

# The Chatham Historical Journal

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## Incidents Concerning a Natural Resource

### *Chatham County's Coal*

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All of the coal of commercial quality within North Carolina is confined to a small area in south-central Chatham, northern Lee, and northeastern Moore Counties (as defined by their present boundaries). The occurrence of this coal and its exploitation form a small chapter in local history. This article reviews some events that took place because of this coal, the physical setting of the coal beds, the start of commercial coal mining in Chatham County, and mining activity on the north side of Deep River within Chatham County in the Farmville<sup>1</sup> community.

#### Coal-related Activities Around the 1850s

Bituminous coal occurs within the central portion of southern Chatham County immediately north of Deep River. Around 1850, the presence of coal and other natural resources within southern Chatham County and adjacent areas attracted state and national interest. When the Western Railroad was chartered in 1852, its chief source of revenue was anticipated to be from the coal and iron ore of Chatham County. By 1862, its tracks extended from Fayetteville to within two miles of Deep River near Egypt. This was the first railroad in the county.

By 1853, the Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company, which had been organized in 1849, expected its main source of revenue would be from transporting coal from the Deep River area of Chatham County.<sup>2</sup> In 1857, Ebenezer Emmons, North Carolina State Geologist, submitted to Governor Bragg a report on the advantages of the valley of Deep River as a

site for the establishment of a National Foundry.

A third event that occurred because of coal was the charter in 1861 of the Chatham Railroad. This line was to extend from Raleigh to the Chatham coal fields. Completed about 1868, it was the second railroad to reach Chatham County.

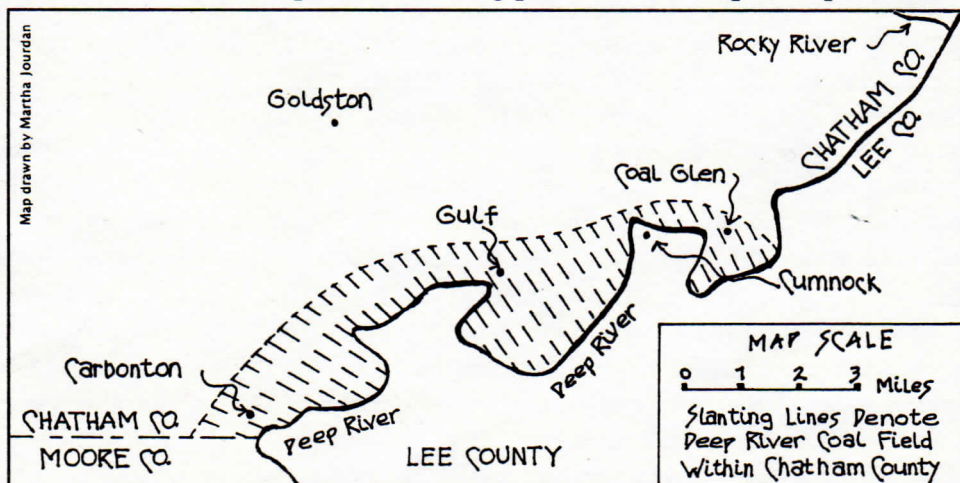
The volume of coal produced and the benefits derived from it during this period were much less than originally anticipated.

#### Physical Setting of the Coal Beds

The beds of coal occur within the Cumnock formation of the Deep River Triassic basin. These coal beds are present at the surface along the rim of the basin and continue in the subsurface down-dip, ranging in thickness from a few inches up to about 4.5 feet. The basin is a graben structure with its opposite sides bounded by faults which place the Triassic beds against much older beds of the Carolina Slate belt.

Reinemund in 1955 estimated the remaining reserves of coal in southern Chatham, northern Lee, and northeastern Moore Counties to be 110,337,000 short tons and classed 50% of it as recoverable.<sup>3</sup>

Some of this coal ranks among the best U.S. soft coals. It has been used successfully in the forges of blacksmiths and of ironworks, in the common fireplace, in heating plants, in steam power plants, and



blacksmiths and of ironworks, in the common fire-place, in heating plants, in steam power plants, and in locomotives. Trial runs of this coal made in gas-works at Norfolk and at Portsmouth, Virginia, in 1875 were highly favorable to the Chatham coal, both as to the quality of gas produced and the quantity that a given amount of the coal yielded.<sup>4</sup>

Although coal of the Deep River basin has a local advantage over coal brought in from neighboring states, because of reduced shipping costs, profitable mining of this coal has been hampered by the steep dip of the coal beds, by their interruption by faults, and by igneous intrusions; thus, coal here cannot be produced in the high volume and at the low price comparable to mines of the major coal-producing regions.

The mining of coal within the Deep River basin of Chatham County has taken place intermittently for over 200 years. Although the early mining operations were mainly small ones at surface pits, there were two substantial underground mines: the Cumnock mine and the Coal Glen mine. The Coal Glen mine will be described later in this article.

The Cumnock (formerly Egypt) mine was a vertical shaft started in 1852. The main seam of coal was topped at 430 feet and the shaft bottomed at 460 feet by 1855. This mine had a long and interesting history of irregular activity before it was permanently abandoned in 1929. Reliable records show 39 persons killed in an 1895 accident in this mine and of another 31 killed in 1900. Less reliable reports indicate that an additional 61 persons may have been killed in this mine between 1852 and 1864. Originally in Chatham County, this mine has been in Lee County since 1908.

### **Start of Commercial Coal Mining**

The first coal mined commercially in Chatham County and within the Deep River basin was on property owned by Herman (or Harmon) Husband (1724-1795). Husband received land grants of 192 acres in 1757 and 637 acres in 1762, both from Lord Granville, on the north side of Deep River near the town of Gulf. There were deposits of coal, iron, and limestone visible on the surface of this acreage, which Husband probably had observed before applying for his grants. Before moving to Chatham County about 1751, Husband had owned a farm in Maryland on which there was an iron mine.<sup>5</sup>

In 1768 mention was made of building a boat to haul coal across Deep River to an ironworks on the south side of the river near Gulf, indicating that there were plans at that time to mine coal from the Herman Husband lands north of Gulf.<sup>6</sup>

By the early 1770s, John Willcox had purchased

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the Husband land and was promoting the coal from surface pits on his land for use in the forges of blacksmiths of the area. He also sent samples of the coal from his mine to Great Britain for evaluation by smiths there.<sup>7</sup> The mining of coal from this area was always on a small scale and at irregular intervals. Olmstead, writing in 1824 after having visited this mine, said, "For some years past the mine has been neglected."<sup>8</sup>

Over the years the area has been referred to as the Willcox mine, the Gulf mine, and the Haughton mine. Confirmation that coal from the Deep River basin was first mined here was given by Emmons in 1852 when he said, "The Haughton mine has been used the longest. It was known in the Revolution..."<sup>9</sup> Laidley, in 1856, wrote "The coal and iron both crop out here; the former has been used...for a longer time than from any other place in the coal-fields [of Chatham County]..."<sup>10</sup>

Coal can still be found at the surface within an area between the town of Gulf and Bethany Church to the north. Reinemund's 1949 preliminary map, Sheet 1, shows a coal pit just north of Gulf and the Gulf mine about three-quarters of a mile from the town. During the 1980s, some surface coal was mined on this trend, not far west of where John Willcox first mined Chatham County coal.

### **Surface Mining in the Farmville Community**

The Farmville area is on the north bank of Deep River, about 1.75 miles east of the town of Cumnock and the old Cumnock mine. Coal beds of the Cumnock formation are on the surface at Farmville and were worked on a small scale prior to 1856. By 1856 preparations for the large-scale mining of coal were being made in anticipation of transportation to take the coal to market. Permanent buildings had been erected, a steam engine was in place for raising the coal and pumping water from the mine, and rail track and cars had been provided.<sup>11</sup>

In March of 1856, a tow-boat was loaded with coal near Haywood and taken to Wilmington by the steamer *John H. Haughton*. This was the first cargo of coal from Chatham County to reach Wilmington by steamboat through the works of the Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company.<sup>12</sup> This shipment of coal could have come from Farmville and/or Egypt.

Starting in 1862, coal from the mines at Farmville, at Gulf, and at Egypt was shipped over the Western Railroad from its northern terminus near the town of Egypt to the Confederate arsenal at Fayetteville, being used to fuel blockade runners out of Wilmington and for other uses during the war.

Notes by Walter D. Siler on the history of Deep River coal mines, written in 1925, state: "A Mr. Seagroves (father of R. R. Seagroves) for many years supplied a considerable local demand and shipped to various points in the state coal from the Farmville area."<sup>13</sup> No dates were given; probably this traffic occurred some time after the Civil War.

### Coal Glen Mine

Early in 1921 the Carolina Coal Company was opening an underground sloping shaft mine in Chatham County at Coal Glen in the Farmville community, near where surface beds of coal had been mined as early as the 1850s. Day and night shifts were at work, but the main coal seam had not been reached.<sup>14</sup> In June of 1923 the mine was in production, capable of producing about 200 tons of coal a day, and the railroads were buying all the coal they could get from the mine. Mules were employed in pulling coal cars in some parts of the mine. Pumps removing water from the mine were driven by 50-horsepower electric motors.<sup>15</sup>

Early in the year 1925, the capacity of the mine was 200 tons of good coal a day, and 75 men were employed. Coal at the mine sold for \$5.00 to \$6.00 a ton. There were about thirty dwellings in the mine village. Plans were under way to extend the mine workings, to add new machinery, and to double the output of the mine.<sup>16</sup> By mid-May 1925, the mine had reached a reasonable margin of earnings. The payroll was about \$150,000 a year. Coal from this mine was ranked with the best U.S. soft coals.<sup>17</sup>

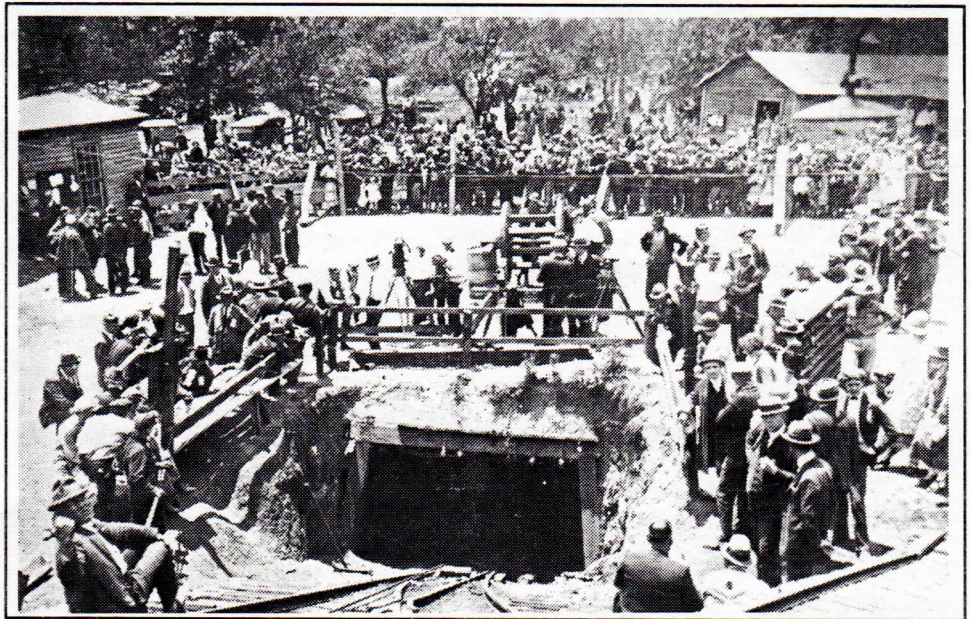
Then, on 27 May 1925 at about ten in the morning, there was an

explosion in the Coal Glen mine. A witness on the surface near the mouth of the mine saw a large amount of what appeared to be smoke and dust, rushing like a windstorm from the mouth of the mine, lasting for about one and a half minutes. Fifty-three miners were killed and two were injured by this explosion.<sup>18</sup>

It was not until 23 June 1925 that the mine was in condition for a team to enter and inspect the mine to determine, if possible, the cause of the explosion. The conclusion was that it resulted from a blow-out blast shot and that this ignited the gas and dust resulting in a general explosion throughout the mine. The general condition of the mine was found to be very good, with the exception of some coal dust found in some of the entries. Inspection revealed that the explosion of May 27 was not as severe as first thought. Only one of the smaller entries was completely wrecked. The running of the fan was not stopped by the explosion and most of the machinery underground was repairable.

A receiver for the company was appointed, and a decision was made to continue the operation of the mine. Pumps were back in operation within a few days, and a force of men was set to work to restore the mine. In a short time small quantities of coal were coming out of the mine and continuous operations resumed. There was a fatal accident in this mine around mid-September, when one man was killed by falling timber dislodged by a wrecked coal car.<sup>19</sup> In November of 1925 management announced that all settlements had been made for the loss due to the accident of 27 May 1925.<sup>20</sup>

During January 1929, the Coal Glen mine was



*Crowd waiting at entrance to Coal Glen mine for news from rescue squad, 1925.*

(Photo courtesy of Harold L. Tysinger)

producing 300 tons of coal a day. The labor force at this time included 100 convicts. A few months earlier, in 1928, the parent company, Carolina Coal Company, had purchased the nearby Cumnock mine.<sup>21</sup> But the year 1929 marked the start of the Great Depression and the end of this company's period of marginal prosperity.

In 1931 the Coal Glen mine was not in production. A small force was employed to keep the mine pumped out and ready for full operation at any time. During this year there were two mishaps resulting in three casualties, all men who were operating pumps at the lower levels of the mine. In late March two men were killed by an explosion caused by a severe electrical storm.<sup>22</sup> In September a man lost his life after two small rocks became dislodged and pressed electrical wires together, causing them to arc and ignite gas in the mine. Because his body was found some distance from the area of the explosion, it was concluded that he had died from the coal damp gas following the explosion.<sup>23</sup>

By 1933 the parent company, Carolina Coal and By-Products Company, was bankrupt. Its properties, including the Coal Glen mine and the Cumnock mine, were sold at auction at Cumnock on 8 February 1933, subject to a first mortgage on which \$400,000 in bonds was outstanding and to unpaid taxes. The one and only bid was for \$5,000, made by K. R. Hoyle, attorney for the first mortgage bond holders. The holdings of the company included more than 700 acres of coal land owned in fee simple in and around Cumnock in Lee County and mineral rights to 3,300 acres of additional land on the Chatham side of the river at Coal Glen, the mines at Cumnock and Coal Glen together with machinery and equipment, three miles of railroad track, and a locomotive, plus other property.<sup>24</sup>

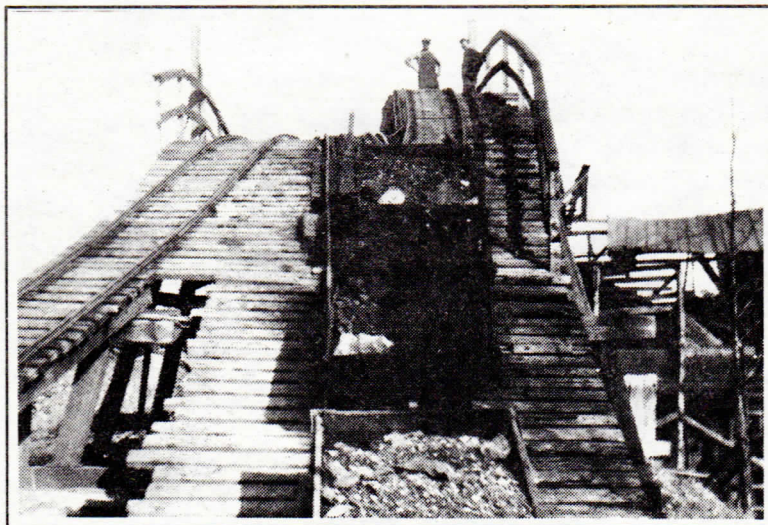
The mine remained inactive until 1939, when the Carolina Fuel and Transportation Company was formed to reopen it.<sup>25</sup> This mine was active into the late 1940s. The mine was abandoned in June of 1952,<sup>26</sup> and there has been no substantial mining of Chatham County coal since then.

## NOTES

8 1. The 1858 map of Capt. Wilkes (Charles Wilkes, Report of the Secretary of the Navy on the Deep River Country. U.S. 35th Congress, 2nd Session, 1859, Sen. Ex. Doc. 26. North Carolina General Assembly, Session 1858-1859, Doc. 60) shows this place as Farmerville. It appears as Farmville in published reports of that period. More recently the place name of Coal Glen has been applied to the same community.

2. Wade H. Hadley, Jr., *The Story of the Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company, 1849-1873* (n.p.: Chatham County Historical Society, 1980), 31.

3. John A. Reinemund, *Geology of the Deep River Coal Fields* (United States Geological Survey Professional Paper 246: 1955).



Loaded cars from the Carolina Mine at Coal Glen.

(Photo from North Carolina State Archives)

4. W.C. Kerr, "Kerr's Report, 1875," in P.M. Hale, *In the Coal and Iron Counties of North Carolina* (Raleigh: P.M. Hale; New York: E. J. Hale, 1883), 52-55; reference on p. 53.

5. During the 1750s and 1760s, Husband was an active land speculator and was a leader of the Regulator movement. After the battle of Alamance on 16 May 1771, Husband fled the state with a price on his head and settled in western Pennsylvania, where he enjoyed a long and interesting career.

6. George W. Willcox, *John Willcox, 1726-1793* (n.p.: Historical Research Company, 1988), 18.

7. *Ibid.*, 118

8. *Ibid.*

9. Ebenezer Emmons, "Emmons's Preliminary Report, 1852," in P.M. Hale, *In the Coal and Iron Counties of North Carolina* (Raleigh: P.M. Hale; New York: E.J. Hale, 1883), 11-19; reference on p. 14.

10. T.T.S. Laidley, "Colonel Laidley's Report" [1856], in P.M. Hale, *In the Coal and Iron Counties of North Carolina* (Raleigh: P.M. Hale; New York: E.J. Hale, 1883), 139-146; reference on p. 140.

11. *Ibid.*, 141.

12. Hadley, 41.

13. *Chatham Record*, 4 June 1925.

14. *Ibid.*, 20 January 1921.

15. *Ibid.*, 28 June 1923. Backers of the mine at this time were J. P. McQueen, Leonard Tuffs, Frank Bauchan, and C. W. Reeves.

16. *Ibid.*, 5 February 1925.

17. *Ibid.*, 26 November 1925.

18. "Report of the Explosion of the Mine of the Carolina Coal Company" (Raleigh: Department of Labor and Printing, 25 June 1925).

19. *Chatham Record*, 17 September 1925

20. *Ibid.*, 26 November 1925.

21. *Chatham News*, 31 January 1929.

22. *Ibid.*, 2 April 1931.

23. *Ibid.*, 10 September 1931.

24. *Ibid.*, 16 February 1933.

25. *Ibid.*, 10 January 1939.

26. *Sanford Herald*, 25 January 1992.