

Iowa Coal: Fuel for a New State's Growth

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Photos and lithograph from State Historical Society of Iowa

Ponies and small mules were used to pull carts loaded with coal through the low-roofed mines. Iowa's last pony mine, in Appanoose County, was closed in 1971.



Iowa's coal resources played an important role in the state's social and economic history. The westward expansion of railroads made it easier for people to move into Iowa and have access to supplies. Steam locomotives required large amounts of coal, and the mining industry grew along with the rail network.

Small quantities of coal were first mined in the 1840's near Fort Des Moines to fuel the post's blacksmith forge and from shallow seams along the lower Des Moines River to power coal-fired steamboats. In 1854 the Rock Island Railroad reached the Mississippi River, and by 1860, 500 miles of track existed in Iowa. By 1876 the North Western Railroad reached Council Bluffs, and Iowa was the leading coal producer west of the Mississippi and fifth in the U.S. By 1914 the state's rail network included 9,216 miles of track, and by 1918 annual coal production in Iowa peaked at 9.3 million tons. Production declined thereafter and the industry shifted from underground to surface mining operations.

The main street of Buxton, a thriving community in 1915, is lined with homes of coal miners, including many African-American families.



Many of the larger companies constructed camps to house miners and their families. A few of these camps, such as Hiteman in Monroe County and Beacon in Mahaska County, have persisted as small communities, but most left little evidence of their existence. Buxton was one of the best known of these, and included among its population African-Americans recruited from the South in 1873. It was a thriving community with schools, stores, a YMCA, a municipal band, and a baseball team. Children went on to become doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Eventually, the coal was mined out, and in 1927 the last of the mines closed with many residents resettling in Des Moines where their descendants live today.

OTTUMWA COAL PALACE. Erected in 1890 with the backing of local businessmen and 12 coal-producing counties, this impressive structure resembled a medieval fortress, featuring a 200-foot tower with a dance floor near the top. The building was veneered with coal and was brightly decorated inside with sheaves of wheat, oats, sorghum, and corn. It boasted a 30-foot waterfall, a solarium of tropical plants, and a 6,000-seat auditorium where concerts, plays, and operas were performed. It also enclosed a functioning reconstruction of an underground coal mine.



Adapted from *Iowa Geology 1992, No. 17, Centennial Edition*, Iowa Department of Natural Resources

[Coal and Coal Mining: Keystone Coal Industry Manual \(Iowa Coal\)](#)