

U.S.

In W.Va., fortunes of black minority fall along with coal

For many African-Americans, mining once promised a path to the middle class. Its collapse leaves workers without options

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by [Reniqua Allen](#)



Snow falls over a line of coal-laden cars in West Virginia. In the 1930s, coal employed 55,000 black miners. In 2014, the most recent year for which Bureau of Labor Statistics data are available, only about 2,500 black people worked as coal miners — fewer than 3 percent of the total. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

Buck Wade wanted to be just like his dad. His father, a widower, raised five children on a coal miner's salary, working long hours and in his free time teaching the kids to cook and clean house. At 17, Wade got his first job in the mines. It was 1943, and he was so anxious to work underground that he lied about his age on the application form. No one cared. His father took him on as an apprentice, and Wade made 23 cents for every ton of coal he mined. "I was just as happy in the mines as I could be," he says.

Wade grew up in Keystone, a busy town in McDowell County, West Virginia, unusual for its racial diversity and the economic power of its black residents. Though the county was an anomaly in that sense, residents here, like elsewhere in the region, were ensconced in the world of coal. That's what brought Wade's dad to the state — he'd walked all the way from Montvale, Virginia, to the West Virginia community of Edmond, the old man always said — along with thousands of other African-Americans.



Mike Brooks, 59, and his daughter, Asia, 7, wait for a ride to church Sunday morning. Brooks worked for 13 years at a coal mine before he was laid off. He is raising Asia on his own. She wants to be a cheerleader, or maybe a doctor or nurse, when she grows up. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

Coal was booming, and work was plentiful. By the 1930s, the industry employed 400,000 miners, 55,000 of whom were black. African Americans were restricted to more physically demanding positions requiring less skill, earning [30 percent less](#) than whites. But their wages were still high by national standards: \$118.30 per month, according to one 1929 survey. By contrast, a national study in 1939 later found that black men earned an average income of \$460 per year.

By the 1950s, African Americans made up [24 percent](#) of McDowell's population, compared with 6 percent statewide. Locals came to refer to the area as "the Free State of McDowell." Black doctors, lawyers and entrepreneurs also flocked to the county, drawn to the promise of a better life. Even in the Jim Crow era, unions in the area were integrated, blacks in West Virginia enjoyed voting rights, and local political leadership included many people of color.

"Everybody had money," says Clif Moore, a current state delegate for McDowell who was born in the county in 1949. "It was sort of like little New York. Like a little Manhattan. Everything was popping."

But at mid-century, as machines began to take over the tasks of drilling and blasting coal and hauling it above ground, black miners were the first to lose their jobs. What had once been an all but certain gateway to the middle class began to close. African Americans fled the industry at even higher rates than whites; by 1960, the share of black workers in coal shrank to 6.6 from 12 percent a decade earlier. In 2014, the most recent year for which [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) data are available, only about 2,500 blacks worked as coal miners, less than 3 percent of the total.

Families who've lived here for generations say they're reluctant to leave. They praise the region's physical beauty, close-knit family life and friendly Southern manners.



Blackhawk Mining Mingo 2 Loadout facility near Gilbert, West Virginia. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

Coal has seen booms and busts before, but for locals, this time feels different. Production in Appalachia fell last year by 13 percent (and 10 percent nationwide) as tougher environmental regulations and cheaper natural gas choked off demand for the highly polluting fossil fuel. Last month, the Obama administration [announced](#) a moratorium on new coal leases on public lands. Many of the area's mines have closed. Shops are often empty; drug use is rampant. McDowell is now West Virginia's poorest county.

Still, families who've lived here for generations say they're reluctant to leave. They praise the region's physical beauty, close-knit family life and friendly Southern manners. "It's a different kind of black folk here. ... They dress differently, they talk differently, they carry themselves differently. They have a little arrogance about them," says Moore with a grin.

Wade, like others here, harbors particular resentment for the Obama administration. "He hasn't done anything for us," says the 88-year-old, leaning back on a couch in his living room overlooking the mountains. "If he were running again, I just couldn't vote for him. And I've been a Democrat my whole life."

When Wade first started in the mines, Franklin D. Roosevelt was president. It was a dangerous gig, but Wade didn't worry much about safety, even after his brother nearly died in a motor accident underground and his father lost an eye in a roof collapse. Wade says he didn't witness much discrimination, either. "I had some of the nicest white friends that you would ever want to meet."

He got involved in the mine's union, serving as president, and later took a job with the United Mine Workers of America. From 2005 to 2011, after his retirement, he also served as mayor of Keystone. But while he cared about local politics, his heart was in the mines. Even today, Wade drives the 30 minutes to the union offices once a week just to say hello.

‘We didn’t develop alternatives because we thought coal was going to be here for the next 90 million years. It’s not.’

Clif Moore

state delegate for McDowell County



Brandi (Wade) Scott with her three children at her home in Keystone, West Virginia. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

Wade is always happy when young people go into mining. But his only child, Johnny, chose a different path, working in steel mills and later a hospital. However, Wade’s grandniece, Brandi Wade Scott, and nephew, Galvester Wade (also known as "Junior"), still see a future in coal.

Brandi, 29, lives in Keystone with her three children. She says the town is a great place to raise a family. “When it snows it’s beautiful and my kids can go out and play. They’ll see a deer running through the woods and they get so excited. You don’t have all the crime. All the gunplay and weapons.”

But jobs, she says, are a problem.

She thought about working in the mines but ultimately decided she wasn’t cut out for it. In February 2007 she landed a job at Walmart, West Virginia’s largest private employer since 1998, where seven of her family members were also employed. She started at \$8.50 an hour plus benefits and was then promoted to a pharmacy job in which she earned \$11.75. “Most people try to get jobs at Walmart. Walmart and fast food restaurants.” Since May, she has worked as an assistant to the city manager.

Her 37-year-old brother, Junior, focused on getting a mining job, just like his great-uncle Buck. After a stint at a mine as a security guard — and 40 hours of coursework in mine training — he landed a position driving a Caterpillar rock truck at a strip mine.



Walmart announced in January that it was closing 154 stores nationwide, including the only one in struggling McDowell County.

Roger May for Al Jazeera America

He liked the work and the pay, but after 5 1/2 months, he was laid off. Needing a paycheck, he took a job as a school bus driver.

The median salary for a bus driver in the southern part of West Virginia is \$30,837. The average coal miner there makes \$84,959. “I do enjoy being a bus driver,” says Junior, but he’d go back to the mines if he could.

Now Brandi and Junior’s relatives at Walmart are on the job market, too. In [January](#), the retailer announced it was closing its McDowell County store by month’s end.

“We didn’t develop a vision, we didn’t develop a future,” says Moore. “We didn’t develop alternatives. Because we thought coal was going to be here for the next 90 million years. It’s not.”

Jeremy McMillian



Jeremy McMillian at his home in Bluefield, West Virginia. He has spent five years working in the mines. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

For Jeremy McMillian, 25, working in the mines was difficult at first. He was one of just 13 black employees among roughly 400 at the Pinnacle Mine in Pineville, West Virginia, he says. Occasionally, people directed racial slurs his way, but more often, they simply ignored him. “People not talking to you, just walking by

you like you're invisible," says McMillian. "It's been days I wanted to snap, go crazy. They'll push your buttons."

But over five years of running a coal buggy in and out of the mine, he gradually grew close to some colleagues. "I can't blame them. Their parents taught them that."

McMillian never thought he'd be a coal miner. His father was a cop, and his stepdad, who raised him, owned a roofing business. No one in high school had ambitions to work in the mines unless their fathers did, so McMillian never expected to end up there. In fact, he was afraid of the mines. He'd heard of coal workers' pneumoconiosis, more commonly known as black lung. ([A recent report](#) found that after near eradication 15 years ago, black lung has resurged as coal miners work longer hours, often in dirtier conditions.) And he didn't think it was a profession welcome to black people. So after high school, he found a job as a mechanic.

'You can make \$100,000 a year. They pay you that much because it's a dangerous job.'

Jeremy McMillian

But when a father of a friend, a white man who'd worked in the mines for 32 years, told him he could earn six figures as a coal miner, McMillian signed on. His health concerns haven't evaporated, though.

"You can make \$100,00 a year," he says. "They pay you that much because it's a dangerous job." Each time a shift of workers prepares to go underground, he says, they pray together. "All I can do and pray [is that] it ain't my last day in the mines."



A wall in Williamson, West Virginia. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

His wife, a cheerleading coach at the local high school, is ready for him to quit. But there aren't many other jobs available. He has two children to provide for — a 7-year-old daughter and 7-month-old girl. He's studying for his roofing license

so he can take over his stepfather's business one day. But he plans to keep working in coal as long as it's viable.

That may not be long. In October, his employer, Cliffs Natural Resources, announced it was laying off more than 200 people — roughly half its staff — at the [Pinnacle Mine](#). McMillian kept his job, but his overtime hours were capped, costing him about \$2,300 a month, he says. He was relieved, though, to still have a job.

McMillian says he's frustrated that so many national politicians seem to be turning against coal. "We don't like Obama 'cause he don't like us," he says. Instead, he may vote for Donald Trump: "He talk a good game," McMillian says. "We'll see if he stick to it. I mean, who wouldn't want to pay less taxes?" He says he pays up to \$2,400 a month in state and federal taxes on his monthly salary, which ranges from \$4,000 to \$4,500, depending on his hours.

Two days before New Year's, McMillian was laid off. But as he was making plans to start a job as a truck driver hauling cars and heavy equipment cross-country, he was called back to the mines. He's happy to be back at work, for now. But he imagines he'll soon have to give up coal for trucking.

Janice Martin



Janice Martin is the state's only black female mine inspector. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

With her long, black dreadlocks; warm smile; and Trinidadian accent, Janice Martin, 62, doesn't look or sound like a typical coal miner. She arrived in McDowell County in the late 1970s when her then-husband returned to his home state to find work in the lucrative coal industry.

Following her mother's counsel, Martin searched for a job too. The mines seemed an obvious place to look. But she was shut out. "They said women were not allowed in the coal mines because they thought it was bad luck," says Martin.

But a few years later, after equal opportunity laws forced the mines to hire women, she tried again. This time she was successful and soon was one of the first five women hired at U.S. Steel Co. Mine Number 9 in Gary, West Virginia.

At Mine 9, Martin was a mason. She laid blocks and built stoppings to aid air ventilation for \$10 an hour, a good salary for a man or woman. She didn't mind the work, but the male-dominated culture could be demoralizing. "They cuss, and they make dirty jokes, and they make women jokes, and they make black jokes, and they make Polish jokes. I mean, that's how life is, and you have to get used to it." But none of the jokes were personal, Martin says, and she never felt disrespected. Nearly 40 years later, she's still employed in the coal industry, as the only female (or African-American) mine inspector for the state of West Virginia, covering McDowell and a few other counties. She loves her work but believes even bigger job losses are about to hit. "These communities are dying — slowly," she says. "People are moving out of these areas, and they aren't coming back."

As she drives through McDowell in her beige GMC truck, the Trinidadian flag flying from the mirror, she points with sadness and frustration to the retail stores and government buildings that have shut down in recent years — cleaners, banks, grocery stores, a school. The industry's decline is also hitting her at home. Martin once hoped her 19-year-old daughter, Jazzlee, would work in the mines, but instead she's studying to be a welder. "I raised her that she was going to be in the mines, but the mines dropped drastically; there is no future in mining now."

Geneva Lynch



Coal silos behind coal camp houses in Stirrat, West Virginia. The mine is owned by Alpha Natural Resources, which purchased Massey Energy in 2011. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

Geneva Lynch believes her husband was just minutes from fresh air when he died on April 5, 2010, in the biggest U.S. mining disaster since the 1970s. A lawsuit she filed after the disaster claims that William Roosevelt Lynch, 59, was just two miles from the mine's exit.

Lynch thought about those minutes as she followed the trial of former Massey Energy chief executive Don Blankenship, who was convicted in December in connection with the explosion that killed 29 miners. The conviction, for conspiracy to cover up safety violations at his mines, was not directly related to the deaths of her husband and the other miners. (Meanwhile, government officials, including Gov. Joe Manchin, initially contended that William Roosevelt Lynch and the others died instantly, in contrast to his wife's account.) Still, Geneva Lynch says the Blankenship verdict may be the closest her family will come to gaining justice.

Lynch, along with the families of the other miners who were killed, received a settlement from Massey. (According to media reports, the company initially offered each family \$3 million, but the final figure may have been higher. Lynch declined to comment on the terms of the settlement). The money — which she says wasn't accompanied by any sort of apology from Massey, at least one that she can remember — hasn't lessened her anger.

Lynch's husband, who went by the nickname "Rosie," had worked in the mines for more than 30 years. He started as a contractor, never missed a single day of work, she says, and was eventually rewarded with a full-time staff job as a shuttle-car operator, transporting materials around the mines.

Mining paid better than teaching, the first profession he pursued after graduating from nearby Glenville State College with a degree in American studies and physics. Geneva wasn't thrilled by his professional shift, but she understood. A native of Minden, West Virginia, she had been surrounded by coal her entire life. Her father spent four decades at the Peabody Energy mine, her late brother was a coal miner at the Kingston mine, and her brother-in-law worked at the same plant as Rosie. Her sister still works in security at another mine. Lynch said her husband made around \$29 per hour and worked six days a week, nine hours a day. He loved his colleagues and having money to care for his family. He even helped their only son, Roosevelt Lamon ("Mon" for short), find a job in the mines.



The World War Memorial in Kimball, West Virginia, was constructed in 1927 to honor black veterans of World War I — the first of its kind in the United States. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

Yet, as a black man, he felt he had to work twice as hard as his white peers, Lynch says. She points to a white truck in her driveway that Massey had awarded her husband years earlier. “My husband won it because he didn’t miss no work. He knew that if he missed or he didn’t have some kind of excuse that he would be the first one to go.”

Lynch remembers April 5 in detail. First, there were the sirens. She was finishing up her workday as an office manager in Beckley and wasn’t sure what the commotion was about. She headed home to warm up the ribs she’d bought the day before from the Lone Star Steakhouse as a surprise for her husband. He’d been craving them for days. But when she walked in the door, Rosie wasn’t back, and her phone was ringing. On the other end was the girlfriend of another miner, who told her an explosion had occurred at the mine and that she should check on Rosie. Lynch assumed her husband was fine, but she turned on the TV to watch for any news. As the evening wore on, her calm turned to panic. Around 6 p.m., Lynch and her sister-in-law drove to the mines. They were stopped by her son and brother-in-law, who worked with Rosie. The men told her that Rosie was gone. His was one of the first six bodies recovered.

Lynch’s only daughter, Miki, 33, went into premature labor that night. Her son refused to return to the mines. The family poured their energy into caring for Miki’s new daughter, Geneva Rose (named after her grandparents). But life wasn’t the same. When Geneva’s nephew told her he wanted to find a job in the mines, she forbade it.

Geneva only attended one day of Blankenship’s trial. Reliving the day of her husband’s death was too painful. As a Christian, she is trying to forgive him for her family’s loss. “I keep making myself think and believe that if he doesn’t pay for it here,” she says, “he will pay for it up there.”

On Jan. 26, Alpha Energy, which had purchased Massey in [2011](#), announced plans to lay off 831 coal miners at eight underground mines and two processing plants in southern West Virginia. The cuts are the latest since Alpha, which declined to comment for this story, filed for bankruptcy last August.

The company blamed the layoffs on the industry's downturn. According to a recent report by [Vox](#), however, Alpha's top executives will still receive nearly \$12 million in bonuses this year.

Cora Hairston



Cora Hairston of Sarah Ann, West Virginia, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in nearby Logan, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Each year she performs as Rosa Parks during a service to recognize the civil rights struggle. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

Cora Phillips Hairston, 73, dreams about her father more now than she did in the first years after his death. She has been feeling out of sorts because his remains went missing a decade ago and where they are is anyone's guess.

Frank Phillips was buried in the African-American cemetery in the unincorporated community of Crystal Block, West Virginia, on land leased to the now-defunct mining company Crystal Block Coal & Coke. In 2004, a bulldozer hired by the energy company Equitable Production (now EQT Corp.) ripped through the cemetery to relocate a gas pipeline to [accommodate surface mining in the area](#). In the process, Hairston says, headstones were scattered, the cemetery's steps removed and bodies displaced.

Hairston grew up in Crystal Block, near the Kentucky border, in a segregated coal camp with her five siblings. Her father was a coal miner; her mother stayed home to raise the children. "It was a good job," says Hairston of work in the mines. "They took advantage of being hardworking men and took care of their families very well."

The mine, so much a part of the workers' lives, was also entwined in their deaths. After Crystal Block leased the land for the coal camp from a local family in 1923, it built a burial site on a small plot beside the town's African-American church. Loved ones were carried to rest as mourners sang spirituals. The cemetery became a source of pride for the community, and relatives of the deceased kept it up even after the coal mine shut down in the 1960s.

When Phillips died of pancreatic cancer in 1965, there was never a question of where he'd be laid to rest. Cora's mother bought him a headstone, comforted by the knowledge that he had a peaceful resting place.



The headstone of Cora Hairston's father, Frank Phillips, in Crystal Block, West Virginia. The footstone, with "Dad" engraved on it, was found tossed over the hill behind the headstone. Roger May for Al Jazeera America

That's what made the news of the cemetery all the more devastating. In 2004, James Olbert, another former resident of the Crystal Block Coal camp, discovered the disarray on a visit to his father's grave. "When I was growing up, we were taught not to step on a grave, but to walk around it," he [told](#) the West Virginia Gazette and Mail. "Then they have the nerve to show so much disrespect with that bulldozer."

Even more disturbing was a witness's account of the demolition. Bud Baisden, a local who'd been passing by, said in an affidavit that he tried to stop the truck driver from bulldozing the area. Baisden said he told the driver, Vince Keaton, that he was destroying an African-American cemetery, to which the driver responded, "F--- those n-----s."

In 2006, Hairston, Olbert and 12 other relatives of the deceased sued EQT.

Lawyers for EQT, which had leased the property, said the plans it received from landowners didn't indicate the presence of a cemetery. The damage, the company said, was accidental. Keaton, according to Hairston's lawyer, also denied making the racial slur.

The families spent nearly a decade fighting their case in court. Hairston's husband, a former coal miner, is disabled, and she battled breast cancer. Many of the other plaintiffs were also older and in ill health. Hairston says she wonders if the company was waiting for them to die off.

Over the years there were a series of victories and then reversals by the courts. As part of one 2012 verdict, a jury in Logan County instructed the company to pay \$900,000 in damages. "Fourteen African-Americans standing up against a gas company in Logan County just shows the power of our jury system and why we must protect it," the families' lawyer, Kevin Thompson, told the [Associated Press](#) at the time. But in 2014, a state Supreme Court decision [overturned](#) the verdict.

Last October, the families agreed to settle. The money will establish a trust fund to preserve the cemetery, according to Thompson. (Both he and Hairston declined to specify the amount). A memorial commemorating those buried will also be erected.

It's bittersweet, but a victory nonetheless. Says Hairston, "I can let my daddy rest."