North Carolina’s Deadliest Industrial Accident, 100 Years On

A century after underground explosions killed at least 53 people, a community commemorates the state’s ‘forgotten’ mining history.
by Elizabeth Friend

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The original entrance to the Coal Glen mine. (Kate Medley for The Assembly)

There were no canaries in Chatham County’s Coal Glen mine—only rats, mules, and men. On the morning of May 27, 1925, according to local legend, the rats fled.

Three underground explosions killed at least 53 men that day, decimating families in the nearby mining villages. A century later, the Coal Glen mine accident is still the deadliest industrial disaster in North Carolina history, but it’s largely forgotten outside the communities along the Deep River on the border between Lee and Chatham counties.

“Families still hold the grief of these mining legacies closely,” said Cole Wicker, executive director of the Heart of Deep River Historical Society.

The Coal Glen explosion isn't the area's only tragedy. There's a long history of loss in the region. Wicker estimates more than 130 workers have died mining the Deep River coal field, though the true number may never be known.

Through a series of public events commemorating the anniversary of the 1925 disaster, Wicker and others in the community of Cumnock aim to bring the region's coal mining history to light.

This comes as the area faces a wave of growth. A new housing development slated for construction along U.S. Route 421 in Cumnock is expected to add hundreds of homes to a place that has just a handful. If a proposed highway corridor project connecting Greensboro and Fayetteville moves forward, the rural community could become a bedroom suburb for commuters.

The Coal Glen mine explosion is still the deadliest industrial disaster in North Carolina history. (Kate Medley for *The Assembly*)

Members of the historical society hope to provide a bulwark against the loss of local identity they fear may come with that change. The group has organized cemetery tours, oral history projects, and outreach to local schools about the area's past.

Ultimately, they'd like to create a gathering space that doubles as a history museum and community center.

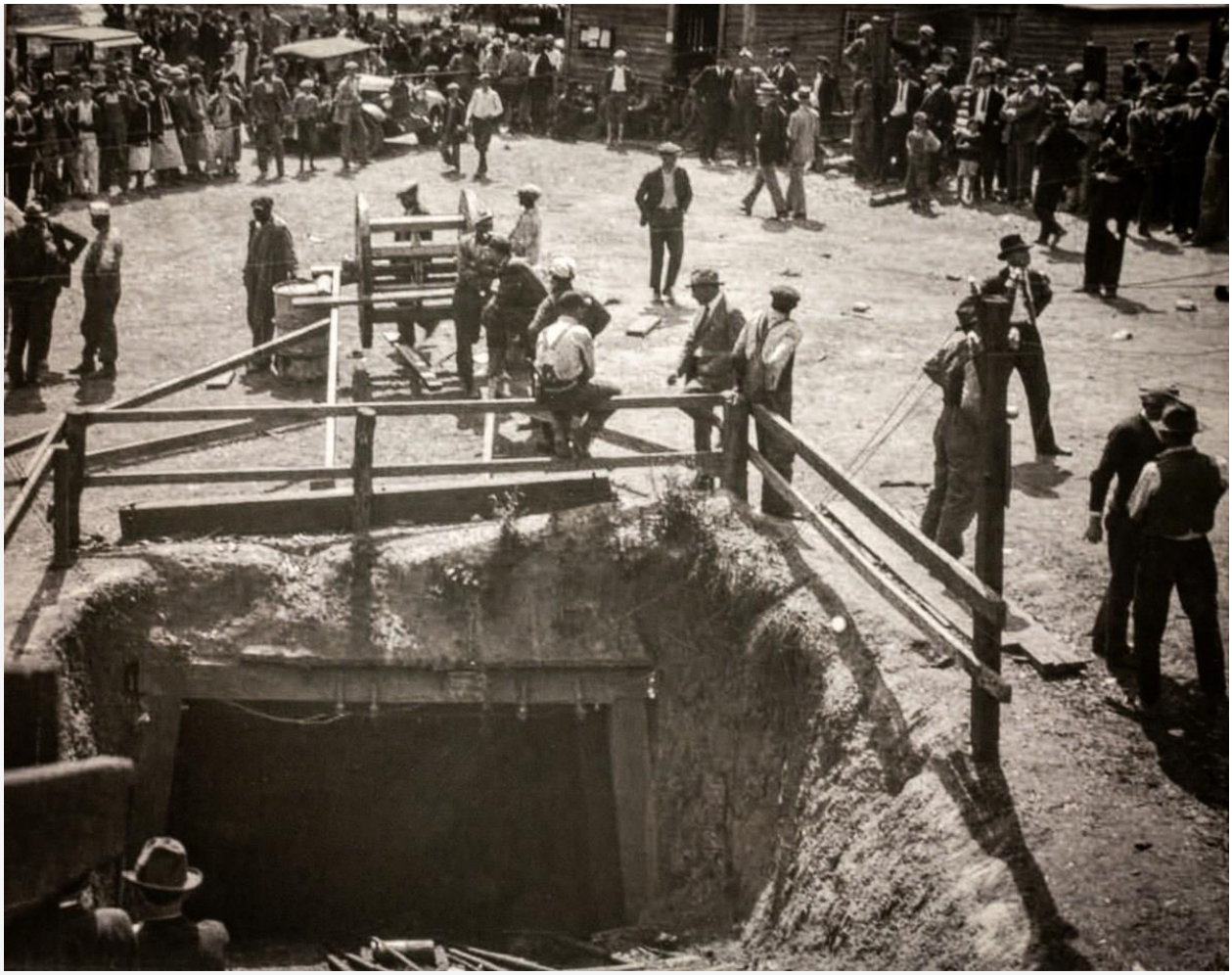
In April, the historical society hosted an exhibition of photos from the 1925 disaster at the Cumnock Union Church, along with maps, reports, and mining paraphernalia. On the anniversary, they'll gather at the Farmville Cemetery just a few hundred yards from the former Coal Glen mine's entrance to mark the explosions that once shattered mining communities on both sides of the Deep River.

'Between Feasts and Famine'

North Carolina was never a coal-producing powerhouse like other Eastern states, but coal left its mark here, and not exactly where you'd expect.

The Deep River separates Chatham and Lee counties, twisting through the landscape with jigsaw-puzzle curves where the Piedmont meets the Coastal Plain. Underneath, there's a Triassic basin full of sandstone and shale and a 35-mile-long ribbon of coal that runs alongside the river. It's bituminous coal, not the best quality, but good enough to warrant nearly 200 years of toil to free it from the earth.

The coal found here has been put to industrial use since at least the Revolutionary War era, when it fueled local ironworks. Larger scale underground mining enterprises took off in the 1850s. Wicker, who grew up in the area and wrote his master's thesis on the region's coal mining history, says the decades following the Civil War saw a repeated boom and bust cycle.



A historic photo of the Coal Glen Mine taken by *The News and Observer* reporter Ben Dixon MacNeill hangs in a cafe in Cumnock. (Kate Medley for *The Assembly*)

“The mine would get a flush of money, they would try to make it work, and then it would close. And then someone would invest again, and it would close,” he said. “But in those periods between feasts and famine, in those good years, a lot of money, and a lot of labor, a lot of time and energy was sunk into those mines.”

The area’s two most productive mines sat on each side of the Deep River: the smaller Coal Glen mine in Chatham County and the larger Egypt mine in Lee County near what is now Cumnock.

Unlike most of the Jim Crow South, the Deep River coal mines were not segregated, Wicker said. Black and white miners worked side by side below ground, while above ground they lived in separate communities. The mines and surrounding villages changed names numerous times over the decades as new owners tried to start fresh or shake off a reputation for disaster.

George Monroe and his son, T.S. Monroe, are buried in the Cumnock Community Cemetery. Their headstone says they were “killed by explosion.” (Kate Medley for *The Assembly)*

Local cemeteries tell the stories of tragedies large and small. In the Cumnock Community Cemetery, grave markers detail mine deaths as far back as 1857.

George and T.S. Monroe, buried in the same plot, share a headstone that reads, “To my husband and son, killed by explosion.” They died in a 1895 Egypt mine blast along with roughly 40 others.

Five years later, another blast in the Egypt mine killed roughly 20. Questions linger about where the dead now lie. In the oldest part of the cemetery, there’s an open space under a cedar tree where caretakers believe there may be an unmarked mass burial from the 1900 explosion.

‘No Hope Among Them’

The morning shift in the Coal Glen mine started at 7 a.m. on May 27, 1925. The first blast came less than three hours later. According to newspaper accounts of the day,

Superintendent Howard Butler called via telephone to the workers 1,800 feet deep in the mine, who told him the explosion happened somewhere above them.

The Durham Sun reported that Butler and another man descended to 1,200 feet, where they found a wall of debris and six men trapped, some still alive. Before they could begin to shift the timber and rocks to try to save them, a second and third blast rocked the mine, this time higher up the maze of tunnels. Butler and his colleague barely escaped. No one else made it out.

Cumnock resident Debbie Hall, 74, grew up hearing stories from her grandfather, who worked in the Coal Glen mine along with his brother.

“He was supposed to work that day, and he said when he got to work, the rats and even the bugs were coming out of the mine,” she recalled. “Apparently there’d been some talk between the miners about some unsafe things, and he said, ‘Don’t go in.’ And he didn’t, and they did, and his brother was killed.”

Debbie Hall holds a photo of her great uncle Henry Grady Hall, who was killed in the mine explosion. Hall and others are trying to preserve the history of the disaster. (Kate Medley for *The Assembly)*

Canaries came to Coal Glen after the disaster, according to Wicker, brought in by mine officials to monitor air quality as workers toiled to bring up the dead. The cause of the 1925 explosion, like so many before it, was deemed to be firedamp, a buildup of combustible gases that could ignite with any stray spark. According to a U.S. Bureau of Mines report on the accident, ventilation in the mine was not sufficient to clear the large amounts of gas released.

It took four days to recover 53 men. Crowds of thousands flocked from across the state to the nearby community of Coal Glen, now called Farmville, to help or to keep vigil as bodies were slowly brought to the surface. Ben Dixon MacNeill, a reporter with *The News and Observer*, was on hand to chronicle the events. His photographs and first-hand accounts garnered attention statewide and made headlines across the country.

In some of his pictures, it seems as if the crowds are gathered for a spectacle, but the most memorable of his stark black and white shots captured the tension of those waiting for the worst.

On the day of the disaster, MacNeill wrote: “They await there quietly, numbed by the unthinkable horror that lies beneath their feet. They stare at the yawning hole down which their kin went to work this morning. They whisper together in hopeless monotones and wait. There is no hope among them anywhere.”

Debbie Hall, shown in Cumnock Union Church, said her grandfather didn’t go into the mine the day of the explosion, but his brother did and was killed. (Kate Medley for *The Assembly)*

Sitting in a long wooden pew surrounded by MacNeill’s photos, Hall picked out her grandfather among the miners. She said his brother was one of the last recovered from the mine.

“It’s hard to look at those faces,” said Hall. “I see today there are some industries that would like to take away regulations, take away things that protect human beings, and we need to be reminded of that.”

The Coal Glen accident, which left behind 38 widows raising 79 children, was cited by the state labor commissioner as impetus for passing the North Carolina Workers’ Compensation Act in 1929. The act mandated that employers pay workers or their families for injuries and accidental deaths occurring on the job.

After three major tragedies in a 30-year span, Wicker said mine owners found it increasingly difficult to find people willing to work in such dangerous conditions, especially since workers had other options in the region like sharecropping.

> "There is no hope among them anywhere." *Ben Dixon MacNeill, reporter with* The News and Observer

In the late 1920s, the owners of the Coal Glen mine turned to convict labor, leasing nearly 200 Black prisoners from the state. This ended in 1929 following a rail car accident that killed four men.

Both the Chatham and Lee County mines closed during the Great Depression, signaling the beginning of the end of North Carolina's coal mining era. The promise of underground wealth would continue to spark occasional enthusiasm, prompting sporadic mining efforts into the 1950s, talk of strip mining in the late '80s, and interest in fracking more recently. Wicker said nothing substantial ever came of it.

One lesson he takes from studying the region's history: "Trying to get any sort of fossil fuel energy from the Deep River just is never commercially viable enough to work in the long run."

Preserving the Past

These days, Cumnock is a tiny place a few miles northwest of Sanford. Locals agree it's more than a neighborhood but not quite a town. There's no post office, no stoplight, no grocery store, but there are kinship bonds and affinity ties dating back generations and two churches that have anchored the community since the late 1800s.

Now, there's a new eatery too. The Coal Miner's Diner opened earlier this year with the motto "restoring history in Cumnock NC one meal at a time."

On its walls hang black-and-white photos documenting the region's coal mining past. Katlyn Ridenhour, who works at the diner, said people often assume the restaurant's name is some kind of gimmick or a nod to Loretta Lynn.

"When they see the pictures and they start talking about it, a lot of people don't know that there was even coal mines in North Carolina," said Ridenhour. "They don't think that it's actual pictures from here."

The Coal Miner's Diner cafe in Cumnock opened earlier this year with photos of the region's mining past on its walls. (Kate Medley for *The Assembly)*

The diner's motto is "restoring history in Cumnock NC one meal at a time." (Kate Medley for *The Assembly)*

Ridenhour likes the idea of sharing this little-known lore. She says it builds a connection with people who might see Cumnock as a place to pass through, including workers at the nearby Pilgrim's Pride chicken processing plant who drive in from Sanford or Greensboro.

The chicken plant sits on land that used to be the site of the Egypt mine. Most plant workers don't live nearby the way mining families did a century ago, but Wicker sees a clear throughline between the past and present that informs his work as a historian.

"From the earliest iron forges all the way through coal mining and then now the chicken processing plant, you have a large contingent population of working class, both white and non-white laborers, in that area really trying to make a claim and make a living," he said. "It is American history, it is community history, and it is forgotten history."