407	7-12
1976	405	7-12
1977	371	7-12
1978	336	7-12
1979	368	7-12
1980	314	7-12
1981	321	7-12
1982	295	7-12
1983	341	7-12
1984	334	7-12
1985	339	7-12
1986	339	7-12
1987	339	7-12

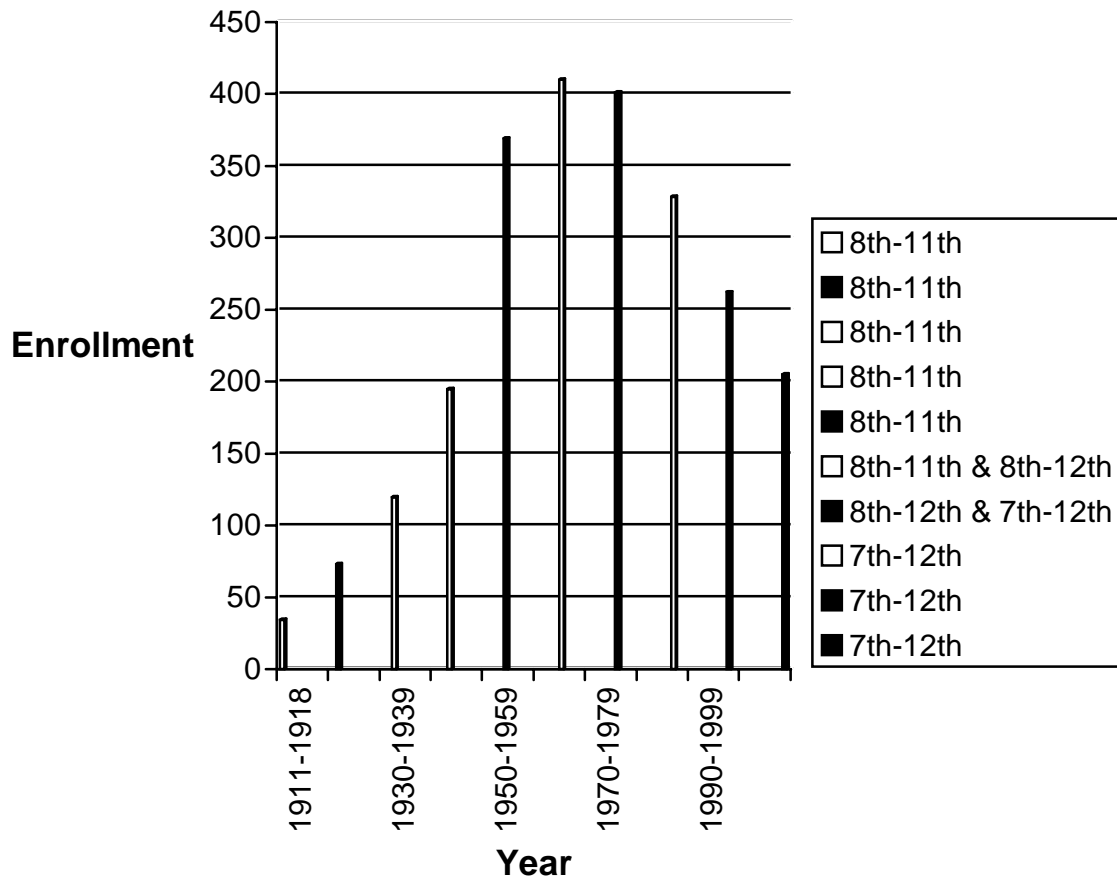
Year	Enrollment	Grades
1988	327	7-12
1989	336	7-12
1990	323	7-12
1991	284	7-12
1992	293	7-12
1993	277	7-12
1994	281	7-12
1995	253	7-12
1996	244	7-12
1997	216	7-12
1998	232	7-12
1999	218	7-12
2000	205	7-12

APPENDIX F

Enrollment at Pocahontas High School 1911-2000 (Table and Graph)

Year	Enrollment (average)	Grade Level
1911-1918	34.2	8-11
1922-1929	73.1	8-11
1930-1939	119.7	8-11
1940-1949	194.9	8-11
1950-1959	369.1	8-11
1960-1969	410	8-11 (1960-1962) 8-12 (1963-1969)
1970-1979	401.1	8-12 (1970-1972) 7-12 (1972-1979)
1980-1989	328.5	7-12
1990-1999	262.1	7-12
2000	205	7-12

Enrollment at Pocahontas High School



APPENDIX G

Population Changes in Tazewell County and Pocahontas, Virginia

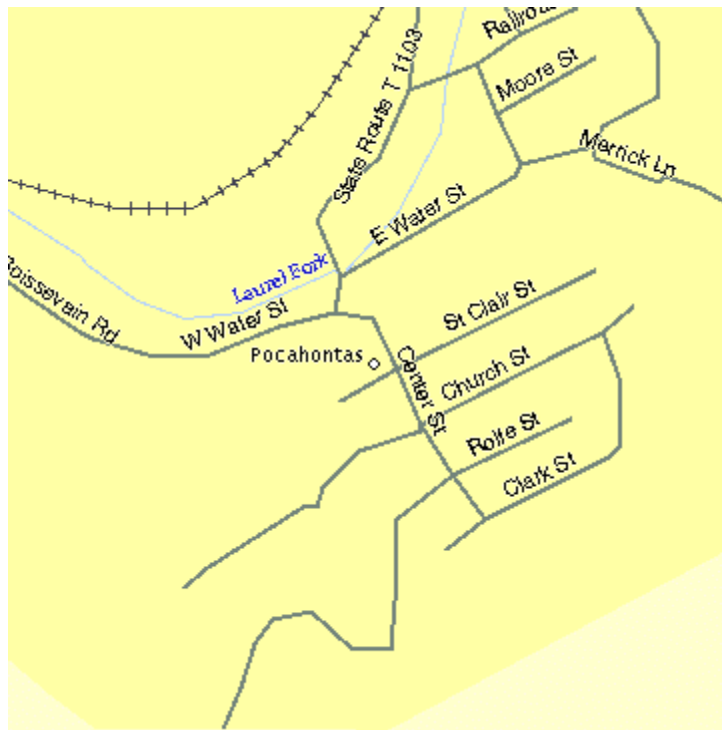
Year	Tazewell County	Pocahontas, VA
1800	2,127	
1810	3,007	
1820	3,916	
1830	5,749	
1840	6,290	
1850	9,942	
1860	9,920	
1870	10,791	
1880	12,861	
1890	19,899	2,953
1900	23,384	2,789
1910	24,946	3,561
1920	27,840	3,775
1930	32,477	2,293
1940	41,607	2,673
1950	47,512	2,410
1960	44,791	1,313
1970	39,816	891
1980	50,511	703
1990	45,960	513

APPENDIX H

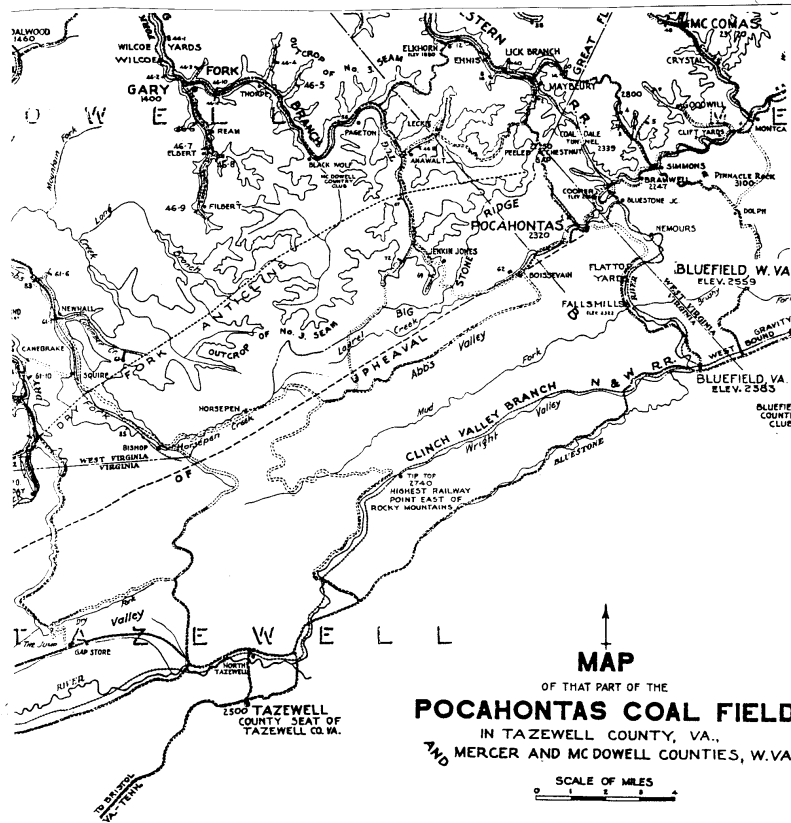
Vicinity Map, Pocahontas, Virginia



Street Map for the Town of Pocahontas, Virginia



Map of the Pocahontas Coalfields



VITA

Thomas M. Brewster graduated from Bluefield College, Bluefield, Virginia, with a B.A. Degree in Social Studies during the spring of 1991. After teaching in Tazewell County, Virginia, for five years, Brewster earned a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership from Radford University, Radford Virginia, in 1995.

In 1996, Brewster became Assistant Principal at Tazewell High School, Tazewell, Virginia. The following year, he was promoted to Principal at Pocahontas High School, Pocahontas, Virginia.

Brewster is married to Debra Brewster, and they have two children, London and Sahara.