

**March 18, 1839; Black Heath Mine, Near Richmond, Va.; 53 Killed**

*(From Henry Howes, Virginia, Its History and Antiquities, published 1845 (10, p. 120))*

Some years since, when ventilation was less understood than at present, an explosion took place—of the most fearful character. Of the fifty-four men in the mine, only two who happened to be in some crevices near the mouth of the shaft, escaped with life. Nearly all the internal works of the mine were blown to atoms. Such was the force of the explosion, that a basket then descending, containing three men was blown nearly one hundred feet into the air. Two fell out, and were crushed to death, and the third remained in, and with the basket, was thrown some seventy or eighty feet from the shaft, breaking both his legs and arms. He recovered. It is believed, from the number of bodies found grouped together in the higher parts of the mine, that many survived the explosion of the inflammable gas, and were destroyed by inhaling the carbonic acid gas which succeeds it.

## The Washington National

THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 1839.

RICHMOND, (VA) MARCH 19.

A disastrous explosion took place in the coal mine of the Black Heath Company, in Chesterfield, yesterday morning. From a note sent to the President of the Company, we learn that between fifty and sixty of the hands and two overseers had descended the shaft previous to the explosion, and that three others, who were about to descend, were killed. The last accounts from the scene state that nothing certain was known of the fate of those below. The damage sustained by the company must be very great.—*Enquirer.*

## Milwaukee Sentinel

April 10, 1839

*From the Richmond Courier.*

**Awful explosion and loss of life.**—News was brought to town yesterday, that an awful and fatal explosion had taken place early in the morning, in the Black Heath Coal Pits, in Chesterfield, by which there was a considerable destruction of human life. The explosion was what is known as a "fire damp explosion," from want of proper precaution. Between fifty and sixty pit laborers and two overseers had previously gone down. Three men at the mouth of the pit were instantly killed. The fate of those who went down is not known; but it is supposed few, if any escaped death. They had not been reached according to the last accounts.

**Postscript.**—Since the above was in type we have just conversed with a gentleman from the Pit. He thinks that between thirty and forty had gone below before the explosion—four of them had been gotten out, who it was supposed would recover; two others were seen dead; and cries and groans were distinctly heard from some who had not been reached.

So great was the consternation and dismay, that the accuracy of the details could not be relied on; and so great was the terror among all in the vicinity, that the proper efforts could not be promptly made to get out the unfortunate laborers.

One of the three at the mouth of the pit, alluded to above, is living with both legs broken.—The other two were immediately killed. The shaft and engine are but little injured.

**The Coal Pit Explosion.**—The Richmond Courier of Wednesday brings the following additional intelligence, as to the recent dreadful accident at the Black Heath Coal Pit.

Up to four o'clock yesterday evening, only four bodies had been got out. They were lifeless, and in a very mutilated condition, having been taken from beneath a great bulk of coal.

One of the four got out alive on Monday has since died. Mr. Beverly Heth, with his assistants, is causing every possible exertion to get out the bodies. There is but little hope that any more of them will be taken alive. The explosion took place at 6 o'clock on Monday morning, and thirty-fours had elapsed when we last heard from the Pits, in which time, if any had escaped death from the very violent explosion, they must have died of suffocation, the structures for conducting air in the shaft being so much injured.

# The Indiana Journal

INDIANAPOLIS, SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 1839.

From the Richmond Compiler, we copy the following interesting account of the Black Heath Mine and further accounts of the disastrous explosion which took place in it on Monday last. It is said to be the first explosion of the kind which has taken place in this country. It may be noted here, that the coal mines, near Cumberland, in this state, are not exposed to any such disasters—the entrance to them being horizontal, affords ample means for ventilation, and there is no gass generated which will not allow the use of candles or lamps without danger.—*Balt. Pat.*

## THE BLACK HEATH COAL MINE.

The Black Heath Coal Mine, worked by the "Black Heath Coal Company," is one of the richest and most extensive in this country. It is 12 miles from Richmond in nearly a western direction, and is situated in the midst of bituminous coal fields of unknown extent. The shaft from which the explosion on Monday took place, has not been long sunk, and we believe is the deepest in the union—being more than 700 feet to its bottom. Upwards of 10,000,000 bushels of coal had been explored in the pit reached by it; and none can conjecture how much more a further exploration would discover.

The steam engines and apparatus for hoisting coal from this shaft were excellent; and the system and facility with which the hoisting process was conducted, produced an average of about 2,500 bushels of coal per day. It is to be regretted that these operations have been interrupted—throwing so much weight in the scale of our productions, and aiding essentially to increase our capital and commercial strength as they did—and this regret is added to by the afflicting event which has caused the interruption. However, the intelligent and active men who are superintending the Mine, say that it will be reclaimed in a short time.

The explosion was one of a most violent nature.—How it happened, there is no telling. But that it occurred from neglect or disregard of positive orders and regulations of the pit, is beyond all doubt. The drifts and "air coasts," (passages for the air from chamber to chamber) were so arranged as to keep up constant ventilation. It is the general opinion that one of the doors of the air coasts must have been closed, and that thus the "inflammable gass" accumulated on Sunday to such an extent as to produce the explosion soon after the laborers entered the pit, on Monday morning. Sir Humphrey Davy's safety lamp was constantly used in the Mine, and no doubt is entertained, but that it was used on Monday morning. It was commonly carried forward to test the presence of the gass. It may have been out of order; if a slight rent should have been in its wire gauze covering it would readily ignite the gass. Other lamps were used; and one of these may have been taken into a chamber or drift where the safety lamp had not been presented. Either of these causes would have involved carelessness. The density and inflammability of the gass might have caused the wire to have become oxidated, and fall to pieces; but that could not have occurred till after indication by flame inside the gauze, of a danger, in the face of which it would have been madness in the laborers to remain. Whatever may have been the immediate cause, the arrangements and rules of the pit, drawn from the lights of science and experience in mining, were such as to have ensured safety, if properly attended to. But would it not be well, in order to diminish the chances of danger from even carelessness itself, to use Davy's lamp, exclusively, in all pits where there has been any exhibition of carbonated hydrogen or "inflammable gas?"

One of the superintendents of the operations in the pit, who was below when the explosion took place, was a man of great skill in his profession, having been many years engaged in it in some of the most famous English mines. He was a Scotchman, named John Rynard. It is hard to account for how he should have permitted the cause of the occurrence; but even in the midst of an effort to correct the omission or neglect of Saturday night, the explosion may have taken place.

Mr. John Hancock, a native of Chesterfield, of respectable family, was the other unfortunate superintendent.

The laborers were all colored men. The superintendents above the shaft say that about forty were below. They cannot speak with certainty. Many had gone to see their wives to distant plantations; and it was not known how many had returned.—Those who had not, do not yet appear from terror at the news of the explosion, but *forty* is the *maximum*.

The explosion was so powerful as to blow pieces of timber out of the shaft to a distance of a hundred yards from it. Three men were blown up it into a coal hamper, to a height of some thirty or forty feet above its top; two of them fell out of the hamper in different directions, and were immediately killed—the third remained in it, and fell with it, escaping most miraculously with his life, having both legs broken. He is now doing very well. Much loose coal was blown from the drifts to the bottom of the shaft, and four of the bodies as we have already stated, were taken from beneath a large bulk there, in a mutilated state. Four were taken out shortly after the explosion on Monday—one of whom died. The others are in a fair way to recover.

Every exertion has been made which could be made consistently with safety, to rescue the unfortunate beings. It appeared upon going down the shaft, that much carbonic acid gass (the product of combustion) was present. This is called at the mines "black damp," and though not inflammable, is destructive to human life. This, then, had first to be dispersed.—The partitions, too, in the shaft, necessary for the ingress and egress of air in the pit, were much torn to pieces by the explosion, and had to be repaired as the shaft was descended, or death would have resulted to those who went down.

These explosions were formerly very common in the north of England. One occurred at the Felling colliery in Northumberland, on the 25th May, 1812, in which 92 lives were lost. This is the greatest destruction ever known from the same cause. In 1815, an explosion occurred in a mine at Durham, in which 57 persons were destroyed; and at another, 22 were killed in the same manner. The discoveries of sir Humphrey Davy and other contributors to science and benefactors of mankind, have since rendered the avoidance of these destructive explosions certain.

In our mines, no explosion of any extent has ever occurred, from the ignition of inflammable gas. Such are as certainly to be guarded against the bursting of steam boilers. The safeguards in each are as simple as effective.

Let the unfortunate event which has just occurred, be a lesson and a warning, as we are sure it will be; and, if possible, cause a more rigid observance of the rules which science and experience have pointed out as the sure and unerring guarantee of safety.