



National Coal Heritage Area Authority

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February 25, 2016

Dear Friend,

The Houston Coal Company store is located on highway 52 at the mouth of Carswell hollow near Kimball and may be one of southern West Virginia's most intact company stores. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the store's outstanding characteristics are its perfect symmetry, round arch openings, rear arcade and its spacious setting. Once providing goods and services to generations of McDowell County mining families, this beautiful structure has set vacant for many years. Now, through a partnership of various organizations, the exterior of the Houston Company Store has been restored to its original condition. Photographs of the newly restored structure are included with this letter.

On behalf of the McDowell County Economic Development Authority and McArts, Inc. we invite you to join us for a discussion about the future interior restoration and a long-term sustainable use for the building. While many suggestions for uses such as a museum, a center for arts and culture and providing much needed visitor services have all been made, no decisions have been arrived at. All ideas are on the table and we hope that you will bring your expertise and knowledge to this brainstorming session.

We have scheduled the meeting for March 17, 2015 beginning with a tour of the building at 10:30 AM and will then move to nearby Kimball War Memorial for the meeting. Lunch will be provided as a part of the meeting. We will conclude no later than 3 PM. We have included a map showing the location of the Houston Company Store and the Kimball War Memorial. If you need additional directions please feel free to contact our office. To assist us in planning, we ask that you RSVP for the event by emailing lhawkins@coalheritage.org or call Linda Hawkins at 304-465-3720.

We appreciate your assistance and look forward to seeing you at the meeting.

Sincerely,



Christy Bailey
Executive Director

Enclosures

Houston Company Store, RT. 52, Kimball, WV



Kimball, WV

- Untitled layer
-  HoustonCompanyStore
 -  KimballWarMemorial



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McDowell coal company store being resurrected as museum

By Rick Steelhammer



F. BRIAN FERGUSON | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

Workers remove the original windows of the historic Houston Coal Company Store in Kimball for refurbishing in Allegheny Restoration's Beckley workshop.

KIMBALL, W.Va. — A \$1.5 million restoration project underway in Kimball could keep the Houston Coal Company Store — perhaps the best preserved of more than 100 company stores that once operated in the coal camps of McDowell County during the first half of the 20th century — intact and operating into the 22nd century.

In its re-purposed incarnation, the 1923-vintage building will become a museum, giving visitors a chance to learn the key role that company stores played in coalfield community life, and serve as a visitor center for those coming to McDowell County via the National Coal Heritage Trail, which includes the stretch of U.S. 52 fronting the historic store.

“This is the thrill of my life,” said Kimball native Jean Battlo, a retired teacher and founder and director of McArts, McDowell County’s community arts organization, as she watched workers from Swope Construction of Bluefield and Allegheny Restoration of Beckley clean and repair masonry and remove windows for refurbishing. “I think of this as a phoenix, coming out of the ashes of coal — something that will draw history tourism travelers off the Coal Heritage Highway to spend time in Kimball.”

Battlo began pitching the idea of restoring and re-using the company store more than a decade ago.

A coal boom swept through the McDowell County coalfields after the Norfolk & Western Railway extended its tracks across the state line from neighboring Tazewell County, Virginia, in the 1880s, providing market access for scores of new West Virginia mines. Thousands of European immigrants and blacks from the Southern states rushed into the region, lured by plentiful jobs and cheap housing.

The new West Virginia mine families became part of an economic system controlled by the coal industry, in which miners worked in company mines, using tools they leased from the coal companies and lived in company housing, the rent for which was deducted from their pay. Miners spent their wages, paid in coal company scrip, at company stores, which also housed coal company offices, and served as community gathering places. The Houston Coal Company Store, with its wide front porch and expansive lawn bordered by two streams, a low rock wall and shade trees, was just such a site.

According to documents supporting the store’s addition to the National Register of Historic Places in 1991, the Houston company store “was constructed during the early years of the automobile age

and, although not many miners owned cars, the building seems to have been built with the residents' mobility in mind. The store was conveniently placed at the mouth of the valley on the county's main route near Kimball, a thriving service town. The store was easily accessible for those traveling to and from Kimball and also for those who lived within walking distance. This location on a busy thoroughfare provided residents with a perfect social center that was so typical and essential in the industrial community."

According to its National Register nomination form, the Houston company store "is not as easily recognizable as a company store as are McDowell County's others. A spacious lawn surrounds it. It has a single story and no display windows, and it is not located at the center of the community. A second glance, though, reveals that the building does include nearly all of the characteristics that company stores generally share. Although not so obvious from the front, the building is large and probably holds as much store space as the others. It has a delivery entrance along the railroad tracks, a broad porch, secondary entrances into the offices and, originally, the company's name was applied to the facade."

Its tile roof, broad eaves and perfect symmetry "recall buildings of the Italian Renaissance," giving the structure "more high-style architectural characteristics than the county's other stores," according to the National Register nomination.

Perched on a knoll across the street from the store, coal operator David Houston, the owner of Houston Coal and Coke Co., lived in a mansion built from the same materials used in constructing the store. Houston and his wife, Miriam, were the main benefactors of Houston Methodist Church in Kimball, and they built a summer camp with 26 cabins and two natural swimming pools for use by McDowell County schoolchildren and Southern West Virginia Girl Scouts.

As coal properties changed hands over the years that followed Houston's ownership, the store was operated as the King Coal Store and the Koppers Company Store, and it later housed Leatherwood Dairy, Corte Construction Co., and a McDowell County Emergency Services office.

Most of the \$1.5 million included in the contract being used to restore the company store comes from a Transportation Enhancement grant from the Federal Highway Administration, issued through the National Coal Heritage Area, and made possible with matching funds from the McDowell County Economic Development Authority and the town of Kimball.

While it was hoped that the \$1.5 million would cover the costs of restoring the exterior and interior of the store, when construction bids for the project were opened, all turned out to be for more than \$2 million.

"That was kind of a shock. We had to draw back some and focus on the exterior," said project architect Joe Sinclair of ZMM Architects & Engineers of Charleston. "The interior will have to be completed during a second phase, after more money is raised."

The interior work would include the installation of a new HVAC system and new utility connections.

Work now being done on the store includes cleaning and repairing masonry and roof tiles, rebuilding a collapsed chimney, a loading dock and the store's extra-wide front porch, adding an accessibility ramp, and removing, refurbishing and replacing all windows and doors.

"They'll restore and re-use everything that was part of the original building," Sinclair said.

Construction plans are reviewed by a consultant approved by the State Historic Preservation Office, to make sure the historic integrity of the structure is maintained throughout the restoration process.

“We’re gaining some ground here,” said McDowell County Commission President Harold McBride, as he watched a flurry of construction activity take place at the store one day last week. “When we get the museum displays in there and put in the tourism office, we should be able to bring more visitors into the county. It’s another spoke in the wheel of development.”

Work on the exterior of the building is expected to be completed this summer.

Reach Rick Steelhammer at rsteelhammer@wvgazette.com, 304-348-5169 or follow [@rsteelhammer](#) on Twitter.