

TOWN OF BOSWELL  
Merchants Coal Company  
Boswell  
Somerset County  
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-367

HAER  
PA  
56-BOSW  
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

TOWN OF BOSWELL  
Merchants Coal Company  
HAER No. PA-367

HAER  
PA  
56-BOSW  
3-

Location: Boswell, Somerset County, Pennsylvania

Date of Construction: 1901

Present Owner: Various private owners.

Present Use: Residences.

Significance: The houses built at Boswell in the early 1900s were the work of the Merchants Coal Company, led by company president Thomas T. Boswell. Merchants Coal constructed four types of workers' houses and a number of stone houses for company managers. The company also dominated the small downtown with its large stone-constructed company store, bank building, and brick-constructed company office.

Historian: Scott C. Brown, 1992.

Project Information: The results of the study of Somerset County were published in 1994: Gray Fitzsimons, Ken Rose, and Patricia Summers (eds), Somerset County, Pennsylvania: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service). The contents of the publication were transmitted to the Library of Congress as individual reports. Research notes, field photos and copies of historic photos collected during the project were transmitted to the AIHP Collection, Special Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705.

The Borough of Boswell is laid out on a grid pattern and has two commercial streets: Main and Center streets. Quemahoning Creek separates the mine site from the rest of the mining structures and from the town itself. Of the 600 houses in the Borough, only a portion of them were actually built by Merchants Coal Company. There are four types of workers' houses: brick twelve-room double houses; wood-frame ten-room double houses; wood-frame four-room bungalows; and wood-frame four-unit row houses (only two of these row houses survive on Pine Lane beyond Quemahoning Creek). Approximately seventeen brick two-story, double houses constructed in the 1910s stand on Juniata and Susquehanna Streets between Atkinson Place and Hower Avenue. There are three stone-constructed management houses, two of which are located at 224 and 228 Quemahoning Street. These are twelve-room double houses. The third is located at 331 Stony Creek Street. One-story single-family houses exist on Quemahoning Street between Garrett and Gibbons avenues. On Center Street are two-story side-gabled houses, built of brick though one is of stone construction and several others are of wood. On both sides of SR 601, on the opposite side of Quemahoning Creek, are portions of what once were long, one-story wood-frame boarding houses.

Three churches built to serve the miners and their families include St. Stanislaus Roman Catholic Church (1918), and Parish Hall (1911), Saints Peter & Paul Russian Orthodox Church (1918), and St. Andrews Lutheran Church (1916).

A stone company store, now vacant, is located at the northwest corner of Morris Avenue and Stony Creek Street. On the second floor of the facade are double-hung windows with pointed-arch, Gothic-style panes. The structure is banked and the basement level is exposed at the rear. On the Stony Creek Street side is a loading dock and what remains of a freight door.

Next to the company store at 412 Morris Avenue is the former First National Bank of Boswell, constructed around 1902 by Merchants Coal Company. Presently used as apartments, the two-and-a-half-story stone building has a corner front entrance and a hipped roof with dormers.

The Merchant's Coal Company Office, constructed in 1901, is near the northwest corner of Quemahoning Street and Morris Avenue. This brick structure has been altered over the years, and some of the windows have been filled.

The Superintendent's House, presently the Boswell American Legion, is at the southwest corner of Morris Avenue and Stony Creek Street. A concrete block addition was added on the rear as a social hall. The company store, bank, and office all face what was once Fulton Square. It is now filled

A stone powerhouse, extant between Atkinson Way and Quemahoning Creek, provided electricity to the mines as well as to the town itself. A portion of the north end has been razed, exposing the metal truss roof system, and the end wall has been enclosed in corrugated metal. Some of the windows have been filled with concrete block. The building is presently used by North Star Equipment, a company that repairs and sells coal-processing equipment. The site adjacent to the powerhouse is strewn with metal and machine parts.

Across Atkinson Way from the powerhouse stood the machine shop. Stones from this structure mark the site. Near the mine opening is an overgrown area with numerous mounds indicating that this was where mine slate was dumped. Wide enough to handle two sets of mine car tracks, the stone slope mine portal has the inscription: "Erected 1901, Merchants Coal Company, W.H. Morris, General Superintendent."

Boswell was established in 1901 by the Boswell Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Merchants Coal Company. The town was named after Merchants owner and first president, Thomas T. Boswell. Laid out on one square mile with 1,600 lots measuring 120' x 50', lot sales began in October. Several of the streets were named after company officials including Vice-President W. G. Atkinson and General Superintendent W.G. Morris. All of the company buildings and some of the houses were constructed of ashlar stone from the immediate area, creating a more striking appearance than that of other company towns. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Quemahoning Branch was completed in 1902 and a depot (no longer extant) was built on Atkinson Way across from the rear of the superintendent's house.

Mining began in June 1901. The mine facilities were state-of-the-art, with Coal & Coke, a prominent trade journal of the day, referring to the Merchants operation as one of the finest in the country. While the E, B, and C coal seams all were mined, only coal from B and C seams was labeled "Quemahoning" coal. The first mine machinery at the site was electric and included pick machines manufactured by Sullivan Machinery Company, and drills manufactured by Ingersoll-Sergeant Company. Coal was hoisted from the mine by compressed air machines built by Exeter Machine Company of Pittston. A fan house that to the right of the mine opening had a fan built by Robinson Machinery Company of Monongahela. This fan had a capacity of 400,000 cubic feet of air per minute. In order to transport the coal from the mine over Quemahoning Creek to the tipple a large viaduct, or conveyor, was constructed. Utilizing 824 tons of steel, it was 1,080' long, 90' above the creek, and 60' wide at the widest part and had six sets of tracks. It was constructed by Columbia Construction Company of Pittsburgh, which also fabricated the steel tipple that abutted the powerhouse. The tipple had four

chutes for the five sets of tracks underneath. One chute loaded a conveyor that went directly to the boilers in the powerhouse.

As originally planned, the town was to be centered around a post office on Main Street that was constructed in 1900, and around Mountain House, a large house across the street that was used as a hotel. Soil in this location was rocky, however, so the town was instead centered farther to the north on Main Street. Boswell was incorporated as a borough in February 1904.

The year before its incorporation Boswell residents witnessed one of the most violent strikes in the region's bituminous coal fields. After owners of the Somerset Coal Company and Merchant's Coal Company refused to recognize the United Mine Workers union in 1903, miners from Garrett and Boswell initiated a strike. Both companies attempted to open the mines with men from outside the area. In January, a riot erupted in Boswell resulting in the shootings of four strikers and three of the town's sheriffs, two of whom were seriously wounded. Twenty-five Boswell residents were arrested and several were convicted and imprisoned. After a sixteen month-long strike in 1922, the defeated union ended its organizing effort in the county. It was not until the early 1930s that Boswell miners successfully organized a union.

By 1910 Merchants was operating Orenda No. 2 (a slope mine) and Merchants No. 3 (a drift mine), and producing 475,000 tons of coal with a work force of 507. After briefly operating under the United Coal Company, the operation again changed hands in 1918, this time to the Davis Coal & Coke Company of West Virginia. There have been two noteworthy disasters at the site. In 1909 a methane gas explosion killed five miners, and another explosion in 1915 killed twenty-two miners. By 1920 only Orenda No. 2 was still in operation, with 309 workers mining approximately 221,000 tons of coal. By 1930 production was down to 131,000 tons and only 196 miners were employed.

The company store once had a lookout tower on the roof consisting of a cupola with windows. On the facade at the first-floor level were plate-glass windows and a large awning. Also on the facade at the cornice level was the stone inscription "AD 1902" that has since been removed. The store was first known as the Quemahoning Supply Company and later Mercantile Company No. 5 store. During Davis Coal and Coke Corporation's ownership the store was operated by the Buxton & Landstreet Company. The company headquarters also served as paymaster's office, where miners received their pay and company store scrip.

Constructed about 1905, the two-and-a-half-story stone house was informally known as "The Diamond" after long-time company superintendent, Andy Diamond, who lived there. The house had

three coal-company ownerships before it was sold in 1945 to American Legion Home Aid Association.

Sources:

Blackburn, E. Howard and William H. Welfley. History of Bedford and Somerset Counties, Pennsylvania. New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1906.

Bureau for Historic Preservation, Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission, Somerset County Historic Resource Survey. Prepared by Glessner, Lehman, and Kendall, 1986.

Chervenak, Louis B., ed. and comp. The Community Story: Jenners-Boswell-Jennerstown. Boswell, PA: Jenners Boswell-Jennerstown Joint High School Junior Historians, 1962.

Edkins, Donald O., comp. Edkins' Catalog of Coal Company Scrip. New Kensington, PA: The National Scrip Collectors Association, 1977.

"Merchants Coal Company's Orenda Coal," Coal and Coke 12, no. 21 (1 November 1905).

"The 'Quemahoning' Coal Plant," Coal and Coke 9, no. 19 (1 October 1902).

Pennsylvania Department of Mines. Report of the Department of Mines of Pennsylvania: Part II - Bituminous, 1910. Harrisburg, PA: C.E. Aughinbaugh, State Printer, 1911.

Pennsylvania Department of Mines. Report of the Department of Mines of Pennsylvania: Part II - Bituminous, 1919-1920. Harrisburg, PA: J.L.L. Kuhn, State Printer, 1925.

Pennsylvania Department of Mines. Report of the Department of Mines of Pennsylvania: Part II - Bituminous, 1929-1930. Harrisburg, PA: n.p., 1932.

Sanborn Map Company. Boswell, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1910, 1916, and 1930 editions.