
The Mine Wars: Who Worked in the West Virginia Coal Mines?
TRANSCRIPT

THOMAS ANDREWS, Historian: The southern West Virginia coalfields were really the up and coming coalfields. They had tremendous demand for new miners because the industry was expanding so much. The only way to really bring more coal out of the ground was to put more mine workers underground. And the coal companies in southern West Virginia are bringing African-American miners up from the South and bringing people in from southern and eastern Europe.

JEAN BATTLO, Local Historian: My father came here from Calabria, Italy with his brother Antonio. His name was Fortunato Battaglia. Coal company agents would come up to him, he said, and say, “Lavoro e casa,” in other words, “We can give you a job and a home.” And, uh, they had nothing to lose.

ELLIS RAY WILLIAMS, Coal Miner: My family decided to come from South Carolina to the coalfields of West Virginia for economic reasons and cultural reasons. My parents were sharecroppers and the life of sharecroppers wasn’t the best life. The South wasn’t very free where black people were concerned.

JOE WILLIAM TROTTER, JR., Historian: In West Virginia African Americans entered a class and racially stratified society. But compared to the South and compared to the North, West Virginia was a place in which they got a more equitable footing. There were more black miners in West Virginia than anywhere else in the nation. And black workers in this environment gained access to a system that proclaimed equal pay for the same work.

DENISE GIARDINA, Historian: There was a lot of conflict among the different groups of coal miners because they didn’t know each other, and so you had a great deal of prejudice. And the companies reinforced that by building coal camps so that you had a section for black miners, had a section for Eastern European miners, and there was a section for native, Appalachian miners. And that was done on purpose. The coal operators felt that that diversity would keep unionization at bay.