



SOCIETY FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHEOLOGY

NEWSLETTER

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LAST OF THE GIANTS Coal Breakers Threatened

Two bits of distressing news recently came across the Pennsylvania industrial heritage front: the Huber and St. Nicholas, two of the last remaining anthracite coal breakers, were in the early stages of demolition. The Huber Breaker in Ashley, just outside of Wilkes-Barre, and the St. Nicholas Breaker in Mahanoy near the town of Shenandoah, were both significant steel structures built in the 1930s and were two of the largest breakers ever constructed to wash, break, and size large pieces of anthracite coal for market. Both now have a bleak future.

Anthracite is a hard coal, geologically older and much purer than bituminous and lignite. Globally, its largest fields are found in northeast Pennsylvania and it was mined and processed in significant quantities beginning in the mid-19th century. Initially an industrial fuel and claimed to be the first mass-produced and marketed, anthracite became primarily a home-heating fuel in the 20th century as home-furnace technologies evolved making the difficult-lighting but long and clean-burning coal desirable for

domestic consumption, while the generally less expensive coke took over the industrial market. Anthracite, due to its hardness and the particular geology of the region, was up to three times more expensive to bring to market than the much more prevalent bituminous. The anthracite mining industry began to see significant declines following major strikes that disrupted supply lines to the home-fuel market and the encroachment and later dominance of fuel oil and natural gas alternatives.

The multi-story breakers, linked directly to underground slopes or shafts, were the dominant feature on the anthracite landscape and were rivaled in size only by the vast culm or waste piles they created. They could be found clustered in urban environments but were also the centers of small, often scattered, mining communities called patch towns. Hundreds of breakers existed in Pennsylvania; employing thousands. The work inside was loud, dirty, and dangerous. Often a coal worker would start his career in the breaker at the age of 10 or 11 separating slate and other debris from coal before it was sized and

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J.E.B. Elliot. HAER PA, 40-ASH, 1-19

Huber Breaker (left) with retail coal storage bins (right), 1991.

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CALENDAR

2014

Jan. 8-12: Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Conference, Quebec City, Que. Info: www.sha.org.

Jan. 31: CALL FOR ABSTRACTS DEADLINE FOR THE SIA ANNUAL CONFERENCE, PORTLAND 2014. See article in this issue.

Feb. 1: SIA CALL FOR NOMINATIONS DEADLINE. See article in this issue.

Mar. 1: SIA INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION GRANT APPLICATION DEADLINE. See article in this issue.

Mar. 3-4: Iron & Steel Preservation Conference, Lansing, Mich. Paper sessions and hands-on workshops. Info: meslerv@lcc.edu.

Mar. 19-22: National Council on Public History Annual Conference, Monterey, Calif. Info: www.ncph.org.

Apr. 1: SIA GENERAL TOOLS AWARD NOMINATION DEADLINE. See article in this issue.

Apr. 9-12: Society for Commercial Archeology Annual Conference, St. Petersburg, Fla. Info: www.sca-roadside.org.

Apr. 9-13: Society of Architectural Historians Annual Conference, Austin, Tex. Info: www.sah.org.

Apr. 11-12: Construction History Society First National Conference, Cambridge, U.K. Info: www.constructionhistory.co.uk.

May 7-11: Vernacular Architecture Forum Annual Conference, Galloway, N.J. Tours of South Jersey landscapes from Cape May to Salem. Info: www.vernaculararchitectureforum.org.

May 15-18: SIA ANNUAL CONFERENCE, PORTLAND, ME. Presentation abstracts requested. See article in this issue. Info: www.sia-web.org.

May 28-31: Early American Industries Assn. Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, Pa. Info: www.earlyamericanindustries.org.

June 2-7: Assn. for Industrial Archaeology Spring Tour, Moravia and Silesia, Czech Republic. Info: www.industrial-archaeology.org/aoverseas.htm.

June 10-14: National Ry. Historical Society Annual Convention, Springdale, Ark. Info: www.nrhs.com.

June 11-15: Mining History Assn. Annual Conference, Trinidad, Colo. Tours of the Raton Basin with a focus on Western coal mining. Info: www.mininghistoryassociation.org.

June 19-22: First International Conference on Early Main Line Railways, Caernarfon, North Wales, U.K. Info: www.earlymainlinerailways.org.uk.

July 5-8: Railway & Locomotive Historical Society Annual Meeting, Ely, Nev. Info: www.rlhs.org.

Sept. 5-10: Assn. for Industrial Archaeology Annual Conference, Chester, U.K. Two days of paper sessions followed by visits to IA sites. Info: www.industrial-archaeology.org/aconf.htm.

Sept. 26-28: Ninth Biennial Preserving the Historic Road Conference, Savannah, Ga. Paper proposals requested. See article in this issue. Deadline: Jan. 31. Info: <http://historicroads.org>.

Oct. 5-8: SIA FALL TOUR, SOUTHEASTERN INDIANA. Info: www.sia-web.org. [Note the Sun.-Wed. schedule to take advantage of process tours, many in Columbus, including Cummins diesel.] ■