

The Story of Coal Along the Schuylkill River

Michael Korb, an honored leader of the Society of Mining Engineers and the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical and Petroleum Engineers, came to the Heritage Center last September to give our first live presentation in over a year because of the Covid pandemic.

He began by sharing the story of Anthracite coal being found in what became the coal region of northeastern PA. He explained how coal mining began in the early 19th century when coal fired stoves and furnaces began to be used. Early mining companies built roads, canals, and railroads to transport the coal to major markets. But it was the creation of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad that was chartered in 1833 that was better able to deliver the coal to the major markets. By 1849 it provided the most important connecting link between Schuylkill County and Philadelphia. It was much more efficient than the Schuylkill Canal which ceased operations in the late 19th century because of the growth of the railroads.

The anthracite coal industry became the Reading's catalyst for growth. It bought or leased other railroads. It even extended west to the Susquehanna River and all along the Schuylkill River to Philadelphia; where it established a sales and distribution Center in the city's Port Richmond area. By the 1890's seven railroad companies controlled nearly all the mines in the entire anthracite region.

Mr. Korb also defined the mining operations. A **Coal Breaker** means both the machine used to separate the coal from the rock and broken into sized pieces to be prepared for sale, and the building where the machine is housed. A **Colliery** is the name given to the entire complex where mining operations took place.



This image dating from 1867 illustrates the Colliery operation in Mount Carbon when the Schuylkill Canal was still operational, but the trains were also being used to transport the coal.



Young boys pictured here worked as coal breakers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were named the Breaker Boys since they broke up the coal into pieces with their bare hands.



Shown here are (l. to r.) **Michael Korb**, SRHC member **Marge Miller** and **Dave Smith** from the HSPA who recorded the presentation that will be added to our web site and shared with the HSPA

The Schuylkill River Project to Clean up the River

Chari Towne, a leader of the Riverkeeper Network, who now serves as its Director of Grants and Operations, gave an excellent zoom program in November about the history of coal waste in the river and the massive cleanup that was critically needed by the mid-20th century.

It is ironic that in the early 1800's after the yellow fever epidemic in 1793, the Schuylkill River became a source of clean drinking water and the Philadelphia Water Works was established along its banks to provide clean water for the growing city. The placid country landscape along the river radically changed in the 19th century with Philadelphia becoming the "Workshop of the World". Many industrial places along the river were established there. All of these places had waste materials such as animal dung and sulfuric acid which were dumped into the river. In 1892 there was even oil floating in the river and it caught fire!

The worst amount of waste came from the growth of the PA anthracite coal industry, which reached its peak in 1917. By that time, 75% of the world's use of anthracite coal came from the mines in north-eastern PA, and all of the waste from cleaning the coal went into the river. There were **two to three million tons** of coal dust and waste being dumped into the river every year. By 1944, 48% of dredged waste from the river was waste from coal mines. In some places the coal residue was 18' to 20' high, and the water was too thick with waste to be able to navigate.

In 1945 the government approved the Desilting Act. These dredging and cleanup operations took place from 1947 to 1954. It was a joint federal and state operation. The Army Corps of Engineers along with former WWII soldiers and private companies were involved in this project to remove the immense amount of waste from the river. By 1978 the Schuylkill was named PA's first scenic river.



This dredging operation at Sanatoga, near Pottstown, used pontoons and pipelines to carry the coal waste to a nearby impounding basin.



This image shows a barge being used to dredge the huge amount of silt and waste from the river.



This picture shows the coal residue being cleared from the riverbank and the dredging operation on the river as well.