

University of North Carolina at Asheville

North Carolina Mining and the Failed
Safety Legislation of 1897

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Since the discovery of gold on John Reed's farm in 1799, North Carolina has promised vast riches to those interested in gold, silver, copper, and coal. Particularly in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth-century, the state was rife with speculators and prospectors all interested in taking advantage of the mineral resources abundant in the area and, by extension, exploiting the state's other resources in the process. Wood was readily available to fire the smelters used to separate the minerals deemed valuable from their resting places amidst random rock and pyretic material. Machinery, although archaic and somewhat inefficient at times, was available to pump water from mine shafts and help transport the earth's underground treasures to the surface. And perhaps most importantly, labor was plentiful and inexpensive. It is this last, human factor that has been consistently overlooked by mine owners, operators, legislators and society in general. Before 1825 safety concerns in the Old North State's mining industry were minimized by the relative safety inherent in the surface, or placer, mining that prevailed in the region. As the industry grew, however, surface minerals became scarce forcing mining operations underground and exponentially increasing their complexity and hazardousness.¹ Though badly needed, seventy-two years followed the shift in mining technique before any legislative attempt was made to offset the increased danger. Finally, in 1897 The North Carolina General Assembly passed *An Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines*.² Unfortunately, largely due to a socio-economic attitude that held monetary concerns in higher regard than physical considerations, the legislation proved a catastrophic failure.

¹ Elizabeth Hines and Michael Smith, "The Rush Started Here II: Hard Rock Gold Mining in North Carolina, 1925 to 1864," *Earth Sciences History* vol. 25 number 1 (2006), 69.

² "An Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines," *Public Laws and Resolutions of the State of North Carolina Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1897* (Winston N.C.: M.I. & J.C. Stewart, Public Printers and Binders), 423.

Historians who have addressed North Carolina's mining industry have often mirrored the industry proprietors' focus on the cost of machinery and processing while demonstrating the same lack of concern for the true human cost of mining reflected among the general population. For example, In *Gold Mining in North Carolina: A Bicentennial History*, historians Richard F. Knapp and Brent D. Glass provided a survey of mineral extraction in the Old North State. Their work, despite the title, was not limited to the state's gold deposits and is considered by many scholars to be the definitive work on mining in North Carolina. In general, Knapp, whose main focus was on John Reed's gold mine, and Glass, who concentrated his research on Rowan County's Gold Hill mining district and boom town, provide an in-depth analysis of the costs and struggles of the industry. The work progresses, as the mining industry did, from the harvesting of gold to the search and extraction of other mineral resources when the precious yellow metal had become scarce. Though it would be remiss to suggest that *Gold Mining in North Carolina* completely ignored the physical dangers that prevailed in the industry, Knapp and Glass addressed the hazardous mining environment only in passing, choosing instead, as many other historians have, to concentrate their efforts on the capital investments inherent in the industry.³

Otis E. Young Jr. provided another example of the preference that historians have shown to the economic aspects of the mining industry. In his study, "The Southern Gold Rush, 1828-1836," Young, a history professor at Arizona State University, highlighted mining's financial impact on the Southeast United States by pointing out that the industry "suddenly injected forty million dollars into a specie-starved economy." He goes on to

³ Richard F. Knapp and Brent D. Glass, *Gold Mining in North Carolina: A Bicentennial History* (Raleigh, N.C.: Division of Archives and History, 1999).

explain that the industry, which actually began in North Carolina, employed as many as 25,000 men early on and laid the groundwork for subsequent western mining ventures.⁴ As was the case with *Gold Mining in North Carolina: A Bicentennial History*, however, Young's primary area of concern allowed little room for the treatment of the often life-threatening conditions encountered by miners on a daily basis.

While the writings of Knapp, Glass and Young, at least in their economic foci, are indicative of the approach that many other historians have taken in regards to mining, they are somewhat unique in that they are centered on the American Southeast. As indicated in the *Report of Vice-Consul R.E. Heide, on the Resources, Trade and Commerce of North Carolina* issued in 1875, the mineral industry in North Carolina was second at certain junctures only to agricultural pursuits in its impact on the state's economy.⁵ Yet, akin to North Carolina citizens who, as reported by the Lumberton North Carolina Newspaper *The Robesonian*, in the wake of the 1925 Carolina Coal Mining disaster, "did not realize that mining was being done in this state [North Carolina] on a scale that carried the menace of such a fearful catastrophe," many historians fail to acknowledge the significant impact that mining has had on North Carolina's development and the death toll the industry has exacted on the state's citizenry.⁶

David Hunter Strother, perhaps better known by the pen name Porte Crayon, while on a trip to North Carolina in 1857, took note of the dangers that persisted in the state's unregulated mining industry. Later, in his article "North Carolina Illustrated," Strother reported many of the hazards he observed, some of which subsequently proved

⁴ Otis E. Young, Jr., "The Southern Gold Rush, 1828-1836," *The Journal of Southern History* vol. 48 no. 3 (August 1982), 373.

⁵ R.E. Hiede, *Report on the Resources, Trade and Commerce of North Carolina*, (Wilmington: North Carolina Presbyterian Publishing House, 1875).

⁶ An untitled article from *The Robesonian* vol. 61 no. 32 (Lumberton, N.C.), June 1, 1925.

fatal. According to Crayon's work, for example, the miners donned "costumes" that consisted of a coat, complete with tails, overalls, and a felt hat.⁷ Though clothing would not have mattered much in the face of disasters such as cave ins and explosions, requiring miners to wear protective gear would have undoubtedly saved lives in other, less destructive instances.

Despite the fact that many injuries were sustained, some fatal, by miners who were struck with relatively small falling objects, the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines* failed to recognize inappropriate attire as a viable safety concern. The folly of the General Assembly's omission was made abundantly clear when Will Perkins, a miner at the Ormand Mine, was struck in the head by a piece of wood while descending into the mine in March of 1900.⁸ Other details of the incident aside, had Mr. Perkins been required to wear protective head gear while in the mine, his chances of survival would have increased.

Mr. Crayon, as depicted in figure one of the appendix, also alluded to the miner's routine use of open flames to light their way in the dungeon-like mining environment. According to Crayon each miner carried a lighted candle fixed to his hat brim with a wad of clay.⁹ Though electricity was not widely available at the time of the article's publication and was severely limited even by the late 1890s, other, safer methods of illumination were available in the years preceding and following the passing of the legislation of 1897. In fact, section six of the mining act addressed the issue of the dangers posed by the open flame approach and insisted that locked safety lamps be

⁷ Porte Crayon, "North Carolina Illustrated," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* vol. 15, no. 87 (August 1857), 292.

⁸ "A Little Boy's Thoughtless Act Killed a Man," *The Landmark* (Statesville, N.C.), 20 March 1900.

⁹ Crayon, 292.

employed when inspecting or working in mines. According to the legislation, the key to the lamps must be maintained by a supervisor, each lamp must be inspected before every shift to ensure its clean and safe condition, and matches, or any other instrument of ignition must be used only under the strict direction of the mine foreman.¹⁰

While the act at least addressed the explosive hazard of the hat-mounted candle, post-1897 disasters indicated that the legislation again failed to provide a safer work environment. A lack of reinforcement rather than direct omission was the culprit this time as the only repercussion provided in the document for those who violated the open flame restriction was the possibility of a misdemeanor charge.¹¹ Apparently, with little fear of reprisal, two Mecklenburg county miners decided to have a smoke break in the Capps mine in June of 1901. An explosion ensued that claimed both of their lives.¹² Incidentally, largely unconfirmed eyewitness reports also attributed the Cumnock mining disaster of 1900, which cost the lives of 23 miners, to a direct violation of section six by asserting that the incident originated from an inoperable lamp.¹³

Another concern brought to light by Porte Crayon's article was the hazards posed by the improper storage of equipment and supplies. Midway through their tour, Mr. Crayon and a companion sat down for a rest on some bags that lay conveniently on the ground in the middle of the shaft. Boston, Crayon's travel companion, became curious as to the contents of the bags. The two decided to investigate and upon cutting one of the satchels open they discovered it was filled with gunpowder. Their initial shock gave way

¹⁰ "An Act," 426.

¹¹ "An Act," 428.

¹² An untitled article in *The Landmark* (Statesville, N.C.), 15 June 1901.

¹³ "Mine Disaster in Chatham," *The Landmark* (Statesville, N.C.), 25 May 1900.

to fear when they realized that, like the other miners, they too had candles atop their heads.¹⁴

Undoubtedly, the Crayon article was not the only source to highlight the need for a storage standard in the mining industry. Still, the author's concern was not addressed in the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines*. Tragedy was the result when, having miraculously survived a fall of 150 feet, Mr. Standfield, a miner employed with Granville County's Holloway Copper company, had the misfortune of landing on a tub of extremely large drills. Three of the drills, each three inches in diameter, entered Standfield's abdomen and exited through his posterior. According to newspaper accounts, in attempting to rescue the miner, workers unwittingly removed the drills with his entrails attached.¹⁵

The improper storage of supplies was indicative of the overall lack of cleanliness and order within North Carolina's subterranean world. For example, on his visit Mr. Crayon described descending down "the black throat of the shaft" on a ladder soaked in water and covered in mud and being "enveloped in an atmosphere of sulphurous smoke." At one point the writer even lost his footing because of the filthy conditions. Only the quick action of his guide, Mathew Moyle, who also served as the mine's foreman, saved him from plummeting four hundred feet to certain death at the bottom of the shaft.¹⁶ Unfortunately, according to historian Richard F. Knapp, Moyle fell victim to a fatal mining accident of his own only a few weeks after Crayon's visit.¹⁷ Cleanliness within

¹⁴ Crayon, 294.

¹⁵ An untitled article from *The Landmark* (Statesville, N.C.), June 19, 1900.

¹⁶ Crayon, 293.

¹⁷ Knapp, 143.

the mines, however, seemed to be yet another non-concern for the members of North Carolina's 1897 General Assembly.

The ramifications of the assembly's cleanliness oversight were realized not only by those who slipped off ladders but also by many miners who met their demise in explosions. One such instance reported in *The Robesonian* in January of 1902 resulted in the death of twenty-one miners employed by the Lost Creek Fuel Company. The disaster was attributed to the presence of highly flammable coal dust throughout the mine.¹⁸

W. H. Hill, who accompanied The U.S. Bureau of Mines Explosive division's Chief Engineer Mr. J. E. Tiffney on his investigation of the 1925 Carolina Coal Mine disaster, also indicted coal dust as a contributor to explosions in the mines. Among Hill's suggested corrective actions is that "all possible dry coal dust be cleaned up and loaded out of the mine."¹⁹ Though dust and mud seemed an unavoidable by-product of the mining industry, Mr. Hill's report inferred that a cleaner standard was possible and may have saved lives.

Porte Crayon's concern about the unclean condition of the ladder became a broader issue of transportation when, at the end of his tour he was faced with two options of reascension. He could either go back the way he had come or resurface in a large bucket designed for the transport of ore for above ground processing. Intimidation set in as the author recounted his previously harrowing ladder experience and despite the insistence of several miners who informed the reporter of the dangers involved in bucket travel, Crayon took the ore bucket to the surface. While Porte Crayon did not suffer any

¹⁸ "Twenty-One Killed: A disastrous Explosion Occurs in a Mine," *The Robesonian* (Luberton, N.C.), January 28, 1902.

¹⁹ W. H. Hill, "Accidents in Mines," *North Carolina Industrial Statistics* (Raleigh:: Department of Labor, 1925), 251.

adverse effects as a result of his decision, his writing implied that many others had been less fortunate and that the dangers posed by ore bucket transportation were widely known at the time.²⁰

Leaving much room for interpretation in regard to transportation, the 1897 legislation insisted only that “appliances of escape shall always be kept in a safe condition.” Obviously, ore buckets were considered unsafe, but since they were not specifically prohibited in the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines* they continued to be employed as a means of transportation in and out of North Carolina mines.²¹ This fact contributed to the death of the aforementioned Will Perkins in the tragedy at the Ormand Mine. Perkins, who it will be remembered was struck on the head by a falling piece of wood, was subsequently rendered unconscious. As a result the miner plummeted from the ore bucket in which he had been riding.²²

Another tragic accident that highlighted the Act’s detrimental failure to prohibit the ore bucket mode of transportation occurred just six months after Will Perkin’s death in a mine outside of Salisbury, N.C. Again a Will was the victim. On September 10, 1900 Will Myers, an employee of the Union Copper Mine, fell from the bucket he had been travelling in. “Down, Down he went,” according to newspaper accounts, until he reached the bottom of the shaft seventy feet below. Sadly, rescuers could do little to save the “mangled mass of bone and flesh” they reported finding on the mine’s floor.²³

Mr. Myer’s death, in that it followed a long and physically draining work day, was telling not only of the potential hazards of the ore bucket, but also of the dangers of

²⁰ Crayon, 294.

²¹ “The Act,” 424.

²² “A Little Boy’s Thoughtless Act.”

²³ “Probable Fatal Accident at Union Copper Mine,” *The Landmark* (Statesville, N.C.), September 11, 1900.

the extended work day that the mining industry introduced to North Carolina. Before the rise of underground mining in the state, shift work, though often long and tedious, was largely limited by the availability of daylight. Primarily because of the dark nature of underground work, mining depended mainly on artificial lighting sources and thus was done around the clock.²⁴ In 1857, by his own admission, fatigue was a factor in Porte Crayon's decision to travel by bucket.²⁵ Likewise, Will Myers was obviously too worn out to make proper decisions concerning his own safety. Mistakenly thinking a landing had been reached, he stepped out of the bucket prematurely. Medical workers later brought him to the surface in critical condition with one leg broken above the knee, a joint shattered, crushed ribs, a broken jaw, and a fractured temple.²⁶

Among all of the other dangers inherent to the history of North Carolina's mining industry, explosions have proven to be the most deadly. In addition to directly causing fatalities, explosions often caused cave ins, wide-spread fire, or panic that in turn induced further carelessness. Though, as mentioned previously, coal dust has been implicated in some of these unfortunate mishaps, the presence of gas has been determined, by far, to be a more prevalent cause. In fact it was a gas explosion in the Cumnock mine of Chatham County in 1895 that finally goaded the General Assembly to consider passing a bill regarding mine safety and accountability.²⁷ That being the case, the legislation of 1897 still accomplished little in the prevention of subterranean explosions.

One of the most peculiar facts about the Cumnock mine disaster in 1895, which was deemed at the time to be the most horrible disaster in North Carolina's history, is that

²⁴ Knapp, 142.

²⁵ Crayon 294.

²⁶ "Probable Fatal Accident."

²⁷ Michael Hetzer, "The Coal Demon of Deep River," *The State* 55, no. 1 (June 1987), <http://www.freepages.history.rootsweb.com>

according to eyewitness reports the mines had been thoroughly inspected before the miners went to work.²⁸ When the General Assembly reconvened nearly two years after the disaster, they did so with the Cumnock incident in mind and in the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines* they responded by requiring that each of the states mines be inspected for gas directly preceding each shift, an action that apparently was done to no avail before the explosion.²⁹

The act further muddled the issue by not provided specific recommendations on exactly what to look for or how to go about detecting dangerous gases in the mines. Human detection, after all, had failed in 1895 and canaries were not used successfully in detecting gas toxicity until the rescue efforts that followed the 1911 explosion of the Cross Mountain mine at Briceville, Tennessee.³⁰ Instead of providing detailed information on gas leak indicators, the General Assembly chose instead to leave the means of inspection up to the discretion of the inspector by insisting that he focus on concerns the “he deemed important.”³¹

At the same Chatham County mine a little over four years later, another gas explosion occurred. Despite the legislation’s call for inspections and regulations, no pre-work inspection claims were made. To the contrary, many of the surviving miners reported noticing that a great deal of gas had accumulated in the days prior to the disaster but nothing was done prior to the explosion to address the issue.³²

To date, the only mining disaster in North Carolina to surpass the death toll of the 1895 Cumnock tragedy occurred in the same county and under much the same

²⁸ “The Chatham County Horror,” *The Landmark* (Statesville, N.C.), December 24, 1895.

²⁹ “The Act,” 423.

³⁰ “Canary Birds Used to Rescue Miners,” *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, N.C.), October 30, 1911.

³¹ “The Act,” 424.

³² “Mine Disaster in Chatham.”

circumstances as its predecessor. Forty widows and more than 75 orphans were created when, on May 27, 1925, an explosion took place in the Carolina Coal Mine.³³ Fifty-three bodies were removed from the mine in the days that followed the devastating blast.³⁴ As previously mentioned, W. H. Hill represented the North Carolina Department of Labor in the post-explosion inspection and made some suggestions as to the causes of the incident and corrective actions needed to avoid future catastrophe. In a letter to the commissioner of the Department of Labor and Printing Frank D. Grist dated June 25, 1925, Hill echoed the pre-work gas inspection demand that the legislation had previously insisted upon.³⁵ Despite improvements in early detection capabilities, as a by-product of the vagary and inconsistency in the 1897 legislation, North Carolina's mining industry obviously failed to improve on its ability to avert deadly gas explosions between 1895 and 1925.

While the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulations of Mines* may have been vague in regarding the inspections of the mines, the same cannot be said for its recordkeeping requirements. To that effect the legislation called for the commissioner of labor statistics and inspector of mines to make an annual report to the governor's office. The report was to include all of the state's mining fatalities and their surrounding circumstances.³⁶ Moreover, according to the act "every person having charge of any mine, whenever loss of life occurs with the workings of such mines, should give notice ... to the inspector." The document further required the inspector to keep the reports for later reference, implying that available knowledge of previous disasters might help to

³³ "Governor Calls for \$35,000 for Relief of Families of Miners," *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, N.C.), June 1, 1925.

³⁴ "Coal Glen Mine Gives Up Dead," *The Chatham Record* (Pittsboro, N.C.), June 4, 1925.

³⁵ Hill, 252.

³⁶ "The Act," 424.

avoid future tragedy.³⁷ Like many of the act's other requirements however, the insistence that a paper trail be created was largely ignored. On August 11, 1904, for example, the Barringer Mine of Stanley County N.C. was flooded after a downpour of rain had caused nearby Long Creek to rise beyond the level of its banks. Eight men drowned as a result. The disaster in and of itself had no precedents, making the legislation's failure to address its prevention somewhat understandable. What is less excusable is that the incident did not appear in subsequent disaster reports.³⁸ For example, though it listed many less fatal mining catastrophes, citing five or more fatalities as the only requirement to make its historical coal mine disasters list, the United States Department of Labor and the Mine Safety and Health Administration chose to omit the Barringer incident from its records.³⁹ Also, on a more local level, in his brief report on the history of North Carolina's mining industry, the current Bureau Chief of The North Carolina Department of Labor's Mine and Quarry Bureau, William W. Gerringer did the same.⁴⁰

Another seemingly ignored stipulation found in the 1897 legislation was the multiple escape shaft requirements for mines employing more than ten miners at a time.⁴¹ Rescuers, as reported by the *Durham Morning Herald* on May 28, 1925 in the wake of the Carolina Mine tragedy, were delayed early on by gases and the blockage of the main tunnel.⁴² Thanks to an adequate number of ventilation shafts, which under section four of the act are under no circumstances to be considered acceptable as escape routes, the gases

³⁷ "The Act," 425.

³⁸ Paul Messino, "Barringer Gold Mine," *North Carolina History Project*, <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org>

³⁹ U.S. Department of Labor, *Mine Disasters*, Mine Safety and Health Administration, Training Manual, National Mine Health and Safety Academy (2000), 37.

⁴⁰ William W. Gerringer, "Mine Safety and Health in North Carolina: A History," (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Labor, 2000).

⁴¹ "The Act," 424.

⁴² "Explosions at Coal Glen, Near Sanford: Six Miners Are Known to be Dead in Disaster at Carolina Company Pit," *The Durham Morning Herald* (Durham, N.C.), May 28, 1925.

in the mine were cleared relatively quickly.⁴³ The debris, however, took somewhat longer. Nearly twelve hours after the first explosion, only six of the eventual fifty-three bodies had been recovered.⁴⁴

As a final point illustrating the categorical failure of the 1897 *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines*, the document attempted an increase in the general security of North Carolina mines. To that end section five of the legislation required that fencing be erected to keep unauthorized personnel away from shafts “not in actual course of working.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately for the aforementioned miner Will Perkins, the fencing stipulation did not apply to his circumstances. Many originally speculated that Mr. Perkins’ untimely death was a result of treachery on the part of a racially motivated murderer. Perkins, after all, was a Negro worker living in the segregated south. The public was shocked when it was discovered that an eight-year-old boy who dwelt near the Ormand mine was to blame for the miner’s fate. Evidently, with no fencing in place around the active shaft, the little boy had no problem accessing the hole and dropping a readily available piece of wood down, not with malice toward Mr. Perkins but rather “just for the fun of hearing it fall.”⁴⁶

Though the wood being conveniently located adjacent to the shaft harkens back to the lack of cleanliness in North Carolina’s mines and the unimpeded access that the youngster had to the mine illustrated the legislation’s ineffectiveness in providing for increased security, what should have saved Mr. Perkins was the Act’s insistence on a competent and sober engineer to operate the machinery used in lowering miners down

⁴³ “The Act,” 424.

⁴⁴ “More Than 40 Men Entombed: Fear That All Perished in Mine Explosions Near Sanford,” *The Raleigh News & Observer* (Raleigh, N.C.), May 28, 1925.

⁴⁵ “The Act,” 425.

⁴⁶ “A Little Boy’s Thoughtless Act.”

and bringing them back out of the mines. Also in accordance with the legislation the same engineer was charged with preventing unauthorized persons from interfering in mining business.⁴⁷ The engineer in the Perkins situation showed his lack of competence and his utter disregard for the terms of the act by abandoning his post to get a drink of water from a nearby spring.⁴⁸ Furthermore, though the act called for punishment, lenient as it may have been, for those who did “anything whereby the life or health of the persons or the security of any mine” was put in jeopardy,⁴⁹ the magistrate dismissed the Perkins case as merely an accident and no one was held accountable.⁵⁰

While there was no single reason for the failure of the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines*, many of the circumstances that made the legislation ineffective share a common foundation on an economic atmosphere that promoted New South industrialization over safety and placed a larger interest on financial gain over the welfare of the common worker. It seems that the North Carolina’s General Assembly of 1897 was dominated by Democrats who, by and large, leaned toward big business interests in their political decisions. For instance, Michael Hoke Justice, a senate member from district 32 in Rutherford was a member of the Rutherfordton Hotel and Improvement Company, drew the charter for the Henrietta Cotton Mills Company, and also incorporated the Asheville and Thermal Belt Railroad Company. Furthermore, Lee S. Overman, the representative from Rowan County, had built an extremely profitable law firm from dealing with companies in the Gold Hill Mining district.⁵¹

⁴⁷ “The Act,” 425.

⁴⁸ “A Little Boy’s Thoughtless Act.”

⁴⁹ “The Act,” 429.

⁵⁰ “A Little Boy’s Thoughtless Act.”

⁵¹ Samuel A. Ashe and Edward McCrady, *Cyclopedia of Eminent and Representative Men of the Carolinas of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 2 (Madison, Wisconsin: Brant and Fuller, 1892).

These men and other members of the assembly such as Mecklenburg senator Sydenham B. Alexander and Senate president Rufus A. Doughton from Alleghany county, obviously had the interest of the common worker in mind when they passed the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines*, however their loyalty to progressive industrialization got in the way of their abilities to provide effective legislation. The Assembly's conflict of interests was made evident in their striving to promote mine safety while, at the same time attempting to keep the financial burden of increased standards at a minimum, especially to mine owners and investors. While the bill called for increased supervision in the mines, it placed the onus of improved safety on the individual rather than the company and only threatened a minimum fine of fifty dollars and a possible misdemeanor charge for anyone whose carelessness led to a fatality.⁵²

In addition to the act's failure to provide adequate economic incentives to business owners for their compliance, it also fell short of providing the necessary financial means to accomplish its far reaching inspection initiatives. According to the "tabulated statement of industries and resources of North Carolina" issued by the commissioner of North Carolina's department of agriculture Leonidas La Fayette Polk in 1878, there were upwards of one hundred and fifty gold, silver, and copper mines alone in the state.⁵³ When added to the growing number of mining operations focused on harvesting industrial minerals such as mica, iron, manganese, asbestos, lead, and especially coal, the number of mines in North Carolina by the turn of the century was virtually unmanageable and unquestionably uninspectable by a team of inspectors, let

⁵² "The Act," 428.

⁵³ Leonidas La Fayette Polk, *Tabulated Statement of Industries and Resources of North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Agriculture), 1878.

alone the one, already employed by the Commissioner of Labor Statistics, entrusted with the momentous agenda laid out by the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines*.⁵⁴

In all fairness to the legislators of the 1890s, the kind of economic bias they illustrated was nothing new. While, as mentioned above, it took the state seventy-two years from the beginning of subterranean mining operations in 1825 to pass safety legislation, a considerably shorter amount of time was needed for the General Assembly to consider measures of financial protection for the mining industry. In 1827, just two years after the shift in mining practices, the state's political cadre began granting charters to mining companies, thus extending legislative protection against fraud and mismanagement to mine owners.⁵⁵

Notwithstanding their bias toward big business interests, at least North Carolina's 1897 General Assembly attempted, however inadequately, to bring some accountability for the safety of their state's miners. In fact, other than the close associates and family members of deceased miners, the legislators were one of the only groups to show any concern for the health and welfare of black-collared mine workers and any impetus they put on economic issues over safety was reflective of the priorities of their constituents. The newspaper reports following the 1895 Cumnock mine gas explosion further indicated where the concerns of the common North Carolinian resided. On the first page of the December 24, 1895 issue of *The Landmark*, for example, a small introductory paragraph composed of two sentences introduced the reader to the disaster and how many people died as a result. The brief treatment of the true human cost of the tragedy was directly

⁵⁴ "The Act," 423.

⁵⁵ Knapp, 3.

followed by a lengthy paragraph divulging information about the coal mining company and the Wilmington based Air Line Railway which it supplied. The paper then went on to list, at \$200,000, the cost of the machinery lost in the accident.⁵⁶

Two weeks later, in the paper's next issue, it finally turned back to the human aspect of the tragedy but once more reflected the public's true interest with insufficiently brief coverage that, in the end, was centered on money. In a small nondescript paragraph, hidden between a report of contaminated water and a local minister's plea for his patrons to abstain from reading newspapers, was a request for financial contributions to help the widows and orphans created by the explosion, who were deemed by the piece as "worthy objects of charity."⁵⁷ While financial assistance was undoubtedly needed and appreciated by the widows and orphans, the paragraph's delay and obscure placement is telling of its content's position on the minds of the newspaper's editors and, perhaps more importantly, the audience at which their work was aimed. Furthermore, no mention was made of the need for safer practices within the mines though the disaster made it painfully apparent that preventative measures were necessary.

Financial concerns continued to take precedence over general mine safety issues and rendered legislation such as the bill of 1897 ineffective throughout the early twentieth-century. This again made evident by the reports that followed the Coal Glen mining catastrophe of 1925. The June 1, 1925 issue of *The Robesonian*, for instance, dedicated a short blurb to what it referred to as "the greatest mine disaster in the history of the state," but ignored the safety concerns that caused the explosion and chose instead to dedicate the bulk of its coverage to the much needed Red Cross donation drive. On

⁵⁶ "The Chatham County Horror."

⁵⁷ An untitled article from *The Landmark* (Statesville, N.C.), January 7, 1896.

page four of the same issue, the paper went on to highlight an impassioned appeal for food and clothing by the mayor of Sanford, N.C.⁵⁸ Moreover, in an obscure paragraph the following month *The Robesonian* updated its readership concerning the fund drive's success by trumpeting collection amounts that reached almost thirty-nine thousand dollars, but in all its coverage the paper failed to call attention to safety, which lay at the heart of the problem.⁵⁹ There again, while the immediate financial concerns of the families of recently deceased miners were of the utmost importance and preventative measures were obviously necessitated by the many disasters experienced in North Carolina's mining industry, fiscal matters continued to stand in the way of the state's citizenry in effecting positive safety initiatives and averting future calamity.

Further clouding the issue, many of those who contributed to relief efforts did so in order to boost their own images rather than to improve the situation for miners, their widows, or their fatherless children. Again nothing about safety or mine accident prevention was reported in *The Robesonian* on June 11, 1925, but what was covered was a large contribution by Billy Sunday, a politically-motivated preacher with a national reputation.⁶⁰ Later that same month a sizable article was issued clarifying a previous misunderstanding created by the paper's donation coverage. Many of Lumberton North Carolina's residents, it was reported, had become upset, not at the lack of safety within the mines, but at the newspaper's failure to include their town on its list of contributors to the miner's relief fund. The citizens of Lumberton showed their economic bias by demanding public recognition of their financial donation, as did *The Robesonian* when it apologetically acquiesced by acknowledging that the town "did a handsome thing when

⁵⁸ "Issue Appeal for Relief of Families of Miners," *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, N.C.), 4.

⁵⁹ An untitled article from *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, N.C.), July 14, 1925.

⁶⁰ An untitled article from *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, N.C.), June 11, 1925.

the emergency call was broadcast” by immediately sending fifty-five dollars to the relief fund.⁶¹

The same sort of economic and industrialized bias among North Carolinians that had spelled doom for the 1897 *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines* even before its inception, can be seen in the state’s mining exports since Carolina’s mineral extraction industry not only played a pivotal role in the New South industrialization movement, but also paved the way for mining endeavors nationwide.⁶² Subsequent national trends often revealed the plight of The Old North State’s miners. To that end, though based on an incident that occurred in the western United States, John Wallace Crawford’s popular poem-turned-song “Only a Miner Killed” demonstrated the sentiment that prevailed among North Carolinians at the time of its composition in 1877, twenty years before the mine safety act was passed. According to historian and folklorist Archie Green’s work *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs*, Crawford had become deeply frustrated by a nearby inspector’s lack of concern for a dead miner whose funeral procession was passing and constructed his poem to juxtapose the general indifference with which the public viewed the lives of low wage-earning miners, with the interest of the masses in the death that same year of the millionaire capitalist Commodore Vanderbilt. The Vanderbilts owned a large portion of Western North Carolina and had constructed the most extensive private residence in the United States outside of Asheville.⁶³

⁶¹ “Local People Musunderstood Article in Daily Papers,” *The Robesonian* (Lumberton, N.C.), June 25, 1925.

⁶² Young, 373.

⁶³ Archie Green, *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 96.

Many of North Carolina's mining disasters relief efforts were commendable, but relief by definition is reactionary and what the industry lacked, and the legislation of 1897 only half-heartedly attempted to provide, were the safety and inspection measures that would have prevented the unfortunate occurrences that necessitated those relief efforts and cost the lives of so many Tar-Heels. While the economic and financial inclinations of many of the state's politicians and citizens was in part to blame for the failure to adequately improve the occupational standards within North Carolina mines, the miners themselves often reflected the same fiscal focus and thus were also partially responsible for their plight.

While pop-culture evidence such as the song "Only a Miner Killed" lend credence to the assertion made by Ted Gioia in his study *Work Songs*, that "only the textile industry could approach mining in showing how music could mobilize workers,"⁶⁴ organizations such as the United Mine Workers and Mine Owners often directed their efforts with the same financial impetus as the general public and thus rendered mobilization ineffective in improving the safety of their mining members. One example of this can be found in the *Gastonia Daily Gazette* of July 10, 1925. On the front page of the *Gazette* extensive coverage was provided of the aforementioned union's fight against mining industry executives. Not surprisingly, mine worker's financial compensation dominated the discussion. Samuel D. Warriner, then president of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company and chairman of the Operator's General Committee, argued that a reduction in labor cost was needed in the mining industry because of "inroads on the hard coal market by oil, gas and electricity." John L. Lewis, the United Mine Workers president, countered by pointing out that "100 miners had been killed and 40,000 maimed

⁶⁴ Ted Gioia, *Work Songs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 183.

since the last wage conference.” Lewis finished with a threat to continue the fight for wage increases, but as the reader will note, not for heightened safety standards for those employed in the woefully hazardous mines, by providing, for public consumption, a parade of the crippled workers, widows and orphans that the industry had produced.⁶⁵

In what he referred to as a brief history on mine safety in North Carolina, the current Mine and Quarry Bureau Chief William Gerringer further indicted the economic focus that prevailed among those involved in North Carolina’s mining industry and thus prevented the success of legislative measures like the *Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines*. In his study, Mr. Gerringer insisted that it was not until Public Law 95-164, the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act, was signed into action on November 9, 1977 that true and lasting improvements were made in the occupational safety of North Carolina’s mining industry.⁶⁶ Owing its success largely to an understanding of economic realities that lacked in its counterpart of 1897, the 1977 legislation appealed to the capital interests of mine managers by insisting on the fiscal benefit for a new and acute focus on worker safety within the mines. For example, in section two of the Safety and Health Program for the Mining Industry instruction manual of 1977, which is titled “Reasons Why Top Management Should Buy the Idea of Safety and Health,” five reasons are given for improved safety initiatives. The first was the “Money,” which accumulates from the lack of accidents and transfers directly from overhead to profit on the company balance sheet. The second reason provided was, well, “Money,” this time in the form of expenditures saved by not having to purchase

⁶⁵ “Arbitration Denounced By Lewis, Coal Mine Quarrel Hanging Free,” *The Gastonia Daily Gazette* (Gastonia, N.C.), July 10, 1925.

⁶⁶ Gerringer, 2.

equipment lost in mining accidents. The third reason, the reader may be able to anticipate, was “Money.” By providing a safe workplace, the document argued, top management could avoid having to pay workman’s compensation to those injured on the job. The fourth and fifth reasons were, you guessed it, “Money,” saved on filling out post-accident paperwork and spent on training unskilled replacements for injured or deceased workers.⁶⁷

From the Reed family’s discovery of Gold on their farm in 1799 to the present day North Carolina has enjoyed vast profits from its abundant mineral resources. As the state’s mining industry waxed and waned with the demand for its minerals, so too did the fatality rate among those employed in their extraction. One unfortunate constant, however, was the lack of safety in the Old North State’s mines, a fact that did not much change until 1977 despite the passing of *An Act to Provide for the Inspection and Regulation of Mines* in 1897. Largely due to an economic focus by the state’s citizens, politicians, mine owners and the miners themselves, that created a reluctance to pass the cost of improved safety standards on to industry proprietors, North Carolina mining would not record a fatality free year until 1960 and even then factors such as an ebb in underground mining operations and technological advancements were more to thank than any legislative measures.

⁶⁷ North Carolina Department of Labor Mine and Quarry Division, “Safety and Helath Program for the Mining Industry” (1977).

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Appendix



Figure 1