



## **CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND** **National Byway Program**

### **CHAPTER I: NATIONAL BYWAY PROGRAM**

#### **What is a National Byway?**

The National Scenic Byways Program is part of the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. The program is a grass-roots collaborative effort established to help recognize, preserve and enhance selected roads throughout the United States. Since 1992, there have been nearly 1500 state and nationally designated byway projects in 48 states. The U.S. Secretary of Transportation recognizes certain roads as All-American Roads or National Scenic Byways based on one or more archaeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational and/or scenic qualities.

*The vision of the National Byways Program is to create a distinctive collection of American roads, sharing with others their unique stories and treasured places.*

*The purpose of the program is to recognize and protect roads that have outstanding scenic, historic, cultural, natural, recreational and archaeological qualities, and to support state scenic byway initiatives.*

#### **Why Seek National Byway Status?**

National byways can become a draw to attract people off interstates and parkways and into the smaller, more rural communities such as those one will find throughout the eastern coalfields of Virginia. Identification of the route on local, state and federal maps can lead to increased visitor traffic which, in turn, means more tourism dollars being spent in those communities.

Studies have determined that over 80% (118 million) of traveling U.S. adults are considered cultural heritage travelers and that these tourists tend to stay multiple nights, travel in their personal cars, enjoy the back roads and both scenic and/or historical pleasure drives which, in turn, can have a significant impact on an area.

In fact, in 2005 over 68 million people visited National Heritage Areas which created significant economic impact on those regions and surrounding communities. West Virginia capitalized on this by obtaining the designation as a National Coal Heritage Area which directly created 94 jobs, generates \$3.4 million in tourist spending and adds \$2.4 million in total value to the economy. Those in the eastern coalfields of Southwest Virginia would like to see similar results occur in their region.

There are also grant opportunities for various enhancement and preservation projects through the National Scenic Byways Program (NSBP) as well as other funding sources and potential partnership opportunities. The NSBP grant program provides funding for Scenic Highways and Byways across the United States to develop marketing materials, interpretive facilities, information kiosks, visitor centers, and to address safety issues and other needed improvements such as accessible restrooms, attractions and offerings.

National byway designation provides recognition through international and national marketing and promotional opportunities through the National Scenic Byways Program website and marketing materials. In the case of the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail, national byway designation provides an opportunity for seven counties to work together in a concerted effort to preserve, protect, improve and market the entire byway as an attraction in itself.



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### **Establishing the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail Scenic Byway**

In 2006, a group of people in the coalfields of Virginia expressed a strong interest in having a section of road through their communities designated a national byway as a possible extension of the Coal Heritage Trail National Scenic Byway of West Virginia. But before a route can even be considered for national byway status, it must first become a state scenic byway.

Through a concerted effort of the Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority (HOATA), the local communities along the proposed route, the Virginia Tourism Corporation, Lenowisco PDC and the Cumberland Plateau PDC, the **Virginia Coal Heritage Trail** was designated by the Virginia General Assembly as an official Virginia State Scenic Byway in July, 2007. This 300+ mile route meanders into the heart of Virginia's Coalfield Region through the seven counties of Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, Wise and the City of Norton. In 2007, each of the counties conducted familiarization tours of the section of byway through their communities. *An overview of each of the FAM tours are provided on the website [trailsrus.com/vacoaltrail](http://trailsrus.com/vacoaltrail) under each of the counties.* At this same time, a list of intrinsic qualities found along the route was noted and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) installed state scenic byway signs along the route.

In 2008, an organization called the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail Advisory Committee was created under the auspices of the Heart of the Appalachia Tourism Authority to assist in the development and management of the proposed byway with representation from each of the seven counties and the City of Norton. The Coal Heritage Trail Authority of West Virginia expressed support for a multi-state trail system and both VDOT and the Scenic Byway Program offered their assistance. In 2009, the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail Advisory Committee was expanded to include the Eastern Coal Council. One of their primary goals is to obtain national scenic byway designation for the route which, if properly developed, can create economic growth opportunities and increase business/customer traffic, tax revenues and jobs.

National Scenic Byways are selected through a nomination procedure. To be considered for designation a road or highway must significantly meet at least one of the six scenic byways intrinsic qualities. These qualities are scenic, historic, natural, cultural, archeological, and recreational. An All-American Road requires that a road must meet at least two of the six qualities. To obtain National Scenic Byway status, a corridor management plan must also be developed, with community involvement. To this end, HOATA Virginia Coal Heritage Trail Advisory Committee hired WMTH "*We Make Things Happen*" Corporation in the summer of 2010 to assist in the development of the corridor management plan and application for nomination.

### **What makes the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail so special that it should be given national scenic byway designation?**

The Virginia Coal Heritage Trail is made up of a series of roads that meander through the Appalachian mountains of southwest Virginia. Not only is the terrain different than anywhere else in Virginia, so is its rich history in coal. Coal was mined in parts of Virginia as early as the 1700's, but it became an industry in southwest Virginia in the latter part of the nineteenth century during the American Industrial Revolution when it was discovered that the Virginia mountains were full of this efficient yet cheap source of energy. Roads were cut and hundreds of miles of railroad tracks laid, not only to haul the coal out of the mountains but also to bring in both supplies and workers.



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As the demand grew, more workers were needed. Thousands upon thousands of people from all over the world were being shipped in to work the mines. Southwest Virginia became a melting pot of cultures of Hungarian, Welsh, Russian, Polish, German, French, English, Irish Italians, Slavic, whites and blacks working side by side. In order to have a place for the workers to live, coal companies built housing for their workers. They also built schools, churches, hospitals, post office, barber shops, shoe stores, restaurants and theaters. In fact, in many cases, the “Company” owned the entire town. Communities sprang up everywhere in southwest Virginia, reaching its peak in the 1920’s.

But gradually, as mining techniques changed and demand lessened, not as many workers were needed. Coal companies shut down or moved away, often shutting down or closing many of the town businesses they once operated. Over time, towns began to decline as many residents left to seek work elsewhere. Overnight, once thriving communities became ghost towns.

The Virginia Coal Heritage Trail offers one the unique opportunity to actually take a trip back in time and visit some of these coal communities and mining operations. At the start of the Trail is the Pocahontas Mine, a National Historic Landmark, which provides visitors an opportunity to actually go into the mine shaft which features a 13 foot coal seam. Next door is a museum and education center located in the mine’s former powerhouse. The town itself once boasted 23 saloons and as many churches when coal was its primary industry.

The tenant and supervisor homes at Keen Mountain Coal Camp look much as they did in the 1920’s although they are now privately owned. It’s company store now houses the post office, a barber shop and offices for People’s Inc. and the company infirmary now is home to a couple of businesses. Other coal camps one will pass include Jewell Ridge, Exeter, Imboden, Keokee, Appalachia, Stonega and Tom’s Creek, just to name a few. Each has their own story to tell. The trail also takes one past the site of a huge union uprising of the coal miners in the 1970’s and near the site where the first woman coal miner was killed in a mine.

Some say that the “history of mining in the region is tragic in the harm it has caused the land and its people”. And yet, if not for the coal mines, would the population in Southwest Virginia be so diverse? Would the network of roads and trails we now use have been developed if not for the need to remove the coal from hard to get places? Would the railroad have even come into Southwest Virginia? Would there have been theaters and schools available to our parents and grandparents. Would this region be so diverse in its local culture, cuisines, music, architecture and religions if not for the migrant workers brought in to work the mines?

Working on the corridor management plan has created a greater public awareness and appreciation of the significance coal has had on this region and why it is important to have a plan which helps to protect, preserve and interpret some of these sites and this rich history for future generations. It is a story that needs to be shared with others. Through the development of the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail National Scenic Byway, this can be done.

#### **Positive action already happening**

While the CMP was being developed, the Dante Depot (a vital part of a historic walking tour being developed in the coal town of Dante) was scheduled for demolition but through the efforts of the community, CSX, People’s Inc. and those all along the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail, the depot has been saved and plans are being developed to renovate it. There was also talk of tearing down the Richlands Railroad Section House and turning the property into a parking lot but now, through the efforts of community leaders, Norfolk Southern has donated both the house and the property to the town who are now seeking funds to develop it into an interpretive center for both the history of rail and coal in the area.



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It is not just the physical structures that are being saved. Through the efforts of individuals within the communities, three pre-1920's railroad benches have been salvaged and are now being renovated for use in both the Richlands Railroad Section House and for community benches in St. Paul. A coal shovel dating back to the 1950's was once considered for scrap metal but is now on display instead. And the small community of Dungannon has created two wayside exhibits as part of the Coal Heritage Trail which are now displayed in front of the Dungannon Depot. More is happening all along the route



*The 1950 Coal Shovel*

On a much larger scale, there is a concerted effort between Virginia and West Virginia to nominate the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail as a national byway as an extension of the already nationally designated West Virginia Coal Heritage Trail so that both states may work collaboratively together on both development and marketing "*as a historic preservation and tourism effort*". See resolution below. The development of a corridor management plan for the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail State Scenic Byway is the first step towards obtaining national byway status.

Below and on the following page is a resolution by the Coal Heritage Highway Authority that oversees the West Virginia Coal Heritage Trail Scenic Byway in support of extending the existing byway into Virginia as a multi-state national scenic byway.

#### **RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF AN EXTENSION OF THE COAL HERITAGE TRAIL INTO THE COALFIELDS OF VIRGINIA**

WHEREAS, the West Virginia Byways Program strives to recognize, interpret, enhance, and preserve the intrinsic qualities of West Virginia Byway corridors with eleven state designated scenic byways, eight state designated backways, five federally designated byways and one all American Road within the state of West Virginia

WHEREAS, 97.56 miles of West Virginia Roadway was designated as the Coal Heritage Trail, a National Scenic Byway on June 9, 1998 enhancing the tourism offerings of the counties of McDowell, Mercer, Raleigh, and Wyoming.

WHEREAS, the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Virginia Department of Transportation designated 325 miles of Virginia roadways as the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail, a Virginia Byway in July of 2007, including multiple corridor that reach the Kentucky/Virginia and Virginia/West Virginia borders.

WHEREAS, the Coal Heritage Trail, a National Scenic Byway and the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail connect at the West Virginia/Virginia boundary on Route 120 and are connected culturally and historically with both segments representing the story of the development of the coalfield region of Appalachia.

WHEREAS, there is an active effort to nominate the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail as a National Scenic Byway as an extension of the West Virginia Coal Heritage Trail.

WHEREAS, there exist several examples of multi-state National Scenic Byways, including the National Road and the Blue Ridge Parkway, providing models of the benefits of cooperation and collaboration in the development of a multi-state National Scenic Byway.



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THEREFORE, be it resolved that the Coal Heritage Highway Authority, the official byway organization of the Coal Heritage Trail, expresses its support for the extension of the Coal Heritage Trail into the coalfields of southwest Virginia.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Coal Heritage Highway Authority anticipates working collaboratively with the organizers of the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail in developing and marketing the combined Coal Heritage Trail, as a historic preservation and tourism effort.

THEREFORE, BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Coal Heritage Highway Authority, upon signing of a mutually agreed upon Memorandum of Agreement, will support the efforts to have the Virginia Coal Heritage Trail, a state scenic byway, designated as a National Scenic Byway and extension of the already nationally designated Coal Heritage Trail resulting in a multi-state national scenic byway, The Coal Heritage Trail.

Approved this 24<sup>th</sup> day of April, 2008 by members of the Coal Heritage Highway Authority.

*Fred Backus*  
Chairman

*Christy L. Daxton*

*Karen S. Disibio*

*Samuel A. Echee*

*Paul L. B.*

*W. L. Swanson*