Labour and Colour: Black Miners in Industrial Cape Breton

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Abstract

This thesis reconstructs the histories of Black coal miners in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and examines their marginalisation in both the historical record and public memory. Although Black people arrived in Nova Scotia through multiple waves of migration, and some were recruited into Cape Breton's coal industry in the early twentieth century, their labour has received far less recognition than its significance to the region's industrial development warrants.

Drawing on archival research, oral histories, and visits to museums and commemorative sites, this thesis examines how Black miners lived, worked, and are remembered in Industrial Cape Breton. It argues that Black miners were present in the region's coal industry, but their labour was unevenly recognised and often treated as peripheral in the historical record. Underground, they shared the dangers of mining work while also facing racial hierarchies that shaped job assignments, promotion, and exposure to the hardest and least secure labour. Above ground, Black miners and their families navigated segregation, exclusion, and company control while building networks of community life, mutual aid, and social support.

By bringing together archival fragments, oral histories, and the silences of public memory, this thesis shows that Black labour helped sustain Industrial Cape Breton, even as it was excluded from dominant narratives of mining history.

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Terminology

Acronyms

AMW - Amalgamated Mine Workers

BESCO - British Empire Steel Corporation

DISCO - Dominion Iron and Steel Company

DOMCO - Dominion Coal Company

DOSCO - Dominion Steel Company

GMA - General Mining Association

PWA - Provincial Workmen's Association

UMWA - United Mine Workers of America

UNIA - Universal Negro Association

Chapter I - Introduction

Apparition of the Inapparent

Coal mining is central to the history of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and the coal miner occupies a place in public memory that transcends the role of any one occupation. He is portrayed as a symbol of sacrifice, tenacity, militancy, and collective belonging in museums, memorial parks, and local histories. The miner is one of the central symbols through which industrial Cape Breton remembers itself and explains its place in Nova Scotian and Canadian history. Through this figure, the region reveals the perils of underground employment, the difficulties of company-town life, the conflicts between capital and labour, and the sacrifices made for family and community. Understanding the history of Industrial Cape Breton, then, also entails examining how the miner has been made into a cultural and historical archetype. This commemorative framing is evident in public historical projects such as the Nova Scotia Archives' virtual exhibition *Men in the Mines*, which describes mining as one of the province's foundational industries and presents Nova Scotia as shaped and defined by the traditions of mining life. Such language preserves an important history of labour and loss, but it also helps consolidate the miner as a familiar and seemingly universal subject of industrial memory.

The central topic of this thesis—what about the Black men in the mines?—arose as I encountered this commemorative and historiographical landscape that repeated invocations to the miner as a universal figure, despite the labour workforce not being racially homogeneous. Across scholarship, archival collections, museum exhibits, and commemorative sites, the miner is typically imagined and portrayed as white and masculine. Even when ethnic differences are acknowledged and emphasised—e.g. Scots, Italians, Poles—these distinctions are still assimilated into an overarching category of the miner. Memorial language that commemorates "our men" appears

inclusive, but it rarely identifies who is memorialised and nearly never names the Black men who also worked and died underground. Even the aforementioned expansive commemorative project *Men in the Mines,* which seeks to preserve the history of mining across Nova Scotia, does not necessarily make Black miners visible as named historical subjects. The cumulative impact is to normalise the belief that the underground workforce was racially homogeneous, thus erasing those who did not conform to the archetype.

The problem, then, goes beyond the fact that Black miners are missing from a few archival records or museum exhibits. Rather, their marginalisation reveals how the history of mining has been structured via an implicit white figure of labour. Black miners are rarely mentioned in academic literature. When they are, it is usually in succinct, formulaic comments that acknowledge their existence without a sustained analysis of their lives and historical significance. The mining commemorative landscape of Cape Breton exhibits a similar pattern. At sites such as the Miners' Museum in Glace Bay, mining history is presented as a coherent collective story, but one in which Black miners remain peripheral or absent altogether. This marginalisation has become ingrained in the region's visual and cultural memory over time, creating an absence that appears natural rather than historically produced.

Yet that absence is itself historical and requires explanation. Black men *did* work in Cape Breton's coal mines. They were recruited by employers during times of high labour demand, discriminated against, and given hazardous and undesirable work, even when their labour was important to the coal industry. Their omission from prevailing depictions of mining distorts the historical composition of the workforce and obscures the role of race in industrial labour and remembrance in Cape Breton. Recovering the lives of Black miners is therefore not only a matter of filling a gap in the record but also requires asking how Black labour could be both materially essential to the coal industry and symbolically peripheral to its history, as well as how the miner became imaginable as a universal figure while remaining so closely tied to whiteness.

This thesis examines Black miners as workers, community members, and historical subjects whose lives can only be partially traced through oral histories and the fragmentary traces left across institutional and commemorative records. It begins with the tension between presence and representation. By doing this, it poses the question of how Black miners lived and worked in Industrial Cape Breton and how their marginalisation has influenced the definition of mining history.

Study Area and Background

The geographical focus of this study is Cape Breton Island, located off the northeastern coast of Nova Scotia. Today, the island forms part of the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, the province's second-largest urban settlement. Cape Breton's historical geography must first be situated within Mi'kma'ki, the homeland of the Mi'kmaq, the Indigenous people who originally inhabited the island. Mi'kma'ki encompassed the Maritimes east of the St. John River and extended to the Gaspé region of present-day Quebec and into parts of Newfoundland and Labrador.[1] In Mi'kmaw, Cape Breton Island is known as Unama'ki, often translated as "the foggy island," and is one of the seven districts within Mi'kma'ki.[2]

[1] Margaret Conrad, *At The Ocean's Edge: A History of Nova Scotia to Confederation*, 2020, 18.

[2] William John Davey and Richard P. MacKinnon, "Settlement History of Cape Breton Island," in Dictionary of Cape Breton English (University of Toronto Press, 2016), x–xli.



Figure 1. Map of Nova Scotia. Created in ArcGIS

Prior to European colonisation and settlement, the Mi'kmaq communities in Unama'ki were primarily organised around fishing, hunting, and gathering, following seasonal patterns. From the sixteenth century onward, however, French and then British incursions significantly transformed the landscape and social organisation of the Mi'kmaq. European fishers and settlers entered Mi'kma'ki to exploit the cod fishery, initiate new trade relations, and establish colonial outposts, introducing European goods, along with new epidemic diseases that profoundly altered Mi'kmaq demography.[3] From the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth century, colonial authorities embarked on a civilising mission to manage Mi'kmaq culture and populations through agriculture and permanent settlement.[4] As part of this effort and due to continual encroachment by settlers, the Mi'kmaq in

[3] Conrad, At The Ocean's Edge: A History of Nova Scotia to Confederation, 18–20.

[4] Andrew Parnaby, "The Cultural Economy of Survival: The Mi'kmaq of Cape Breton in the Mid-19th Century," *Labour / Le Travail* 61 (2008): 74–75.

Cape Breton petitioned the colonial government for land, and the result was the establishment of six reserves located at Chapel Island, Eskasoni, Whycocomagh, Wagamatcook, Malagawatch, and "Indian Garden," but European encroachment continued even with the new reserve policy.[5] Despite these pressures, Mi'kmaq communities remained and continue to be present across Cape Breton. The coal and steel industries that later defined "Industrial Cape Breton" thus developed on land already structured by Mi'kmaq dispossession and ongoing assertions of Mi'kmaq sovereignty. Black and Caribbean workers arrived in this layered colonial geography in the early twentieth century.

By the late eighteenth century, Cape Breton, then a British colony separate from Nova Scotia, had a small non-Indigenous population concentrated in coastal settlements, while much of the interior remained outside intensive European settlement, though it continued to be used by Mi'kmaq communities.[6] That non-Indigenous population consisted of a mixed colonial society that included French inhabitants, British military and administrative personnel, and settlers tied to fishing and other staple activities. Cape Breton's economy was organised around staple extraction, above all the cod fishery, the colony's primary industry, supplemented by subsistence agriculture and limited coal mining. From the beginning, its economy was oriented outward; its fishery was closely linked to the Atlantic and global markets, facilitated by the British imperial trade system. This system directed colonial resources toward the needs of British industry and commerce, thereby making Cape Breton increasingly integrated with and dependent on the transatlantic trade networks. Coal mining, while present, supplied mostly local demands, as it was greatly limited by technology.[7]

Industrial Cape Breton

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[5] Parnaby, "The Cultural Economy of Survival: The Mi'kmaq of Cape Breton in the Mid-19th Century," 72.

[6] Stephen J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth-century Cape Breton : A Historical Geography* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 3.

[7] Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton : A Historical Geography*, 3–7, 15-18.

Industrial Cape Breton emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period defined by the predominance of two interconnected industries: coal mining and steel manufacturing. These sectors were instrumental in shaping the region's economic development and making Cape Breton central to the industrial growth of Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada. The industrialisation process in Nova Scotia was primarily a response to the national demand for coal, iron, and steel, much of which was imported from the United States and Britain.[8] In the decades prior to the twentieth century, there was a notable increase in collaboration between the private sector and government entities, as evidenced by substantial public funding allocated to support industrial development.[9] While policy interventions and public-private partnerships played a crucial role in the early stages of Nova Scotia's industrialisation, geography also shaped the trajectory of industrial development, especially the location of major coal deposits and the province's uneven access to transportation networks and inland markets (see Figure 2).

[8] Terry Gibbs and Garry M. Leech, *The Failure of Global Capitalism: From Cape Breton to Colombia and Beyond* (Nimbus Publishing (CN), 2009), 14.

[9] Gibbs and Leech, *The Failure of Global Capitalism: From Cape Breton to Colombia and Beyond*, 14.

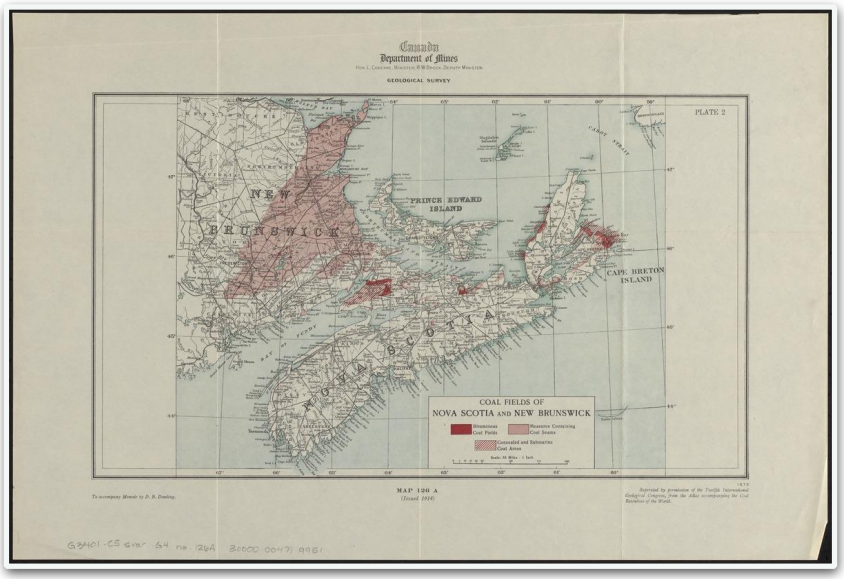

Figure 2. Coal fields of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, D.B. Dowling, Geological Survey of Canada, Map 126A, 1914

Source: Dowling, D. B. (Donaldson Bogart), and Geological Survey of Canada. "Coal fields of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick." Map. Ottawa,

This study centres on the principal mining towns and industrial centres that dot around Cape Breton Island. They include Glace Bay, New Waterford, Dominion, Lingan, Donkin, Sydney, and Sydney Mines. The temporal scope of this study spans roughly fifty to sixty years, from the early 1900s through the 1960s. This period was marked by substantial recruitment of foreign workers and the active participation of Black miners, rapid industrial and economic change, and a significant shift in the social fabric. Class tensions would also come to define this era, and the interplay among labour relations, capital, and the nature of Cape Breton's geography would contribute to the formation of its identity and to its integration into Canada's broader economic system.



Figure 3. Principal mining towns in Industrial Cape Breton. Created in ArcGis.

Unlike Ontario and Quebec, which benefited from abundant natural resources and well-developed inland transportation networks, Nova Scotia's location on the Atlantic and the Gulf of St. Lawrence limited its access to the burgeoning North American industrial heartlands and to continental markets more generally.[10] These geographical constraints shaped the evolution of the province's coal industry from its inception, intertwining with financial and labour relations that characterised maritime industrial capitalism during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Coal mining developed only minimally under the French in the early eighteenth century, with small-scale mining operations at places like Port Morien and Sydney Mines, which supplied the French military and local markets.[11] The British, after the French cession of the island, deliberately

[10] Kris Inwood, "Maritime Industrialization from 1870 to 1910: A Review of the Evidence and Its Interpretation," *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region* 21, no. 1 (1991): 150.

[11] Michael Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," in *Industry and Society in Nova Scotia*, ed. James E. Candow (Halifax, N.S. : Fernwood Pub., 2001), 57-58.

curtailed mining in accordance with colonial mercantilist policies that sought to suppress the industrial capabilities of their colonies to protect their domestic coal production.[12] As a British colony, Cape Breton's economic landscape was dominated by London. The London-based General Mining Association (GMA) obtained a long-term monopoly over coal rights in Nova Scotia;[13] under this arrangement, the company secured a thirty-six-year lease on most of the colony's coal reserves, and the colonial administration compelled existing small leaseholders to sell out to the GMA. The GMA initially relied on miners from Britain, but over time it increasingly recruited workers from Nova Scotia and other parts of the Atlantic colonies, including Newfoundland.[14] The wages for skilled GMA miners compared favourably with North American norms, and the company built infrastructure, including workers' housing and company stores, in the towns where it operated. These paternalistic policies, in which a single company controlled social and economic provisions, would continue as a feature of capital-labour relations later on. By the mid-nineteenth century, colonial politicians and local entrepreneurs had begun to oppose the GMA's monopoly over coal resources. They criticised the GMA for its monopoly pricing power, its limited investments outside a few districts, and its interference in domestic politics. In 1857-58, the colony ended the GMA's monopoly, and a more competitive mining landscape emerged. Over the following decades, companies opened new mines across the province and increased production.[15]

After the end of the GMA's monopoly, Nova Scotia's coal industry experienced a brief boom in the 1860s, aided by the Reciprocity treaty with the United States, which reduced tariffs on natural goods traded between British North America and the United States, and then by the American Civil War, which increased American demand for Nova Scotian coal. With the treaty's

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[12] Ian McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields, 1872-1876," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens De Sociologie* 13, no. 1/2 (1988): 18.

[13] McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields," 18.

[14] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," 58.

[15] McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields," 23.

abrogation in 1866 and the imposition of a U.S. duty on coal, the export trade collapsed, exposing the industry's vulnerability to external markets.[16] After Confederation with Canada in 1867, the federal government assumed responsibility for customs and tariffs, but the province still depended on coal royalties for revenue. The National Policy of 1879 offered economic relief by imposing a duty on imported coal, but tariff protection alone did not secure the growth of Nova Scotia's coal trade. The Intercolonial Railway was equally important, serving as a key instrument of national economic integration by linking Nova Scotian producers more effectively to interprovincial markets.[17] Shipments to Quebec sharply rose, while a growing local industrial base stimulated domestic demand.[18]

Table 1. Coal Production in Nova Scotia: Five-Year Averages, 1867–1920.

Year	Average Annual Production (Tons)
1867–1870	634,344
1871–1875	954,089
1876–1880	927,571
1881–1885	1,495,085
1886–1890	1,919,741
1891–1895	2,325,072
1896–1900	2,867,534
1901–1905	5,243,109
1906-1910	6,262,082

[16] McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields," 23.

[17] David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," *Acadiensis* 7, no. 1 (1977): 8-9, 23.

[18] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," 60.

Table 1. Coal Production in Nova Scotia: Five-Year Averages, 1867–1920.

Year	Average Annual Production (Tons)
1911-1915	7,520,535
1916-1920	6,257,029

Source: Michael Earle, Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History, 66.

From the late 1870s to the early twentieth century, coal production expanded rapidly (see Table 1), and Nova Scotia became more deeply integrated into the national economy. At the same time, capitalists and industrial firms integrated coal, iron, and steel production into vertically organised corporate structures, transforming Cape Breton into an industrial hub.[19] Companies imported iron ore from Bell Island in Newfoundland, mined coal in Cape Breton's coal towns, and produced steel primarily in Sydney using an ever larger share of Cape Breton coal. Corporate consolidation accelerated during this period, and the Dominion Coal Company (DOMCO) and the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company (Scotia) emerged as major coal operators. At the turn of the 20th century, coal royalties provided more than 40 per cent of the province's revenues. By 1912, Nova Scotia's coal and iron companies accounted for 20 per cent of the province's employment.[20]

Yet this pattern of industrial growth did little to alter the industry's dependence on external markets or its vulnerability to market fluctuations. Before the onset of the First World War, the Ontario market was largely closed to Nova Scotian coal because of high transportation costs, while the Quebec market remained vulnerable to changes in U.S. supply and prices. The single largest

[19] L. D. McCann, "Fragmented Integration: The Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company and the Anatomy of an Urban-Industrial Landscape, C. 1912," *Urban History Review* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 1994): 146.

[20] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," 61-63; Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," 6.

consumer of Cape Breton coal was the Sydney steel plant, consuming 1.2 million tonnes of coal in 1913 alone. The First World War temporarily triggered a surge in coal production but disrupted existing trade patterns, though wartime exports mitigated the disruption. After the war ended, local demand for coal for steel production declined, the Quebec market was slow to recover, and competition from American producers ensured a period of financial reorganisation and labour unrest that would plague the industry in the coming decades.[21]

The structural tensions within capital and between capital and labour culminated in the creation of the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco), a large holding company that amalgamated Dominion Iron and Steel (itself a merger of Domco and other companies) and Scotia into a single corporate entity.[22] Besco would struggle financially throughout its existence; its highly leveraged and over-capitalised structure required it to extract ever more surplus from coal operations and to suppress wages.[23] Wage cuts contributed to labour conflicts, including major strikes in 1922 and 1925, leading to the eventual collapse of Besco in 1929, which was then reorganised as the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation (Dosco). The Great Depression and the Second World War severely impacted the already declining industry, which lost a significant share of its market. Falling demand, reduced work hours, and further wage cuts prompted miners to adopt more militant forms of organisation, and by the end of the war, it was evident that the industry was in decline, with diminished production and rising costs.[24]

Throughout this period, labour conflict and workplace risks characterised much of the industry's operations. Coal mining was an exceptionally hazardous occupation. Mine workers faced immediate dangers underground, such as dust explosions, falling debris, gas asphyxiation, drowning,

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[21] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," 64; Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," 6.

[22] Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," 13-19.

[23] Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," 23-28.

[24] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," 61, 69-70.

machinery accidents, and being struck by coal cars.[25] In the long term, their families and communities endure health and environmental hazards linked to mining operations. Major disasters (including mass fatalities) at Drummond Mine (1873), Foord Pit (1880), Vale Mine (1885), Springhill (1891, 1956, 1958), New Waterford (1917), among others, became defining events in those mining communities.

Table 2. Nova Scotia Mining Disasters and Fatalities

Year	Location	Cause	Deaths
1873	Drummond Mine, Westville	Explosion	60
1880	Foord Pit, Stellarton	Explosion	44
1885	Vale Mine, Thorburn	Explosion	13
1891	No. 1 Mine, Springhill	Explosion	125
1899	Caledonia Mine, Glace Bay	Fire and explosion	11
1917	No 12 Mine, New Waterford	Explosion	65
1918	Allan Shaft, Stellarton	Explosion	88
1938	Princess Mine, Sydney Mines	Riding rake	21
1952	MacGregor Mine, Stellarton	Explosion	19
1956	No. 4 Mine, Springhill	Explosion	39
1958	No. 2 Mine, Springhill	Bump	75

Source: Michael Earle, Coal in the History of Nova Scotia, 74.

At the same time, struggles over wages and working conditions produced a strong labour movement. During the 1860s and 1870s, coal companies like the GMA exerted significant influence over their workforce through mechanisms such as company housing and stores, legal intimidation,

[25] Donald MacLeod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Workplace Control: The Nova Scotian Experience, 1873 to 1910," *Historical Papers* 18, no. 1 (2006): 229–31.

and physical coercion.[26] For example, the GMA defeated the 1864 Sydney Mines strike action with evictions from company housing and a reliance on the state's police power.[27] Likewise, the 1876 strike ended in defeat, as the GMA blacklisted strike leaders, hired strikebreakers, and refused to negotiate.[28] In the 1880s, coal miners founded the Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA) in response to the unequal power relations between the companies and their workers, but by the turn of the century, the PWA began to decline, accelerated by the perception of its members of being a company-controlled union and thus ineffective against corporate power.[29] By the early twentieth century, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) had begun to replace the PWA as the dominant union. In 1909, District 26 of the UMWA contested the PWA by striking unsuccessfully in Glace Bay and Springhill, polarising communities between PWA and UMWA loyalty.[30] The UMWA retreated from the district but returned in 1917, when radical union leader J.B. McLachlan persuaded miners to leave the PWA, and in 1918, miners in Nova Scotia voted decisively to affiliate with the UMWA instead.[31]

Besco's consolidation of coal and steel production in Industrial Cape Breton sharpened existing tensions between capital and labour and set the stage for a new phase of confrontation. The postwar crisis in the coal industry, together with Besco's efforts to reduce wages, rationalise production, and discipline the workforce, provoked a series of bitter struggles between 1922 and

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[26] McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields, 1872-1876," 38-39.

[27] Donald Nerbas, "Empire, Colonial Enterprise, and Speculation: Cape Breton's Coal Boom of the 1860s," *The Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History* 46, no. 6 (2018): 1081.

[28] McKay, "The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields, 1872-1876," 36–40.

[29] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," 64.

[30] Brian C. Williams, "International Trade Unionism: The United Mine Workers in Eastern Canada, 1900-1920," *Relations Industrielles* 41, no. 3 (April 12, 2005): 532–35

[31] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia," 67.

1925.[32] These conflicts were not only about wages, but also about union power, workplace control, and the direction of the miners' movement. Within District 26, union debates over contracts, strike strategy, and political leadership exposed tensions between labourist and more radical currents, especially around J.B. McLachlan. The steel strike of 1923 and the miners' strike of 1925 became major confrontations in which police repression, troop deployments, arrests, and the suspension of district autonomy illustrated how closely state and corporate power worked together to contain labour militancy.[33] By the end of the period, the balance of power had shifted decisively against the miners' movement.

By the late 1920s, labour militancy had declined, but the Depression produced a renewed wave of radicalism in the coalfields.[34] In 1932, worsening unemployment, underemployment, and reliance on relief led to the formation of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia (AMW).[35] Communist influence was strongest in Glace Bay, where the AMW drew support from militant rank-and-file miners and from a broader network of unemployed organisations and the Women's Auxiliary.[36] Although the AMW rejoined the UMWA in 1936, labour militancy did not disappear completely. By the 1950s and 1960s, however, mechanisation, mine closures, and industrial contraction had sharply reduced the mining workforce, and with it the social basis of the militant unionism that had defined Nova Scotia's coalfields for decades.[37]

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[32] Ian Mckay and Suzanne Morton, "The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance," in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925*, ed. Craig Heron (University of Toronto Press, 1998), 63–68.

[33] Mckay and Morton, "The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance," 67-75..

[34] Michael J. Earle, "The Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936," *Labour / Le Travail* 22 (1988): 101–2.

[35] Earle, "The Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936, 116-119.

[36] Earle, "The Coalminers and Their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936," 119-122.

[37] Earle, "Coal in the History of Nova Scotia: An Illustrated History," 71-76.

Race and Immigration Politics

Black people have resided in Nova Scotia for more than two and a half centuries, arriving in multiple waves of migration and forming communities once established. Between 1750 and 1820, thousands migrated to the Atlantic colonies, including enslaved and free Africans, Black Loyalists after the American Revolution, and Black refugees from the War of 1812, laying the foundations of Black communities in Nova Scotia.[38] Subsequent migrations further expanded and reshaped these communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the late nineteenth century, as the Nova Scotian economy was industrialising, the coal and steel industries faced labour shortages that would lead employers to recruit skilled workers from abroad. This section addresses the question—what social and working circumstances confronted Black workers upon their arrival in Industrial Cape Breton—by situating their recruitment within Canada's racialised immigration regime, the state's racial logic, and the industry's labour demands.

Canadian immigration policy during this period was dialectical—the state's desire to exclude racialised people collided with industrial desires for cheap labour.[39] Rather than resolving this contradiction, the state managed it by selectively extending inclusion on unequal terms, revealing the limits of the Canadian liberal order.[40] As Ian McKay suggests, liberal rule did not distribute rights and freedoms universally, but organised them through distinctions between those considered fit for full membership and those consigned to exclusion or only conditional inclusion.[41] The state, as Nandita Sharma argues, is best understood not as a unified actor but as a set of social relations

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[38] Harvey Amani Whitfield, "The African Diaspora in Atlantic Canada: History, Historians, and Historiography," *Acadiensis* 46, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 213–32.

[39] Agnes Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900-1932," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 4 (February 1, 1994): 132.

[40] Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 1138–42.

[41] Mckay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," 1140–42.

continually reproduced through an imagined national community that authorises intervention in the name of collective welfare.[42] Immigration controls and citizenship were among the principal sites of this reproduction, as the Canadian state differentiated those imagined as members of the national community from the racialised other. In practice, this meant that racial considerations shaped the government's approach to immigration, as many Canadians favoured a White Canada.[43] These racial considerations became codified through the 1906 Immigration Act, which introduced race-based exclusion clauses and mandatory medical and character examinations.[44] Section 20 of the act established racial and financial prerequisites for re-entry to prevent potential public charges, while Section 30 granted the Minister of the Interior the authority to develop Canadian immigration policy without oversight from the House of Commons. A further amendment in 1908 introduced the continuous journey clause, requiring immigrants to arrive in Canada via an uninterrupted journey from their country of origin. The 1910 Immigration Act further empowered the governor-in-council to deny entry to immigrants of any race deemed unsuitable for the Canadian climate or for the needs of Canada.[45] Along with these formal policies, officials relied on informal practices to restrict entry. Immigration agents received private directives to exclude Caribbean Blacks despite their compliance with the Immigration Act and were instructed to create various obstacles to their entry. Additionally, immigration officials colluded with US officials to limit African-American

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[42] Nandita Rani Sharma, *Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of "migrant Workers" in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2006), 57.

[43] James W. St.G. Walker, "Diaspora Dynamics: Canadian Immigration Policy and the Caribbean Connection," *Histoire Sociale* 55, no. 114 (November 1, 2022): 250; Nilum Panesar, Yolande Pottie-Sherman, and Rima Wilkes, "The Komagata Through a Media Lens: Racial, Economic, and Political Threat in Newspaper Coverage of the 1914 Komagata Maru Affair," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 49, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 86–88.

[44] Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010), 32.

[45] Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900-1932," 133.

migration by encouraging American railway companies to increase ticket prices for Black passengers from $20 to $200.[46]

Even within this exclusionary immigration regime, the Dominion Iron and Steel Company (Disco) became a key conduit for Black migration to the province via an agreement with the provincial government.[47] The recruitment process predominantly relied on established networks within the North American steel industry, with Disco's managers leveraging their connections to recruit workers from industrial centres in Alabama, Buffalo, Maryland, and Pittsburgh.[48] According to Beaton, Black workers had been working in the steel plant since its inception and in the coal industry, but the specifics of their arrival are uncertain.[49] Disco also recruited Black people from the Caribbean, facilitated by Nova Scotia's geographic location and extensive shipping networks, which provided easy access to Caribbean ports, particularly benefiting migrants from Barbados and Jamaica.[50] The Barbadian government initiated emigration efforts in the 1860s in response to economic difficulties stemming from crop failures and drought, hoping these migrants would send remittances back to their families.[51] These migration patterns were complex and operated along a continuum rather than as discrete events, influenced by economic and personal factors.[52] Many saw Canada as part of a larger migratory journey, often maintaining connections to the Caribbean.

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[46] Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada*, 1870-1955, 41-42.

[47] Elizabeth Beaton, "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904," *Acadiensis* 24, no. 2 (April 4, 1995): 70.

[48] Claudine Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, c. 1900–1930," *Histoire Sociale* 55, no. 114 (November 1, 2022): 306.

[49] Beaton, "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904," 69.

[50] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, c. 1900–1930," 302–3.

[51] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, c. 1900–1930," 305.

[52] Juanita De Barros and Laurie Jacklin, "Race, Migration, and Community: Telling Caribbean Histories," *Histoire Sociale* 55, no. 114 (November 1, 2022): 233.

Children born abroad were repatriated to the Caribbean, whereas those born in the Caribbean were often left behind as their mothers sought employment in industrial economies, sending remittances to support their children, spouses, and other family members.[53]

On arriving in Nova Scotia, Black workers encountered considerable difficulties. For example, in Whitney Pier, Black Disco workers were housed in substandard company shacks in the Cokeville district, often lacking basic amenities such as proper heating and insulation.[54] Living conditions were harsh, as seen in a 1908 letter from blast furnace superintendent J. McInnis to general manager David Baker about the houses in the "Negro quarter," which were unboarded and exposed to severe winter weather. In a subsequent April letter, a complaint was made about the lack of running water in some houses. Work at Disco's blast furnaces and coke ovens was extremely hazardous. Black workers were concentrated at these positions because the racial logic at the time suggested that Black people could withstand the heat better than the white workers.[55] Disco company records from 1906–1912 document multiple incidents of burns, injuries, and accidents.[56] Black workers saw further discrimination despite their skilled abilities, resulting in their relegation to subordinate positions inside the factories, where they performed the most physically demanding and lowest-paid jobs.[57] Black workers were typically the first to be dismissed during economic downturns and the last to be rehired during economic booms. In other words, racism mediated their experiences with work and their class position.

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[53] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, c. 1900–1930," 323; De Barros and Jacklin, "Race, Migration, and Community: Telling Caribbean Histories," 234.

[54] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, c. 1900–1930," 306–7.

[55] Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900-1932," 135.

[56] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, c. 1900–1930," 314.

[57] Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900-1932," 131.

Despite the challenges associated with labour and immigration, Black people managed to establish enduring social networks and community institutions. They established churches, schools, and businesses, creating spaces of support that helped them navigate the realities of industry and racial discrimination.[58] These institutions later helped Black communities preserve their own histories of life and labour, including stories and memories often neglected by dominant commemorative narratives.

Black migration into Cape Breton, however, was not confined to steel. Black men also entered the coal industry, though the record of their recruitment is far thinner and more fragmentary than that of Black steelworkers at Whitney Pier. Oral histories, community memory, and scattered archival references nonetheless indicate their presence in collieries in Glace Bay, New Waterford, Donkin, and other coal towns across Industrial Cape Breton. As in steel, their incorporation into coal mining was shaped by the contradiction between employers' demand for labour and a racial order that constrained the terms on which Black workers were hired, assigned work, housed, and remembered.

Historiography

Notes on the Cape Breton Coal Industry

While the historiography of Nova Scotia's coal industry is extensive, it has been shaped most powerfully by labour history and political economy, especially by what is often described as a Maritime Marxist tradition. Historians such as David Frank, Ian McKay, Colin McKay, and Greg Kealey, alongside the earlier intellectual milieu of *Acadiensis,* made class formation, labour struggle,

[58] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, c. 1900–1930."

industrial capitalism, and regional dependency central to the interpretation of Atlantic Canadian history. This scholarship remains foundational to any study of Industrial Cape Breton. At the same time, its primary analytical focus has rested on class, capital, and labour militancy, leaving race and the place of Black workers less fully explored.

This pattern extends beyond Cape Breton. Much of Canadian labour history has treated race as secondary to class or folded it into broader narratives of working-class formation. As David Camfield argues, labour studies in Canada have historically paid limited attention to race and colonialism and have often been shaped by white, non-Indigenous scholars who subsume antiracist and anti-colonial struggles into a general working-class story.[59] In the Cape Breton context, the result is a rich body of scholarship on coal, labour, and community whose subjects often appear as implicitly white. Although scholars have examined Black workers in the steel industry and Black life in Cape Breton and Nova Scotia more broadly, they have devoted very little sustained attention to Black coal miners. No extended study has yet addressed that intersection directly.

Scholars have examined the broader structural development of the Cape Breton coal industry and the mechanisms of national integration, regional dependency, and corporate consolidation within Cape Breton's coal fields. For example, David Frank's study of the rise and fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO) traces the path from the nineteenth-century monopoly held by the General Mining Association (GMA) to the corporate consolidations that established Dominion Coal, Dominion Iron and Steel, and ultimately British Empire Steel Companies, emphasises how this industrial consolidation linked Cape Breton's economy to financial centres in Ontario, Quebec, and internationally in New York and London.[60] Likewise, L.D. McCann's analysis of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company, also known as Scotia, demonstrates how efforts towards industrial integration occurred within an already fragmented regional economy,

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[59] David Camfield, "Settler Colonialism and Labour Studies in Canada," *Labour / Le Travail* 83 (May 6, 2019): 165–66,

[60] Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation."

whose uneven markets and limited capitalisation contributed to its prolonged instability.[61] Earlier works by Ian McKay situate and explore these developments in the mid-nineteenth century, starting from the foundations laid by the GMA, which generated early wage labour and a dependent regional structure well before the BESCO era. Together, this scholarship has produced a detailed account of the coal industry's economic structure, corporate transformations, and place within wider national and imperial circuits of capital.

Alongside these economic shifts, scholars have examined the cultural and ideological terrain of the mining towns in which these consolidated companies operated. Questions include how miners understood themselves and one another, and how they responded to company consolidation and control. David Frank's paper "Company Town/Labour Town" is an analysis of local government administration in the Cape Breton coalfields between 1917 and 1926. Frank asks whether towns such as Glace Bay, New Waterford, and Dominion fit the typology of a company town, a community where a single employer dominates much of social life.[62] Frank argues that this label no longer captured the political reality of the coalfield by the 1920s, as, despite Dominion Coal and Nova Scotia Steel's dominant economic power, their authority was not absolute and was later negotiated with the municipal councils.[63] Frank delineates this new dynamic as a labour town where working-class institutions shaped community life rather than corporate paternalism.[64] Although this new political dynamic did not negate the influence of employers, as their existence depended on the companies, adapting Frank's appellation reframes Cape Breton coal towns as sites of enduring class

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[61] McCann, "Fragmented Integration: The Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company and the Anatomy of an Urban-Industrial Landscape, C. 1912," 139–58.

[62] David Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926," *Histoire Sociale* 14, no. 27 (January 1, 1981).

[63] Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926."

[64] Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926," 179.

conflict where the citizenry constantly negotiated power and control over local government and public life.

Steven Penfold, in "Have You No Manhood In You?," examines the gendered landscape of Cape Breton coal towns during the 1920s strikes. He shows how residents used masculinity and femininity as behavioural ideals through which they organised everyday life.[65] Masculinity or manhood centred on courage and stoicism in the face of danger; a "real man" stood in solidarity with his fellow miners. Boys, through early exposure to pit culture, gradually entered this masculine ideal.[66] Femininity, by contrast, centred on domesticity, household endurance, and support for strike activity. Penfold's analysis contributes to our understanding of the gendered culture of the coalfields, but it also reveals the limits of the existing historiography. Absent here are questions pertaining to racialised subjects; how Black miners inhabited or were excluded from the masculine ideal, or how racialised women fit within the domestic and communal worlds he describes.

Together, these studies have given us a rich historiography of coal, capital, labour militancy, community formation, and gender in Industrial Cape Breton. They explain the structures of exploitation and conflict that shaped mining life with remarkable force and clarity. Yet they do not fully explain how race organised labour, how Black workers moved through the coalfields, or how the figure of the miner came to appear universal while remaining closely bound to whiteness.

Notes on Cape Breton's Underdevelopment

Alongside work focused more narrowly on coal companies and mining communities, a broader historiographical strand has interpreted Cape Breton and Atlantic Canada through the lens of regional underdevelopment and dependency. Cape Breton and the Atlantic region have long been

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[65] Steven Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood In You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926," *Acadiensis* 23, no. 2 (1994): 21–44.

[66] Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood In You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926," 24.

marked by persistent underdevelopment relative to Central Canada, with "high levels of unemployment and net out-migration, a weak manufacturing sector, and substantially lower personal income per person."[67] Cape Breton's historical dependence on staple exports has therefore encouraged historians and political economists to explain the island's development through frameworks attentive to external markets, uneven growth, and the concentration of power beyond the region.

One influential framework is Harold Innis's staple thesis, which understands Canadian regional economies as organised around the extraction of resources for distant markets rather than around diversified local development. In this model, development and underdevelopment were both shaped by external demand and by investments made elsewhere. Applied to Cape Breton, the staples thesis helps explain the island's historic reliance on fish, timber, and coal exports, as well as its dependence on financing and corporate interests centred in London, Toronto and Montreal, and on external markets.[68] These staple industries also produced a series of specialised enclaves around the island that were more integrated into external economies than into one another.[69] Daniel Drache reads the staple approach as a way of understanding how export-led growth could also produce overspecialisation, dependence, and vulnerability to external market fluctuations in frontier economies.[70] The staples tradition thus treats underdevelopment as a condition produced through unequal incorporation into wider commercial and financial networks rather than as a simple lack of development.[71]

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[67] Henry Veltmeyer, "The Underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 10, no. 3 (October 1, 1978): 95.

[68] Stephen J. Hornsby, "Staple Trades, Subsistence Agriculture, and Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Island," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 79, no. 3 (1989): 427.; Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton : A Historical Geography*, 3–7.

[69] Hornsby, "Staple Trades, Subsistence Agriculture, and Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton Island," 430.

[70] Harold Adams Innis, *Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change*, ed. Daniel Drache (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 1995), xviii, xxii.

[71] Innis, *Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change*, xxi.

Within Atlantic Canadian historiography, McCann extends this discussion by focusing on the uneven geography of urban development. He argues that staple production alone did not determine regional growth; rather, the concentration of manufacturing, finance, and business functions in central Canadian cities gave the heartland (Ontario and Quebec) cumulative advantages that restricted urban development in the Maritime periphery or hinterland.[72] Drawing on Innis's notion of the "discrepancy between the centre and the margin," McCann shows that hinterland cities occupied an intermediary position within a wider heartland-hinterland system as they handled staple flows and serviced resource regions, but rarely secured the diversified industrial growth available to central cities.[73] As Bowles and MacPhail note, the staples approach remained a significant reference point in the Canadian political economy because it associated resource dependence with price volatility, reliance on foreign capital, and limited control over economic development.[74]

A more critical formulation of underdevelopment appears in dependency theory, which treats underdevelopment as a structural feature of capitalist accumulation in peripheral regions. Drawing on Marx's concept of the industrial reserve army, Henry Veltmeyer argues that Atlantic Canada became a labour and resource hinterland for Central Canada. From this perspective, Cape Breton's underdevelopment is a structural feature of Canadian capitalism. The regions' underdevelopment is situated within a broader process of historical capital accumulation, in which manufacturing and financial power became consolidated in Ontario and Quebec, while the regions provided raw materials and surplus labour. The same historical processes that made the island an essential contributor to national development through labour and natural resources also fixed it in a peripheral position. Rooted in staple extraction and dependent industrialisation, that position

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[72] L.D. McCann, "Staples and the New Industrialism in the Growth of Post-Confederation Halifax," *Acadiensis* 8, no. 2 (1979): 48–50.

[73] McCann, "Staples and the New Industrialism in the Growth of Post-Confederation Halifax," 49–50.

[74] Paul Bowles and Fiona MacPhail, "Contesting Natural Resource Development in Canada: The Legacies and Limits of the Staples Approach," *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 31, no. 2 (September 1, 2018): 169-170.

produced a distinctive class structure and enduring social divisions.[75] Alvin Finkel similarly describes Cape Breton as a microcosm of the broader mechanisms of capitalist modernity.[76] Capitalist modernity, evident across Canada and globally, has seen a rise in monopolistic capitalist power, accompanied by the dispossession and reconfiguration of social structures along lines of class, race, and ethnicity.

Together, this literature provides a strong account of Cape Breton's structural location within Canadian capitalism, clarifying how staple extraction, external control, and uneven development shaped the region's industrial economy. Yet it says less about how race operated within that political economy: how racial differentiation shaped labour, community formation, and public memory.

Notes on Black life in Cape Breton

Scholarship on Black life in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada has established a substantial body of work on migration, settlement, racial exclusion, community formation, and struggles over citizenship and belonging. Harvey Amani Whitfield argues that Black migration is one of the hallmarks of Atlantic Canadian history and that the history of the African diaspora in the region must be understood through overlapping local, national or continental, and imperial contexts.[77] Whitfield further shows that the historiography of Black life in Atlantic Canada has been shaped, above all, by questions of slavery, migration, freedom, and re-migration. This literature is important because it situates Black communities not as marginal appendages to Nova Scotian history, but as

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[75] Veltmeyer, "The Underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada," 95-100.

[76] Alvin Finkel, "Afterword: Formations and Legacies of Industrial Capitalism," in *Cape Breton in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Parnaby (Athabasca University Press, 2024).

[77] Harvey Amani Whitfield, "The African Diaspora in Atlantic Canada: History, Historians, and Historiography," *Acadiensis* 46, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 213–14, 231-232.

central to the making of the province itself. At the same time, it demonstrates that Black experiences in Nova Scotia have been shaped by both structural exclusion and sustained forms of community endurance. One limitation of the existing literature, however, is that these historiographical streams do not often converge: studies of coal have seldom centred Black workers, while studies of Black life in Nova Scotia and Cape Breton have more often emphasised migration, steelwork, or community formation than coal mining itself. As a result, Black coal miners remain visible only at the edges of both fields.

Scholarship on Black migration to Canada and Nova Scotia provides an important foundation here because it shows that Black workers entered the region through a racialised immigration regime that rendered them simultaneously necessary as labour and suspect as migrants. Agnes Calliste's "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900-1932" demonstrates that a deeply contradictory state logic shaped Black migration to Canada.[78] On the one hand, employers sought labour; on the other, the Canadian state attempted to restrict Black mobility through formal legislation and informal administrative practices that cast Black migrants as undesirable, climatically unfit, or likely to become public charges.[79] Calliste shows that Black workers entered Cape Breton through a racialised immigration regime that already marked them as suspect and contingent subjects; simultaneously desired and rejected and policed through racialised presumptions of morality and suitability. Likewise, James W. St. G Walker's "Diaspora Dynamics: Canadian Immigration Policy and the Caribbean Connection" situates Black migration to Nova Scotia within a longer history of slavery and diasporic connection, showing that both local conditions and wider Atlantic movements shaped the province's Black population.[80] Walker traces

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[78] Agnes Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks From the Caribbean, 1900-1932," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 4 (February 1, 1994): 131

[79] Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks From the Caribbean, 1900-1932," 133.

[80] James W. St.G. Walker, "Diaspora Dynamics: Canadian Immigration Policy and the Caribbean Connection," *Histoire Sociale* 55, no. 114 (November 1, 2022): 249–70.

the province's Caribbean connections back to slavery, notes the presence of enslaved Africans in Cape Breton during the French period, and shows that Black life in Nova Scotia was shaped by systemic discrimination not only in immigration law, but also in schooling, employment, housing, and public culture.[81] Sarah-Jane Mathieu's "*North of the Color Line"* locates Black Canadian history within a transnational geography of migration, labour, and resistance; Mathieu shows how Black migrants moved across and within borders in search of work, safety, and political possibilities, while continuing to confront anti-Black discrimination in Canada as well as the United States.[82] This perspective is especially useful because it underscores that Black workers in the coal and steel industries were part of larger circulations of people and labour across North America.

Within this broader historiography, scholarship on Cape Breton has focused more specifically on the formation of Black communities in relation to industrialisation, migration, and everyday life. Among the first Black people to arrive to work in Industrial Cape Breton were African-Americans. Elizabeth Beaton's "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904" investigates the experiences of skilled African-American men, tracing their recruitment from states such as Alabama and Pennsylvania to work in Sydney's steel industry, showing that even skilled Black workers were relegated to lower-status positions, poor housing, and a hostile racial environment shaped by everyday discrimination and a negative portrayal by the local press.[83] Beaton also notes the fragility of the African-American community, as by 1904, it had largely disappeared, and the archival record offers little evidence to explain why.[84] Although Beaton's study is centred on steel rather than coal, it is important because it establishes the early presence of Black industrial

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[81] Walker, "Diaspora Dynamics: Canadian Immigration Policy and the Caribbean Connection," 255–56.

[82] Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010).

[83] Beaton, "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904." 82-89

[84] Beaton, "An African-American Community in Cape Breton, 1901-1904." 95.

workers in Cape Breton and shows that race structured their everyday experiences from the beginning of the island's industrial era.

Similarly, Claudine Bonner's "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic" examines the migration of Caribbean workers, especially Barbadians, into Whitney Pier between 1900 and 1930; Bonner shows that these migrants were drawn by labour demand in the coal and steel industries but were incorporated into a sharply racist industrial order that concentrated them in the hottest, dirtiest, and most dangerous work, especially in the coke ovens, while also confining many of them to racially marked neighbourhoods such as Cokeville/Coketown.[85] Bonner also outlines the formation of the Whitney Pier community in Sydney and the cultural practices, including religion, food, and sports, that sustained them amid harsh working conditions and racial discrimination. Bonner's contribution is significant because it keeps labour and community formation in view simultaneously, showing that exploitative work, segregated spaces, migration, and the construction of social and cultural worlds through religion, neighbourhood life, and everyday practice shaped Black life in industrial Cape Breton. Joan Weeks's *One God One Aim One Destiny* documents the growth of African Nova Scotian and Caribbean-descended communities in Cape Breton, paying close attention to religion, mutual aid, education, community leadership, and the institutional life of organisations such as the UNIA.[86] Weeks' work is important because it demonstrates that Black life in Cape Breton cannot be reduced to labour supply alone: industrial work formed the material basis of community formation, but those communities were sustained through churches, halls, family networks and their own social worlds. In this sense, Weeks helps illuminate the broader social terrain in which Black miners lived, even when coal mining itself is not the central analytic focus.

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[85] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, C. 1900–1930," 301–24.

[86] Joan Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton* (Cape Breton University Press, 2007).

Notes on Race, Whiteness, and Black Labour

Scholarship on the Cape Breton coal industry, regional underdevelopment, and Black life in Nova Scotia does not, on its own, fully explain how race operated within labour relations or how racial hierarchy shaped the making of working-class identities. To address that question, it is useful to turn to the broader literature on race, whiteness, and Black labour. This scholarship helps clarify that class formation and racial differentiation were often produced together, and that the category of the worker was itself historically shaped through exclusion, hierarchy, and unequal incorporation. While this literature emerges largely from the United States, it nevertheless offers a valuable conceptual and imaginative framework for thinking about how whiteness functioned, the position of Black labour, and how race structured both industrial work and its historical remembrances in places like Nova Scotia.

David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* offers a framework for examining the construction of racial meaning within the dynamics of working-class social relations. Building on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the "public and psychological wage," Roediger argues that whiteness functions not solely as a form of prejudice or identity but as a compensatory social position.[87] This position affords workers a means to assert status, recognition, and a sense of belonging, even under conditions of economic exploitation. In this theoretical perspective, class formation is inextricably linked to race; specifically, white working-class identity is shaped through differentiation from Blackness, thereby constructing the category of the worker not only through labour but also through processes of racial exclusion and hierarchy. Roediger is also attentive to the fact that whiteness did not emerge in a social world neatly divided between free white labour and unfree Black labour. As he notes, "the many gradations of unfreedom among whites" complicated any

[87] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Verso Books, 2007), 12, 137.

simple distinction between an idealised free white worker and an unfree Black labourer.[88] That point is important because it shows that whiteness was constructed within a wider field of labour coercion rather than arising outside class relations.

Roediger's most useful example is derived from his analysis of Irish workers in the antebellum United States, demonstrating whiteness as a socially constructed category with historical origins. In the decades preceding the Civil War, native-born Americans often characterised the Irish as degraded, racially suspect, and not fully assimilated into whiteness. However, this racial instability did not exclude them from the process outlined by Roediger. As Roediger contends, "the making of the Irish worker into a white worker was thus a two-sided process"; Irish immigrants gained acceptance as whites among the broader American populace, while simultaneously asserting their own whiteness and supporting white supremacist ideologies.[89] The case of the Irish worker exemplifies that whiteness was neither merely inherited nor inherently possessed but was constructed through labour relations, political claims, and social struggles concerning inclusion within the category of the worker.

The Irish case exemplifies the complex dynamics that can occur in contexts of shared adversity, illustrating that collective hardship does not inherently foster solidarity among marginalised groups such as Black workers. His account of Irish workers helps clarify that labouring populations could be marginal, exploited, and even racialised, yet still come to claim whiteness as a form of status and compensation. Roediger explicitly warns against presuming that shared oppression automatically results in intergroup identification. His analysis, however, indicates the opposite: groups facing precarious social positions may actively seek to differentiate themselves from Black populations. In the context of Irish immigrants, whiteness acquired particular significance as a means to attain a form of social and political elevation, circumventing degradation

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[88] Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 12-13, 25.

[89] Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 133-34, 137.

without necessarily escaping the underlying conditions of exploitation. Roediger notes that Irish-Americans "treasured their whiteness, as entitling them to both political rights and to jobs," even while voting for pro-slavery candidates and opposing abolition.[90] In this framework, whiteness signifies a claim to civic inclusion, occupational rights, and social legitimacy. The emphasis being that whiteness itself could become one of the social wages through which working-class identity was lived and defended.

In *Black Coal Miners in America,* Ronald Lewis contextualises Black miners within the racial and labour histories of the American coal industry, illustrating how their roles varied across distinct regional formations. Specifically, in the northern coalfields—including the Central Competitive Field of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and western Pennsylvania—coal operators recruited Black workers from the South during strikes and economic downturns.[91] Their integration into the industry became intertwined with white miners' struggles for control over employment, union influence, and the preservation of communities perceived as uniquely white occupational and social spaces. Lewis examines these tensions through case studies of conflicts in locations such as the Hocking Valley, Braidwood, Pana, and Virden, as well as through the examination of exclusionary practices in towns such as LaSalle, Peru, Spring Valley, Herrin, and Carterville, where white communities regarded Black miners as intruders into labour markets and social spheres from which they had historically been excluded.[92]

Lewis shows a different pattern in central Appalachia, particularly southern West Virginia, characterised by the coal operators' implementation of a 'judicious mixture' policy. This strategy entailed recruiting Black, white, and immigrant labour into emergent coalfields with the intent of fragmenting the workforce while sustaining production levels. In these regions, where no single

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[90] Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 134-136.

[91] Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (University Press of Kentucky, 2021), 79–80.

[92] Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*, 79-87.

demographic group held a dominant monopoly over mining labour, Black miners maintained a relatively stable presence in the workforce. They often received equal wages for equivalent work in numerous underground roles and engaged in union activism alongside white and immigrant miners. Nonetheless, segregation continued to influence social organisation, affecting recreation, housing, and public life.[93] Taken together, this scholarship shows that race shaped not only exclusion and discrimination, but the very formation of working-class life and identity. For this thesis, these readings provide a framework for understanding Black coal miners in Cape Breton as workers whose lives were structured by both class exploitation and racial hierarchy.

Research Questions and Approach

From the outset, this project combined archival research with visits to commemorative and museum sites in Cape Breton. In April and July 2025, I conducted research at the Nova Scotia Archives in Halifax, consulting government, corporate, and union records, as well as other relevant holdings. Although these collections were extensive, they yielded almost no systematic documentation of Black miners' work, health, or occupational experiences. Accident records and employment data rarely included racial identifiers, and Black miners did not appear as a distinct or readily traceable category. Across much of this archival record, the figure of the miner appeared as a tacitly universal subject and, in practice, a white one.

In October 2025, I travelled to Cape Breton, where most of the province's mining operations had been concentrated. I visited several commemorative and museum sites, including Colliery Lands Park in New Waterford, the Miners Memorial Park and the Miners' Museum in Glace Bay, and the Whitney Pier Historical Museum in Sydney. Together, these sites present coal and steel as central to Cape Breton's history and identity. At the Miners Museum, I participated in a guided

[93] Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980*, 121, 133, 143-147, 150-152.

tour of a reconstructed underground mine, which offered a more concrete sense of the mining environment and the hazards miners faced. Yet across these sites, Black miners remained largely absent. Although some exhibits acknowledged the diversity of the industrial workforce, the accumulated faces, stories, and commemorative forms through which mining history is narrated continued to exclude Black miners from view.

The UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) Cultural Museum offered an important counterpoint. Located in a former UNIA Hall that had historically served as a social and cultural centre for Black communities in the area, the museum provided crucial confirmation that Black men had, in fact, worked underground. Its holdings included photographs, documents, artefacts, and other materials related to Black life in Cape Breton. The most substantial body of primary material for this thesis came from the Beaton Institute Archives in Cape Breton. After I contacted the archivists, they shared two sets of recordings from the 1970s with me. The first was a group of tapes held by the Miners Museum, described as the "Scott Collection," which consists of 187 cassettes. Archival staff noted that little documentation about the collection had survived, partly because of a fire at the museum in the early 1980s. The tapes appear to have been recorded in 1976–1977 and to include interviews with retiring or retired miners and their wives, although some also contain broadcasts. The second set came from Dr John deRoche's collection and included interviews and transcripts with miners and their wives from the same period. Most recollections concern the period from roughly the 1910s to the 1950s.

Rather than relying primarily on official records and museums as repositories of historical knowledge, I used these oral histories as the principal source base for the project. To identify interviews relevant to Black miners, I used Microsoft Word's transcription feature to generate draft transcripts of each recording and then searched them using keywords such as "coloured," "negro," "Black," "race," "migrant," "immigrant," "Barbados," "West Indies," and "Caribbean." This process yielded 17 interviews that referred to Black miners: 6 with Black miners themselves and 11 with

white miners or community members who discussed Black co-workers or broader racial dynamics. I then read the transcripts while listening carefully to the recordings in order to correct transcription errors and take detailed notes.

Afterwards, I organised the material into three broad thematic categories: race, labour, and social/community life. The category of race brought together accounts of workplace segregation, racialised job allocation, and everyday racism on and around the job. Labour focused on working conditions underground and the risks Black miners faced in the pits. Social and community life gathered material on housing, living conditions, and the racial and social relations that shaped everyday life above ground. For each theme and sub-theme, I compiled statements from Black miners and supplemented them with contextual observations from white miners and other interviewees.

This thesis examines how Black coal miners in Industrial Cape Breton lived, worked, and have been remembered, with particular attention to the material and symbolic conditions that shaped their presence. At its broadest level, it asks how Black miners can be made historically legible within a regional history, archival record, and commemorative landscape that have largely rendered them absent or marginal. Relatedly, it asks how race structured both the organisation of labour and the experience of social life in Cape Breton's coal industry, and how that structuring has informed the representation of Black miners in public memory.

These overarching questions guide the chapters that follow. Chapter II, *Archives, Race, and Visuality,* develops the study's conceptual and methodological framework, focusing on the archive, memory, and visuality. Chapter III, *Life Underground,* reconstructs the occupational experiences of Black miners in the coal mines by examining the work they performed, the risks associated with it, and the ways racial hierarchies shaped job allocation, mobility, and exposure to danger underground. Chapter IV, *Life Above Ground,* turns to the coal towns and explores how Black miners and their families navigated a racially stratified social world, sustained themselves within it, and built networks

of mutual aid, religious and cultural institutions, and forms of community memory. Chapter V draws the argument together by returning to the relationship between labour, race, archive, and public memory in Industrial Cape Breton. Together, these chapters show that Black miners were an important part of the making of Industrial Cape Breton, even as their labour and histories remained marginal within its dominant historical and commemorative narratives.

Chapter II - Archives, Race, and Visuality

On Archival Power and Black Historical Absence

A central methodological problem in conducting this research was the archive's partial nature with respect to histories of racialised subjects, complicating, from the beginning, the reconstruction of Black miners' lives from these fragmentary sources. At the same time, archives do not only erase; they can also preserve traces of the very people they marginalise, even when those traces are partial, scattered, or difficult to classify. The challenge was both quantitative and qualitative: quantitative, in that very few sources exist in the record; qualitative, in that what does exist is mediated by the particular forms through which memory is preserved.

Pierre Nora makes a distinction between memory, that is, *milieux de mémoire*, and history, that is, *lieux de mémoire*.[1] *Milieux de mémoire* are living environments of memory that tie us to the past, those practices, values, and traditions. *Lieux de mémoire* are sites that organise and represent the past. In this case, mining and mining communities are *milieux* in which stories circulate and social relations form. Archives, museums, and other commemorative sites are *lieux* that selectively crystallise some of those memories into legible forms and whose mandate is to preserve the past on the basis that these memories lived through are spontaneous. For Nora, *lieux de mémoire* arise precisely because the environment of spontaneous memory has diminished. This process is what Nora terms the acceleration of history, in which the warmth of tradition consolidates itself through the establishment of *lieux de mémoire*.[2]

The institutions I worked with in Nova Scotia—Nova Scotia Archives, the Beaton Institute Archives, and the Miners Museum—function as *lieux de mémoire* by collecting, organising, and

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[1] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (January 1, 1989): 7–8, 13.

[2] Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire," 7-8.

representing the past. Their coal-related holdings and displays contain extensive documentation of coal and steel, yet offer no systematic trace or account of Black miners as subjects of their own history. At the Nova Scotia archives, for example, government records, royal commission proceedings, company annual records, and union records should, in principle, have recorded Black miners, but do not. The Beaton Institute's oral history tapes occupy a more ambiguous position between *milieux de mémoire* and *lieux de mémoire*. At the moment of recording, they emerge from within living social worlds: miners and their relatives speak from inside the communities and relationships that shaped their experiences. As Linda Shopes argues, oral history interviews must be read in relation to their provenance: who conducted them, when, for what purpose, and under what circumstances.[3] Once archived, these recordings become subject to institutional arrangements for access and preservation. They retain fragments of lived memory, but within structures that mediate what can be found, heard, and historically recognised. For this project, those conditions mattered because the tapes survived with limited documentation, incomplete descriptions, and no indexing by race, requiring substantial manual work to identify interviews relevant to Black miners.

In Derrida's conceptualisation of the arkhēion in *Archive Fever,* the word archive dates back to this term, the dwelling place of the archons, the magistrates who had the right to command through law.[4] The archive was their house: the place where they lived, where documents were kept, and where power was exercised; it was the place from which they claimed hermeneutic power to interpret the law. But for Derrida, the archive is never neutral. It shelters a memory of itself from the memory of its origins in law and authority, which it must repress to present itself as a neutral power, and cannot fully acknowledge this dependence without revealing its impartiality. Archontic power lies in consignation—by consignation, Derrida refers to the power in collecting and

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[3] Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (September 1, 2002): 590.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–2.

categorising heterogeneous material into a legible corpus, unifying any element which stands apart.[5] The apparent self-evidence of what the archives present as such—"look, here is the miner; here is their history"—is produced by prior decisions and its ultimate administration of consignation. The Black miner, whose presence threatens the unity guaranteed by this consignation, disrupts the archive; they must be suppressed to preserve that unity.

In *Silencing the Past*, when discussing the erasure of Sans Souci from the historiography of the Haitian revolution, Trouillot demonstrates that power is a part of historical production itself, writing that "Power is constitutive of the story."[6] It precedes the story and shapes its formation and subsequent interpretation. Archonitic power produces silence. But silences are loquacious. Historical omissions say as much as they do not say. This loquacity results from the operation of power in the inscription of traces, as unequal power dynamics translate into unequal historical power in the record.[7] For Trouillot, presences and absences in sources and archives are not neutral but are created through silencing—"an active and transitive process" through which some histories are preserved while others are marginalised.[8] The archive's function is to prepare and make legible these histories, but in doing so, it sets the narrative frame and selects the stories that matter within it.

Per Cheryl Thompson, Canada has no explicit national archives to preserve the historic materials of Black people.[9] In contrast to Canada's mainstream archival collections, which are predisposed to a repertoire of materials related to individuals that occupy the highest positions within the racial and class hierarchies, Black Canada's archival record consists of scattered collections across the country, each focused on preserving the histories of African Canadians in a particular

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[5] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 3–4.

[6] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 2015), 28.

[7] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 48.

[8] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 48.

[9] Cheryl Thompson, "BLACK CANADA AND WHY THE ARCHIVAL LOGIC OF MEMORY NEEDS REFORM," *Les Ateliers De L'éthique / the Ethics Forum* 14, no. 2 (2019): 77.

locale—many of which are classed as Black History. [10] Canada, as a colonial nation, reflects the selective practices of colonial regimes and what they determine to be kept, as well as the processes behind that determination. Any researcher of the archives must therefore ask: "Why was this item placed here? Is there a larger significance or context that is missing? What does it mean that these items were preserved within the archive?"[11] That question also matters because the archive's partial survival can preserve evidence of Black life even when the archive's own structure makes that evidence hard to see. For if items survive only in this curated and partial form, their very survival is indicative of the historical valuation of those materials and of what they are permitted to signify, and it also reveals, as noted previously, that such presence is built on prior acts of omission, so that what appears in the archive is always overshadowed by what has been left out.

A second important topic Thompson discusses is the archive's classificatory logic. Drawing on image collections at the McCord Museum and the Archives of Ontario, Thompson notes that many surviving images of Black subjects go unnamed—the problem of the archive lies as much in what survives as in how what survives is categorised. Many Black Canadian image collections, as Thompson notes, are searchable only by supplementary metadata—that is, anecdotal data not provided by the source, rather than by a more systematic descriptive regime. In Thompson's case, photographs of Black women are often titled and filed in relation to white families and institutions. Because catalogues are rarely indexed by race or ethnicity, items cannot be retrieved by searching for terms such as African or Black; they either do not appear at all or are returned under a different label. In this sense, the obscure categorisation regime is itself a form of racial negation.

I encountered something similar while searching the Nova Scotia archives for related keywords. A search for "Black Miner", for instance, returned references to black lung or images of dust on the faces of white miners. There is no dedicated collection on Black coal miners or Black

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[10] Thompson, "BLACK CANADA AND WHY THE ARCHIVAL LOGIC OF MEMORY NEEDS REFORM," 78–79, 81.

[11] Thompson, "BLACK CANADA AND WHY THE ARCHIVAL LOGIC OF MEMORY NEEDS REFORM," 82.

steel workers, no consistent way to query catalogues, and no series organised around their work. At the Beaton Institute, the oral history collections were not labelled in racial terms; they were not labelled at all. To locate relevant tapes, I had to undertake manual labour by generating transcripts, running keyword searches, and listening to the recordings. Black labour exists in the record, but the descriptive and classificatory regimes that structure access make it difficult to locate it as such.

On Race and Visuality

A similar methodological challenge concerns accessing visual records of the Black experience, notwithstanding the visual markers attached to the idea of race and racial categories. Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, offers an ontological analysis of Black subjectivity, emphasising that the category of Black is shaped by pre-existing meanings rooted in entrenched racial logic. Under colonial conditions, the corporeal body schema is disrupted and supplanted by what he calls a racial epidermal schema.[12] The former refers to the lived practical grasp of one's own body–the immediate experience of oneself as an embodied agent. The latter is the structure of experience externally imposed and organised around race. As he writes, this schema "does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world-definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world."[13]

To illustrate this point, Fanon recounts his subjective experience of discovering himself as an object among other objects. A child points and shouts, "Look, a Negro!"[14] In that moment, he writes, his "corporeal schema crumbled:" as he realises that his skin has become a surface onto which the Other's fantasies and fears are projected. Fanon remarks that there is also the moment of

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[12] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, 1986), 112.

[13] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

[14] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 111.

being-for-others of which Hegel speaks, that is, the structural fact that any subject exists, in part, as how others see it; yet in a colonised society, this moment is overdetermined by racism so that every ontology is made unattainable for the Black man–that is, no neutral account of Black being is possible that ignores racial relations.[15] "For not only must the Black man be Black; he must be Black in relation to the white man."[16] Blackness is thus constituted from the outset from without, by a racialised gaze emanating from the Other. Fanon shows that the Black subject does not exist as an unmediated *I*. Blackness is lived as an always-already mediated relation, as a position in which attributes and characteristics from history's progression have been assigned in advance. The racial epidermal schema organises how the Black body is seen, named, and felt by others —and, through them, by the subject themselves.

This schema matters for Cape Breton because a comparable racialised gaze sustains the archetype of the miner; across the visual and commemorative landscape, the miner appears as a white masculine figure. This has two linked effects. First, it works inward psychically, as a limit on identification: if the category of miner is silently reserved for whiteness, Black miners are interpellated as Black miners rather than as miners without qualification, their racialisation functioning as a constant modifier that separates their experience from that of the normative figure even while they performed the same work. Second, it works outward as a regime of visuality and historical legibility. Black miners do not simply appear within the mining story as racialised objects; more often, they fail to appear at all, or become visible only in fragmentary, incidental, or mediated ways. When they do emerge, it is often through traces that must be actively sought across oral histories, marginal archival references, commemorative absences, and classificatory systems not designed to render them legible as miners. The problem, then, is not only one of distorted

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[15] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109-110.

[16] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

representation, but also of archival and visual regimes that determine who can appear as a historical subject in the first place.

Vision, Visuality and Absence

Walking through Cape Breton's commemorative landscape, including the Miners' Museum, where I gained a more concrete sense of the conditions miners endured, I became increasingly aware of what these sites did not show. Plaques, photographs, commemorative objects, and the arrangement of museum space do more than display the past; they organise what can be seen, how it can be interpreted, and who can be recognised within the history being told. In this sense, commemoration helps produce a familiar image of the miner and, in doing so, quietly secures that figure as white.

As Elizabeth Kaszynski shows, vision refers to the physiological and neurological act of seeing, while visuality refers to the cultural and rhetorical organisation of what is seen: the imaginative and interpretive work through which meanings and narratives are assembled.[17] This distinction matters because seeing is often treated as if it were transparent knowledge. It is through vision we primarily encounter and interact with the world; we often treat what we see as self-evident and equate seeing with knowing and understanding. As Kaszynski notes, such a collapse of vision into visuality produces an "anemic visuality," one that privileges optical sight at the expense of other ways of knowing and narrows the rhetorical resources available for judgment and response.[18]

This framework is especially useful when thinking about race. Kaszynski argues that race is often identified visually, but also visualised through the ways people imagine and construct racial relationships in the world. As Kaszynski argues through her engagement with Osagie Obasogie, race

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[17] Elizabeth Kaszynski, "'Look, a [Picture]!': Visuality, Race, and What We Do Not See," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 62-63.

[18] Kaszynski, "'Look, a [Picture]!': Visuality, Race, and What We Do Not See," 62.

is produced through a constitutive social process that makes racial difference seem visually obvious even as it masks the conditions of that production.[19] In that sense, race is not merely seen but made meaningful through historically and socially organised ways of seeing and interpreting. That argument is helpful for my reading of Cape Breton's commemorative landscape. Repeated images of white miners, alongside narratives that treat their experience of mining itself, shape the visual and interpretive field through which mining history becomes legible. Under those conditions, the absence or marginal appearance of Black miners can come to seem natural, as though it merely reflects historical reality rather than a prior structure of representation. As Kaszynski notes, images participate in ideological commitments, making some things visible in particular ways while rendering other things unseeable.[20]

Kaszynski's discussion of visibility is especially important here because it frames visibility as a matter of possibility.[21] The problem is not only that Black miners are difficult to locate in Cape Breton's commemorative landscape; it is also that they are not readily made visible as miners in the first place. If visibility concerns whether someone can be seen or imagined in relation to others, then Black miners have often been positioned outside the historical image of the miner that these sites sustain. Reading these sites through Kaszynski therefore shifts the question from whether Black miners are present to how historical visibility is organised. It draws attention to the ways commemoration structures recognition and to the racial limits of the categories through which mining history is known.

The Curatorial Gaze

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[19] Kaszynski, "'Look, a [Picture]!': Visuality, Race, and What We Do Not See," 64-65.

[20] Kaszynski, "'Look, a [Picture]!': Visuality, Race, and What We Do Not See," 66.

[21] Kaszynski, "'Look, a [Picture]!': Visuality, Race, and What We Do Not See," 67.

Curatorial gaze names the racialised visual logic through which archives, museums, plaques, and monuments in Cape Breton organise mining history. The term includes the commemorative work these institutions perform. They preserve selected materials, arrange them into legible narratives, and give those narratives durability in public memory. The same selectiveness that shapes the archives also shapes commemorative and visual representations of mining history. Through these practices, some figures become familiar and central, while others remain marginal or difficult to recover. Just like with the archives, what appears on a museum wall or a panel has already passed through decisions that assign value and historical importance. Since visuality belongs in the province of rhetoric, the gaze cannot be neutral. Ways of seeing always already carry a discourse about who and what matters. We can say that this visible field is never simply given to or perceived by a neutral observer, but is always mediated by the symbolic order—language, norms, and signifiers that render meaning and value to things.[22] In this sense, the gaze names those small moments when that organisation becomes perceptible: when what is absent from, or oddly isolated within, an image unsettles its apparent naturalness and makes the underlying racial order visible, exposing the influence of the symbolic order.[23] In the images that follow, the gaze is most apparent through the recurring absence of Black miners from broad representations of the coal town.

[22] Todd McGowan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Lacan*, *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 2025, 48–49.

[23] McGowan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Lacan*, 116–18.



Figure 4. Billboard-style commemorative panel depicting Dominion Coal Company No. 14 Colliery, New Waterford.

Figure 4 is one of several billboard-style panels installed around New Waterford. It reads "Dominion Coal Company No. 14 Colliery" and includes painted scenes of miners in a railcar, a miner with a horse, and a surface mining structure. Similar panels recur throughout the town, each bearing a different colliery number and condensing the mine and its workers into a single emblem. The panel fixes mining as the town's defining past and gives that past a durable public form. Race remains unnamed, yet the image relies on unmarked whiteness. The colliery stands in for the community, and the community takes shape through white bodies and faces presented as ordinary and representative. Black miners who worked in those pits do not enter this version of the town's past.

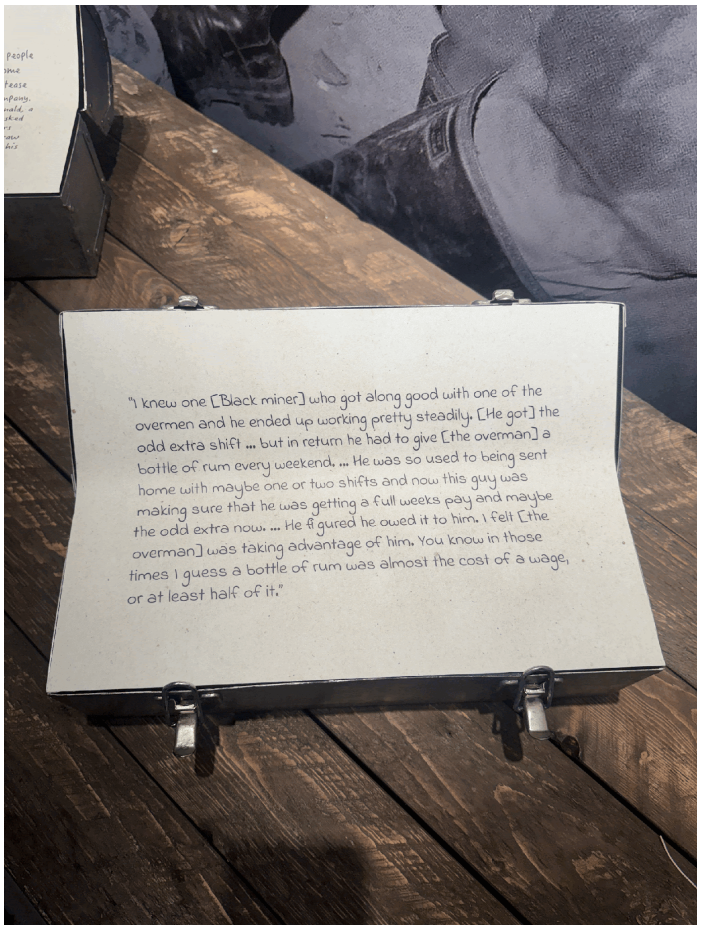

Figure 5. Plaque at the Miners' Museum quoting a miner's account of a Black co-worker, Glace Bay.

Figure 5 appeared in the Miners' Museum. It is a small plaque quoting an unnamed miner who describes a Black co-worker securing steadier work from an overman in exchange for a weekly bottle of rum. Through my own work with the Beaton Institute tapes, I know the voice to be that of Victor Jones, a Black miner who later became a supervisor. His promotion makes him an exception within a labour hierarchy that usually restricted Black miners to the hardest and least secure work, and it shows that Black upward mobility was possible but exceptional rather than typical. The plaque, however, names neither Jones nor the Black co-worker mentioned in the quotation. At the time of my visit, it was the museum's only explicit reference to a Black miner. Even so, the reference stands alone, detached from any fuller account of Black labour in the mines.

Black presence enters the museum's displays as a fragment rather than a sustained part of the historical narrative. The plaque records that presence in a limited way and leaves it outside the dominant figure of the miner, which remains organised around white bodies and stories.

One way this curatorial gaze operates is through framing. Framing organises the relation between the image and the viewer by establishing what can be seen, who appears as representative, and the position from which the scene is to be read. Building on Joan Schwartz's strategy for engaging with historical photographs, this approach treats images not as neutral landscape descriptions but as visual documents whose meaning emerges from the contexts in which they were created, circulated, and viewed.[24] Rather than asking only what a photograph shows, Schwartz develops an approach that attends to framing, captioning, sequencing, and placement within a wider documentary universe as practices that participate in the production of geographical knowledge and regional identity.[25] Lacan's account of the image pushes this insight further at the level of subjectivity. In his terms, "The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture"[26] points to a gap between seeing and mastery. The viewer apprehends the image, but does not stand over it as a sovereign observer. When someone stands before a display, they encounter an arrangement that has already anticipated their gaze and structured their relation to what is seen. The frame thus organises a particular position from which the viewer is asked to see. In Althusser's terms, the frame interpellates its audience and situates them within a specific field of meaning.[27]

Figure 6 shows this clearly. The photograph depicts miners, all of whose visible faces are white. Race is left unnamed, yet the image still organises the mining community through whiteness.

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[24] Joan M. Schwartz, "More Than 'Competent Description of an Intractably Empty Landscape': A Strategy for Critical Engagement With Historical Photographs," *Historical Geography* 31 (2003): 105–12.

[25] Schwartz, "More Than 'Competent Description of an Intractably Empty Landscape': A Strategy for Critical Engagement With Historical Photographs," 107, 123–26.

[26] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (Routledge, 2004), 96.

[27] L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *New Critical Writings in Political Sociology*, 2024, 299–340.

The frame does part of that work by establishing the boundaries of who can appear as the familiar and representative figure of the miner. A white viewer may pass over this arrangement without noticing anything unusual. A Black viewer may register the absence immediately, as the image offers no point of recognition in the scene. Thus, the frame establishes this address by delineating the boundaries of who can plausibly be included in the mining narrative.



Figure 6. Photograph of miners, Miners' Museum, Glace Bay.

Frames are also sites of contest. Changing the commemorative field requires more than adding a few neglected figures to an already settled story. It requires a different frame: one that broadens who counts as a miner, changes what counts as representative evidence, and allows Black

labour and Black life to stand as constitutive of Industrial Cape Breton rather than incidental to it. Black institutions such as the Whitney Pier Historical Museum and the UNIA Cultural Museum already move in this direction by preserving and presenting materials that the dominant commemorative field has left marginal. That makes these institutions not simply repositories of memory, but active correctives to the racial limits of the dominant commemorative field. This thesis also functions as a counter-reframing, assembling archival materials and oral histories to position Black labour and Black life as foundational to Industrial Cape Breton.

On Race and Reason

Understanding the omission of Black miners from mining narratives requires situating Industrial Cape Breton within the broader historical context of race as a structuring logic of modernity. The marginalisation of Black miners in archives, scholarship, and the commemorative economy, as well as their experiences in the coal mines, is rooted in a specific organisation of race. First, Western thought has produced Blackness as a necessary remainder against which universality and reason are defined. Second, race operates through signifying practices that establish some subjects as normative while permanently marking others.

A starting point would be to delineate its logic. Achille Mbembe, in *Critique of Black Reason,* conceptualises "Black Reason" as a structuring force within Western thought: a way of organising knowledge, power, and subjectivity that supports reason, universality, and humanity.[28] Black reason, as he suggests, is at once "forms of knowledge; a model of extraction and depredation; a paradigm of subjection, including the modalities governing its eradication; and, finally, a psycho-oneiric complex."[29] The word *Black*—and by extension *Africa* itself—is first of all a signifier rather than a

[28] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2020, 10.

[29] Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 10.

stable category. What it names and defines is less a fixed essence than a condensation of historically produced meanings coalesced around European fantasies, fears, and projections that have accrued around a racialised figure.[30] This structuration depends on the production of Blackness as its limit, even though race does not exist in any biological sense; nonetheless, it continues to generate real effects through its definition and operation;[31] Blackness marks the boundary of the human.

Mbembe notes that "The racist subject sees the humanity in himself not by accounting for what makes him similar to others but by accounting for what makes him different."[32] Amplified from the scale of the individual subjectivity to that of Western society, the claim to universality rests on the ongoing production of a racial remainder—Blackness, unfit for citizenship and relegated to the periphery of human as defined by law and capital.[33] The term Black describes a figure that, through the mechanisms of racial capitalism, whose body is made available for extraction and extirpation, and whose humanity is conditional.[34] Blackness as the "ghost of modernity"[35] refers to this seemingly paradoxical position: that a subject who was essential to the creation of the modern world is at once a surplus to the category of the human. This position may seem contradictory, but this is precisely Black Reason at work.

The racial logic and epistemic order embedded within the coal mining industry help produce the erasure of Black lives. As previously discussed, the cultural archetype of the miner is presented as raceless but implicitly white, not because Black individuals do not belong to this category, but because their inclusion would challenge the definitions of whiteness and what it means or what it

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[30] Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 30–38, 49–52, 151–53.

[31] Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 32-36.

[32] Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 36.

[33] Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 10-12, 45-48, 86-87, 129-31.

[34] Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 40.

[35] Mbembe, Critique of Black Reason, 129.

meant to be a miner. The correlate is a normalised absence, an expression of the embedded racial reason that decides in advance who may occupy this ostensible universal position and who may be relegated to the status of remainder, as Black people were often excluded from full claims to citizenship and workerhood by both the state and capital.

A further question follows: what does race mean and signify, and how does that operate in society? Race, as Stuart Hall describes, functions like a language rather than a biological essence; it is a sliding signifier whose meanings are produced and reproduced relationally within a signifying field, and whose meanings are maintained by regimes of classification within a given culture.[36] Institutions and subjects adopt these socially constructed meanings as they sediment, thereby reinforcing these classificatory systems and the common sense of difference. The archives, museums, and plaques inherit and reproduce these logics, adopting the socially sanctioned language of who may be represented as a miner. Here, the term *miner* functions as a sliding signifier whose apparent neutrality conceals the work race does in suturing the figure to whiteness; its meaning does not transcend history, but slides. In practice, it denotes a white, masculine subject. Other terms like negro, coloured, or foreigner attach Blackness as an excess or a remainder to this category.

The minutes of the 1925 Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Coal Mining Industry of the Province of Nova Scotia offer an example of how race circulated within the official language of industrial governance.[37] Convened in Sydney during the peak of the BESCO crisis, the Commission received extensive testimony regarding poor living conditions, wage cuts, and the company's refusal to negotiate with miners. As Frank notes, the Commission's reports revealed that BESCO's coal operations remained broadly profitable throughout much of the early 1920s, despite the corporation's claims of losses to justify wage reductions and union repression.[38] Beyond its

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[36] Stuart Hall, "Race, the Floating Signifier," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, 2021, 360-364.

[37] Royal Commission Respecting the Coal Mines of the Province of Nova Scotia, hearing transcripts, 1925, MF 3898, Nova Scotia Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

[38] Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," 16–23.

disclosures about industrial relations, the minutes also document the racial logic that shaped both managerial and state perspectives.

During a discussion regarding the establishment of a new joint plant committee and a modest relief scheme, the general manager of the Sydney steel plant described the challenge of reducing overtime as "one of the little niggers in the woodpile that we have."[39] The Commission's chair reiterated this language, stating, "They always regard this as a nigger, do they?" In this context, the idiom functioned as a racial metaphor for an intractable difficulty within the company's operations. Notably, no Black miners participated in this exchange, nor was their presence in the coal mines under consideration. Rather, the term appears as a floating signifier for trouble, representing an unwanted remainder embedded within an otherwise rational industrial order. That this phrase appears unremarked, and is even repeated by the chair, also illustrates how racialised language could circulate in the very documents that now constitute the official record of industry and provide an illustration of the racial epidermal schema as described by Fanon, a structure in which Blackness is already loaded with meaning, but before any individual Black subject appears.

Race, then, organises the terms through which labour, personhood, and historical significance are understood in the first place. Black miners were present in the collieries, yet the categories through which mining life was recorded and remembered did not easily recognise them as central subjects of that history. Their relative absence from dominant narratives is therefore not incidental. It is bound up with a racial order that shaped visibility, value, and remembrance. This poses a methodological challenge for the present study. Because Black miners rarely appear in official records as a coherent archival subject, their experiences must be reconstructed from fragmentary traces, oral histories, and the silences of institutional and commemorative records. The task is not simply to recover an overlooked presence, but to interpret the very conditions that

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[39] Royal Commission Respecting the Coal Mines of the Province of Nova Scotia, hearing transcripts, 1925, MF 3898, Nova Scotia Archives, Halifax, NS.

rendered that presence difficult to see. The chapters that follow proceed from this premise, reading Black miners' lives through and against a historical record that only partially preserved them. The next chapter turns underground, where that order can be traced in the organisation of work, risk, and everyday life in the pits.

Chapter III - Life Underground

This chapter reconstructs the working lives of Black miners in the Cape Breton coal mines. It argues that although underground mining was dangerous, physically demanding, and economically insecure for all workers, Black miners encountered those conditions through a racially organised labour regime that shaped job allocation, mobility, and risk exposure. Drawing primarily on six oral interviews recorded in the 1970s as part of a broader body of interviews on Cape Breton coal-mining history—including interviews with Melvin Sheppard, Victor Jones, Neal Beaton, William Borne, Mr Batten, and an unidentified Black miner—and supplemented by interviews with white miners and by secondary literature, this chapter shows that Black labour was an important part of the coal industry while being differentially organised and policed along racial lines.

The chapter focuses on underground work and its hazards, as well as the racialised experience of that work. It argues that race structured how class was lived in the mines, treating the mines as both a material workplace and a social space in which race and the realities of industrial labour were experienced together and became mutually reinforcing. Coal mining was an exceedingly hazardous and physically demanding occupation. Across interviews with Black and white miners alike, there is broad agreement on the work's physical demands, the constant risk of injury or death, and its uncertain economic rewards. Yet within this shared environment, Black miners' experiences were shaped by racially segregated collieries, unequal access to shifts and promotions, and their concentration in the hardest, dirtiest, and least secure forms of underground labour.

Three questions guide this chapter. How and in what kinds of work did Black people labour underground? What kinds of risks accompanied that work? And how did racial hierarchies shape job assignments, mobility, and risk exposure? This chapter proceeds in three substantive parts. First, it outlines underground work in Industrial Cape Breton and establishes the shared dangers and exploitative wage and housing system that shaped miners' lives. Second, it examines how Black

miners moved through this common environment within a racially structured allocation of pits, jobs, shifts, promotion, and language. Finally, it turns to accidents, compensation, and the medical bureaucracy as another site where race, risk, and recognition intersect, and where the injuries and deaths of Black miners were rendered only partially visible in the official record.

The Underground Workscape

Before turning to the racial organisation of underground labour, it is necessary to establish the mine as a distinct social and material environment. Thomas Andrews' concept of the workscape is useful here. Andrews defines a workscape as a place shaped through the interplay of human labour and natural processes.[1] Unlike a landscape, which may be viewed as a bounded and relatively static scene, a workscape names a more unstable, shifting, and historically specific set of relationships among land, air, water, bodies, organisms, technology, and culture. It is, in other words, an environment continuously made and remade through work, perception, and struggle.[2]

This concept helps clarify the character of the collieries in Industrial Cape Breton. The mine was not simply a site of extraction, nor merely a physical backdrop to labour. It was a subterranean workscape in which geology, infrastructure, workplace discipline, and everyday practices of survival interacted continually. Coal seams, gases, water, timber, haulage systems, ventilation, and the human body all shaped the pace, organisation, and hazards of underground work. At the same time, miners' own labour transformed this environment: they cut into the coal face, shored up unstable roofs, moved air through the workings, and developed practical knowledge of how to read the signs of danger underground. Yet the underground workscape was not experienced uniformly. In Cape Breton, miners entered a shared environment of labour exploitation, danger, and bodily strain, but

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[1] Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 125.

[2] Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, 125.

they did so on unequal terms. Although Black miners worked within the same hazardous underground world as white and immigrant miners, race shaped how they moved through it. It influenced recruitment, access to particular collieries, the allocation of jobs and shifts, the possibility of promotion, relations with supervisors, and the terms on which injury, grievance, and even presence itself entered the historical record. The mine, therefore, operated as a space where racial hierarchy was reproduced and naturalised through everyday labour relations.

Andrews' framework is especially useful because it highlights the mine as a lived environment rather than a neutral setting. In Cape Breton, however, that environment must also be understood as racialised. The physical dangers of underground work were shared, but exposure to those dangers, and the forms of labour through which miners encountered them, were unevenly distributed. To understand how Black miners mined otherwise, it is necessary first to outline the general labour process underground and the common hazards that shaped miners' working lives. Only then can we see more clearly how race structured experience within that shared workscape.

Boys in the pits

For many miners, entry into this underground workscape began in boyhood. Child labour was prevalent and a structural feature of the industry. Robert McIntosh describes a routine common to coal boys across Nova Scotia:

> The routine of work compelled boys to rise early, make their way wearily to the pithead, and be plunged hundreds of feet underground. In utter darkness, relieved only faintly by their lamps, day after day, for up to twelve hours or longer, boys manipulated ventilation doors, led horses along lengthy and treacherous underground routes, or lifted tons of coal daily, filling wagon after wagon with freshly mined coal as the first step in its removal from the mine.[3]

[3] Robert McIntosh, *Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in Coal Mines* (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2000), 9.

Many of these boys began as trappers, opening ventilation doors for approaching carts or miners and closing them afterwards.[4] The work was monotonous and psychologically demanding. As DeMont notes, the trapper boy's job was not especially strenuous, but "the stress of waiting for hour after hour alone in the dark" shaped the experience of the work.[5] Others later moved into driving or loading as they grew older and physically stronger.

Economic necessity often pushed boys into the pits. During my tour of the Miners' Museum, the guide explained that boys often entered the mines to supplement household income and, in some cases, to replace fathers who could no longer work due to illness or injury. Yet, entry into the mines also marked a passage into adulthood. As Penfold argues, the work culture of the mine socialised boys into collier masculinity through a process of "pit-hardening" that emphasised toughness, fatalism, and manhood.[6] For some boys, entering the mine also marked a degree of independence. As John DeMont notes, drawing on Ian McKay, boys sometimes understood mine work as "a declaration of independence," whether by lying about their age or signing on without their parents' knowledge.[7]

The oral histories confirm this pattern of child labour. Donald Corbett recalled beginning work in 1914 at age fourteen as a trapper in No. 1A, earning ninety cents a day for ten hours; his job was to open the door, let the horse and tubs through, then close it again.[8] Archie Gould started even earlier, at twelve, as a trapper boy in No. 2. He earned $2.80 a day, signed on without parental permission, and later moved into driving and loading in search of a "man's wage."[9] Melvin Sheppard

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[4] John Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives it Ruled* (Doubleday Canada, 2009). 145.

[5] Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 145.

[6] Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood In You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926," 24.

[7] Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 141-142.

[8] Interview with Donald Corbett, T-4645. John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[9] Interview with Archie Gould, T-4652. John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

likewise entered the mines at a young age. He began work in No. 4 Caledonia in 1919 at age fifteen as a trapper, earned $1.78 a day, and spent two years on the doors before moving into driving.[10]

These accounts place child labour at the centre of the mining experience. Companies benefited from a labour force that could be paid less than adult men and trained early into the discipline of pit work. As DeMont notes, in 1880 the average boy working in a Nova Scotia colliery earned only about half of what an adult labourer made, and by 1920 a boy in a Sydney Mines mine still earned only 60 to 70 per cent of a man's wage.[11] By 1908, moreover, 36 per cent of Nova Scotia mineworkers were under the age of twenty and 67 per cent were under thirty, a demographic pattern that underlines how heavily the industry depended on youthful labour.[12] The coal industry thus drew cheap labour from working-class households while embedding boys early in a system that joined economic necessity to bodily risk.

The Pits

The layout of the pit and the rhythm of the working day varied from mine to mine, but collieries across Industrial Cape Breton shared a common set of underground conditions. In many pits, miners worked in cramped spaces. Neal Beaton recalled labouring in sections only six to seven feet wide and in seams five to six feet deep.[13] He began mining at sixteen in Dominion No. 1, where he worked as a timberman, erecting wooden supports beneath the roof. The work was physically demanding, especially for a young boy. Timbermen carried a heavy responsibility: if they misjudged

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[10] Interview with Melvin Sheppard, T-4709, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[11] Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 142-143.

[12] Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 143.

[13] Interview with Neal Beaton, T-4639, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

the ground or the weight of the overlying strata, the supports could collapse. Beaton recalled one such collapse that killed two men and injured his foot with falling stone.[14] A white miner, Steve MacCormack, described timbering as "dead work."[15] By this, he meant unpaid work. Because miners were paid by tonnage rather than by the hour, time spent securing the roof did not directly generate wages. As Andrews observes in the case of Colorado, tonnage systems classified roof support as "dead work," forcing miners to weigh safety against earnings constantly.[16] The work remained essential, but the company compensated it poorly and left the miner to bear the consequences. William Borne, who was also injured by falling stone, put the matter plainly: "The mines are never safe. You have to make it safe for yourself."[17] Other miners echoed the same view. Companies shifted responsibility for safety onto workers, reducing inspection and support costs while limiting their own accountability when accidents occurred. Danger saturated underground life. The interviews are filled with accounts of falling roofs and coal, bumps, and explosions caused by the buildup of gases and coal dust in the tunnels.

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[14] Interview with Beaton, T-4639.

[15] Interview with Batten and Steve MacCormack, T-4637, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[16] Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War,* 138–39.

[17] Interview with William Borne, T-4642, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

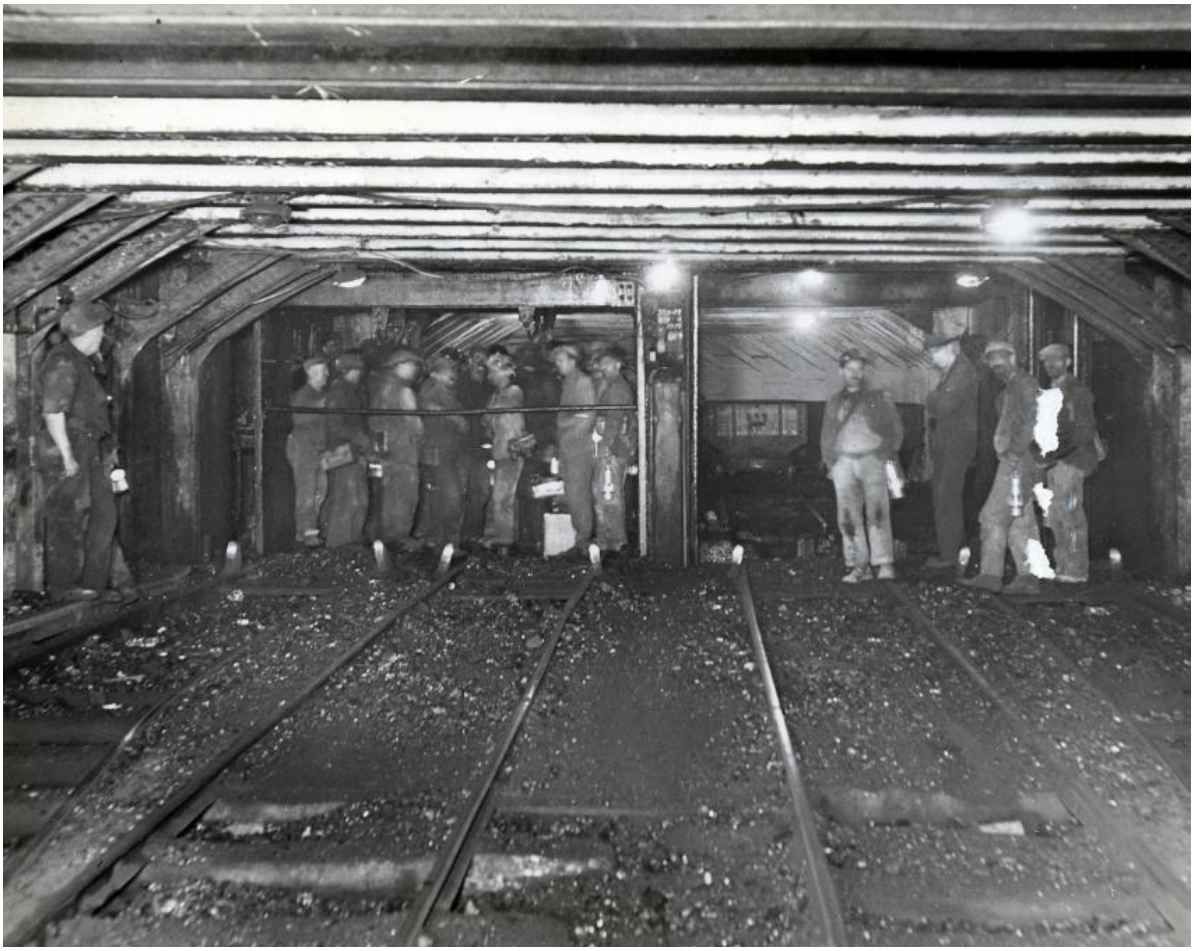

Figure 7. *Men Descending Shaft*, photograph, 20th century, IB Colliery, Glace Bay, N.S., CA BI 77-699-833, Beaton Institute Archives, Cape Breton University. https://beatoninstitute.com/men-descending-shaft

Companies also pursued profit through wage controls and labour exploitation. The tonnage system was central to this process. Melvin Sheppard, a Black miner, recalled that in 1928 he earned forty-eight cents per ton, later raised to seventy-four cents, and that loading ten tons in a day counted as good production.[18] Yet miners received no pay for the time spent travelling to and from the pit, even when that journey was considerable, nor for timbering and other work required to make the workplace safe. Their wages were further reduced through deductions. As Sheppard and others recalled, companies subtracted rent, bills, groceries, and other charges before issuing the

[18] Interview with Sheppard, T-4709.

remainder. Workers knew this system as the check-off. Some men "never drew a cent" because what they owed the company for food and housing exceeded what they earned.[19]

Non-human labour also formed part of the underground workscape. Before mechanised haulage became widespread, horses and ponies pulled coal boxes along mine paths. Newton notes that many of these animals spent most of their lives underground, emerging only rarely, if at all; they worked long shifts in dark, damp, and dusty conditions, and their health and behaviour could significantly affect production: an aggressive horse could endanger its driver and cause serious harm, while a nervous horse would require expensive training.[20] Several interviewees worked as horse drivers. William Borne began as a horse driver at the Hub pit.[21] Steve MacCormack also drove horses and recalled that they remained underground until they died; the mines maintained underground stables and assigned men to care for them.[22] Melvin Sheppard remembered the affection he felt for the horses he drove, recalling that he treated them kindly and spoke to them constantly.[23] Another miner, J.C. Nemis, remembered his first job driving a pony named Bimbo at No. 14. The pony worked two shifts, one with him during the day and another with a different driver at night.[24]

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[19] Interview with Sheppard, T-4709.

[20] David Newton, *Where Coal Is King: The Story of the Cape Breton Miners' Museum* (Cape Breton Miners' Foundation, 1992), 44.

[21] Interview with Borne, T-4642.

[22] Batten and MacCormack, T-4637.

[23] Interview with Sheppard, T-4709.

[24] Interview with J.C. Nemis, T-4692, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.



Figure 8. A *Black Miner with Horse*, photograph on display, Miners' Museum, Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, photographed by the author, October 2025. This was the only image of a Black miner I encountered in any of the museum displays I visited.

Mechanisation in the 1940s and 1950s revealed that horses, like miners, were subject to the changing demands of industrial labour. For decades, they had remained integral to production, but new technologies quickly rendered them obsolete.[25] The oral histories portray underground life as a concentrated expression of industrial capitalism in a peripheral region: intense physical labour in cramped and dangerous conditions; early entry into the workforce; wage systems that shifted risk onto workers; and a housing and credit regime that extended company authority beyond the pit and into domestic life. In these respects, Black miners shared many of the same conditions and dangers

[25] Newton, *Where Coal Is King: The Story of the Cape Breton Miners' Museum*, 45–46.

as their white and immigrant co-workers. Yet that shared brutality did not produce a uniform experience underground. As the following sections show, race shaped the organisation of work by pit, by occupation, and by access to advancement, thereby structuring the particular experience of being a Black miner in Industrial Cape Breton.

Mining Otherwise

Black miners worked in an underground environment in which danger was widely shared, but work and opportunity were not. Race shaped the distribution of burdens and possibilities through the segregation of collieries, the allocation of jobs and shifts, and the restriction of mobility. The interviews most often associate Black miners with No. 2 Colliery in Glace Bay, although men moved between pits as work required. Other collieries also carried distinct ethnic associations. Interviewees linked Poles to No. 4 (Caledonia), while Italians were associated with mines in Dominion. In practice, Caledonia appears in these accounts as an effectively white mine. Melvin Sheppard, who began there as a trapper boy in 1919, stated plainly: "They'd never let a coloured fellow work in Caledonia. They worked in No. 2. The manager would not hire them."[26] Bill Dillon, a white miner, confirmed this pattern and named Tom or Jack Casey as the manager who refused to employ Black men at No. 4.[27] Another white interviewee, discussing No. 4, recalled his father mentioning two Black miners, Eric Jackson and George Desmond, and noted that Black miners were generally limited to employment in No. 2 and Sterling.[28]

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[26] Interview with Sheppard, T-4709.

[27] Interview with Bill Dillon, T-4648, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[28] Interview, T-4784, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

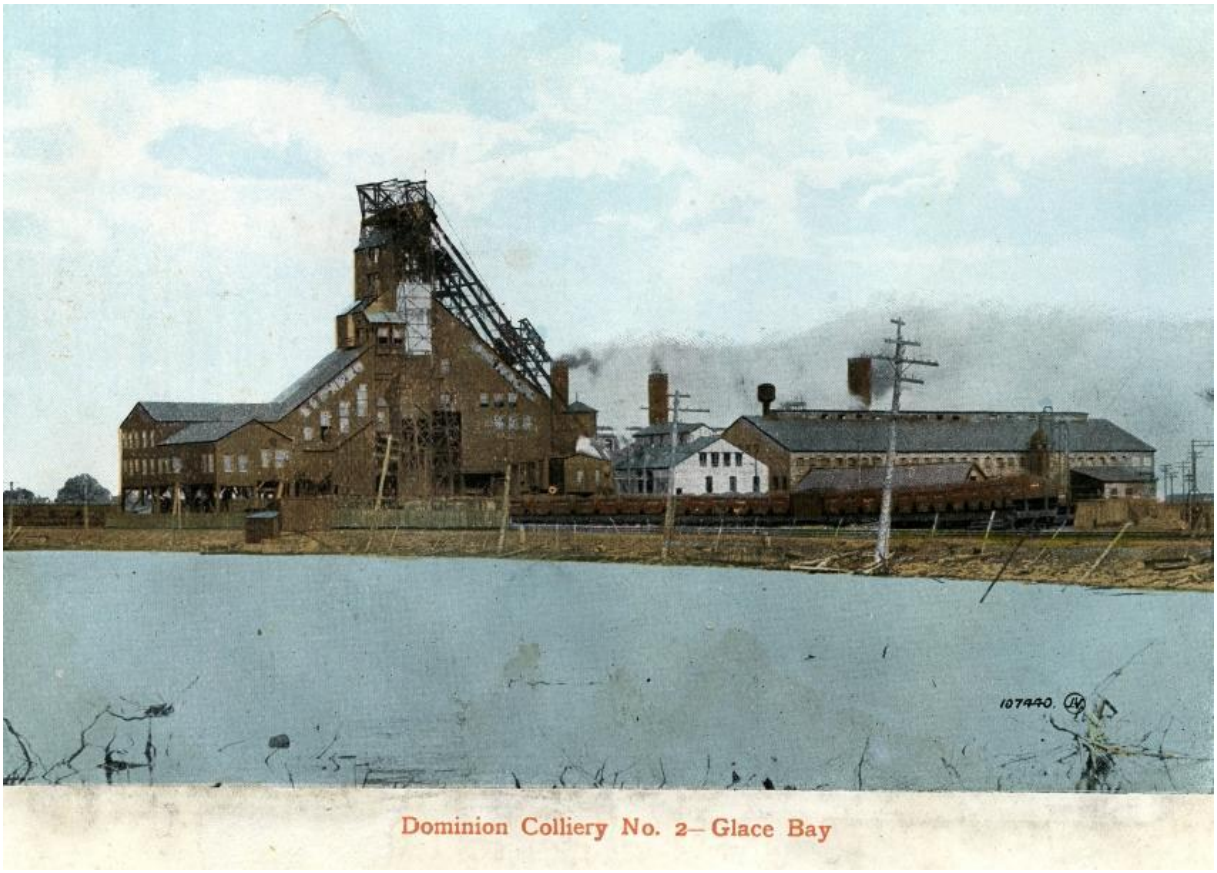

Figure 9. Dominion Colliery No. 2, Glace Bay, photograph, 1912, from Souvenir of Cape Breton, CA BI 77-1250-1384, Beaton Institute Archives, Cape Breton University. https://beatoninstitute.com/dominion-colliery-no-2-glace-bay

Miners often gravitated toward districts and collieries where they found familiar languages, customs, and co-workers. Several white interviewees remarked that immigrant groups tended to stick together. Archie Gould, for example, remembered that No. 2 included Polish, Italian and Russian miners, many of whom spoke broken English but were, in his words, "all good men," and that "local men got along with immigrants" even as they often lived and socialised among their own.[29] Yet Black miners faced more than ethnic clustering. They also confronted explicit managerial exclusion from certain pits. These testimonies, therefore, suggest a crucial distinction: while some ethnic concentration may have emerged from migrant networks and shared experience, Black miners were also channelled by discriminatory hiring practices. The pit system thus reproduced a racial geography

[29] Interview with Gould, T-4652

underground. Black miners were concentrated in particular collieries and seams and, as Chapter IV shows, in adjacent Black neighbourhoods above ground.

Race also shaped job assignments and the distribution of what miners called "dirty work." Victor Jones, whose father migrated from Barbados and who later rose to a supervisory position in the mines, recalled that Black men and certain immigrant groups were routinely directed into the hardest and least desirable forms of labour. He estimated that "about ninety-nine per cent" of Black men worked in coal and steel and that many performed labour-intensive jobs such as loading or shovelling coal.[30] Alongside Italians and Poles, Black miners were assigned the dirtiest work and were often the last men called for shifts. Jones remembered waiting for hours only to be told, "That's it, nothing for you tonight, send them home."[31]

White interviewees described a similar division of labour from another angle. Donald Corbett recalled that local Cape Bretonians disliked loading coal and preferred other work; loaders were often immigrant workers, including Italians, Greeks, Ukrainians, and others marked as outsiders.[32] Another miner similarly remembered that "immigrants were brought in as loaders" while "native Cape Bretonians would tend to avoid loading and pick machine runners."[33] William Borne's work history shows how this pattern operated in Black miners' lives. After arriving from Barbados in 1914, he worked as a horse driver, box-pusher, and loader in several collieries, jobs that combined heavy physical exertion with low status and high exposure to falls of stone and other hazards.[34] Another Black miner from Barbados likewise recalled spending years loading and timbering underground in No. 14, No. 15, and No. 16 before moving into other forms of heavy labour in the

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[30] Interview with Victor Jones, T-5379, Miners Museum Tapes, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[31] Interview with Victor Jones, T-5381, Miners Museum Tapes, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[32] Interview with Donald Corbett, T-4645.

[33] Interview, T-4784.

[34] Interview with Borne, T-4642

steel and brick plants.[35] These patterns of allocation were no doubt shaped by management decisions and local attitudes and preferences, which mapped onto existing ideas about race, nationality, and suitability regarding immigrant and Black bodies. Jones noted that migrant groups were treated very poorly not only by the company but also by the police.[36] Yet Black miners occupied a different position within this hierarchy. Italians, Poles, and other white ethnic groups could, over time, move across ethnic boundaries through language acquisition, intermarriage, or changes of name and status. Black miners could not. Whatever their length of residence, skill, or work record, racialisation continued to mark them.

Advancement within the professional hierarchy was notably restricted for Black individuals, at least in the early years. Jones, who later became the first Black supervisor in his department, recalled that as a younger man, he viewed some positions as effectively closed to him. He wanted to become an area supervisor, but he believed his race made that impossible. When management eventually promoted him after dismissing a white supervisor, the decision surprised him. He wondered how the men would respond, especially since they had just seen a white supervisor fired. Jones recalled that the manager reassured him that the dismissal of the former supervisor had no bearing on Jones's fitness for the job. Even so, the promotion brought new pressure. Jones remembered feeling that he had to serve as a model, and managers repeatedly introduced him as the Black first-line or production supervisor.[37] However, Jones' advancement marked the exceptional and conspicuous character of his promotion within a hierarchy that had long restricted Black mobility.

Language also carried and normalised racial hierarchy underground and above ground. Victor Jones recalled that when miners encountered a hard, flint-like stone in the coal, many white

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[35] Interview T-5337, Miners Museum Tapes, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[36] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

[37] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

workers did not use geological terms such as siderite or stone intrusion; instead, they called it "niggerhead" or "Black ground."[38] He repeatedly corrected them and insisted on the proper terminology. The naming matters. It shows how Blackness itself became a shorthand for obstruction, hardness, or trouble. Similar associations circulated above ground. Jones cited a 3 September 1918 report in the *Sydney Daily News* advising, "If you want to down a Negro, don't hit him in the head," a line that drew on and reproduced the racist trope of the Black body as exceptionally hard-headed and resistant.[39] Such expressions normalised associations of Blackness with excess and obstinacy even when no Black person was present, and mining communities repeated and reinforced them continually.

Other memories reveal how race remained legible even when miners spoke in broader class terms. In Dan J. McDonald's reminiscences, the treatment of miners by the coal operators was explicitly compared to "how coloured people were treated in the South," suggesting that he understood company power through a racial analogy as well as a class one.[40] In the same recollection, however, McDonald remembered the first Black man he had ever seen not through insult but through an act of quiet generosity: during the 1909 strike, a Black worker came to his family's door, placed ten dollars in his mother's hand, and asked her to tell no one.[41] The comparison to the American South, offered unsolicited by a white miner, underlines how visible racial hierarchy was in the local culture.

At the same time, many interviewees spoke in the language of solidarity. They often described underground relations as cooperative and even harmonious, stressing that foreigners were good workers and good fellows. These recollections reflect the camaraderie that pit work could

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[38] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

[39] Interview with Jones, T-5381.

[40] Interview with Dan J. McDonald, T-4787, John DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[41] Interview with McDonald, T-4787.

produce. Miners depended on one another in confined, dangerous environments, and that dependence often fostered habits of practical cooperation. Steve MacCormick, for example, described Poles and other foreigners as "good workers" who were "good fellows" underground.[42] William Borne remarked that men got along pretty well underground, and Jones recalled that some of his white co-workers confided personal problems to him and later nicknamed him "Dad" after he became a supervisor.[43] Yet these accounts of fellowship also reveal their own limits. When placed alongside Black miners' accounts of exclusion from certain pits, assignment to the hardest and dirtiest work, slower promotion, and routine racial language, they point to a distinction between interpersonal cooperation and structural equality. Miners may have maintained solidarity within particular shifts or workspaces, but companies still organised hiring, task allocation, and promotion through racial hierarchy. The language of camaraderie, therefore, should not be mistaken for the absence of racism. Rather, it shows how everyday cooperation coexisted with durable patterns of exclusion.

These tensions also shaped miners' experiences of labour conflict. By the mid-1920s, years of corporate consolidation and financial manipulation had brought the Cape Breton collieries to a breaking point. The creation of the British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO) in 1921, through the amalgamation of Dominion Coal, Dominion Iron and Steel, and the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company, tightened metropolitan financial control over Cape Breton's coal and steel industries while saddling the new holding company with an inflated capital structure.[44] BESCO required profits far beyond what the postwar coal market could sustain, and when those profits failed to materialise, its directors repeatedly turned to wage cuts and speed-ups. As David Frank argues, this chronic

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[42] Interview with Batten and MacCormick, T-4637.

[43] Interview with Borne, T-4642; Interview with Jones, T-5379.

[44] Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," 16–23.

financial instability and the corporation's aggressive labour policy made the 1920s, and especially 1925, a high point of class conflict in Industrial Cape Breton.[45]

That conflict culminated in the 1925 district-wide coal miners' strike. In oral memory, the year appears as a season of hunger, fear, and confrontation. Interviewees repeatedly answered the question "What happened in 1925?" with stories of company police, soldiers, raids, and retaliatory attacks on company property. The Battens, a Black mining family, remembered the strike from Glace Bay. Mrs Batten, confined to bed with a baby while her husband, Isaac, tried to keep house, recalled being "terrified" as crowds raided the company store, throwing goods around and tying shoes together.[46] In New Waterford, Neal Beaton, who arrived from Newfoundland during the strike, remembered the shooting death of William Davis by company police and reflected that the men "should have accepted" BESCO's offer because "it was not going to get any good"; in his telling, the company ultimately "won" and the strike "was never won proper."[47] William Borne likewise recalled taking part in the strike, being in Lingan fishing for work when Davis was shot, and seeing women confront the police afterwards.[48] Melvin Sheppard remembered soldiers stationed throughout the coalfield, searchlights sweeping the pit yards at night, and their movement limited to company property.[49] He also described miners taunting the soldiers and one fight at the pit gate in which a miner seized a soldier "by the neck" and "drove him down the corner."

For Black miners, these events unfolded within a landscape already structured by racial hierarchy. They endured the same wage cuts, irregular work, and repressive policing as their white and immigrant co-workers, but from positions shaped by discriminatory job allocation, housing

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[45] Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," 24-27.

[46] Interview with Batten and MacCormick, T-4637.

[47] Interview with Beaton, T-4639.

[48] Interview with Borne, T-4642.

[49] Interview with Sheppard, T-4709.

segregation, and unequal access to union representation. The 1925 strike thus condensed not only the structural tensions of BESCO's dependent industrial capitalism, but also the racial ordering of labour that determined who was recruited, where they worked, and how far their suffering and resistance would be remembered.

Accidents, Bureaucracy, Compensation and Recognition

Coal mining in Nova Scotia was, by any measure, an exceptionally dangerous occupation. Donald MacLeod's study of Nova Scotian collieries from 1873 to 1910 shows that these mines had among the highest death rates in North America and were the site of several of the continent's most severe disasters.[50] Although the province expanded mine regulation and inspection regimes in the late nineteenth century, MacLeod argues that miners themselves drove many of the most significant safety reforms and that those reforms remained partial and uneven in practice.[51] As noted in a letter to the *Halifax Herald*, every miner understood that safety depended much more on the workers than on the officials of the mines[52] and the oral histories, recorded half a century later, support this view and that the everyday workscape remained perilous. Accidents formed a persistent part of underground life, and the systems that compensated, recorded, and remembered injury and death reveal how race and class shaped whose suffering received recognition.

Interviewees recalled a wide range of incidents, from routine stone falls to major crashes. Donald Corbett, for example, remembered a 1917 accident in which his foot was crushed, forcing him off work for five or six weeks without compensation. In 1929, after losing two fingers while

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[50] Donald MacLeod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Workplace Control: The Nova Scotian Experience, 1873 to 1910," *Historical Papers* 18, no. 1 (April 26, 2006): 226–27.

[51] MacLeod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Workplace Control: The Nova Scotian Experience, 1873 to 1910," 244–48.

[52] MacLeod, "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Workplace Control: The Nova Scotian Experience, 1873 to 1910," 245.

driving, he received $12.69 a week in compensation.[53] Bill Dillon likewise recalled his first injury, when a fall trapped him and left him unable to work for five months with a back injury; for that accident, he received $16 a week in compensation.[54] Dillon also remembered fatal accidents, including a motor crash that killed two men underground. These testimonies suggest that compensation was inconsistent and unreliable. Officials granted it in some cases, withheld or withdrew it in others, and rarely set it at an adequate level.

Miners repeatedly insisted that official safety measures did not match actual underground conditions. "Safety is what you made it yourself," Corbett remarked, pointing to lax company inspections and to the expectation that workers would secure their own conditions of labour.[55] Neal Beaton similarly recalled transporting heavy timbers to the coal face and stressed that if a miner failed to secure his own roof, "you were the one who got buried."[56] He further observes that occasional inspections did not mitigate what he describes as hazardous conditions, including frequent bad roofs and cave-ins. In his view, some places were so unsafe that he would not have sent another man into them.[57] These recollections suggest that the most common and feared hazards were not always the spectacular explosions that dominate public memory, but rather the ordinary, repeated dangers of falling stone. In Donkin, Lem Skeete recalled that "it was a common thing for men to go to work and to hear that someone got crushed under a fall of stone."[58] In Glace Bay, Elmena Vaughn remembered that her father, a Barbadian engineer who could not secure engineering work and instead loaded coal in No. 2, died in a fall of stone around 1920.[59]

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[53] Interview with Corbett, T-4645.

[54] Interview with Dillon, T-4648.

[55] Interview with Corbett, T-4645.

[56] Interview with Beaton, T-4639.

[57] Interview with Beaton, T-4639.

[58] Joan Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton* (Cape Breton University Press, 2007), 60.

[59] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 54.

Black and immigrant miners appear in these stories both as victims of the same hazards and as disproportionately exposed to the most dangerous work. Victor Jones recalled that Black workers, Poles, and Italians were routinely assigned the "dirtiest jobs."[60] William Jones likewise remembered that, in earlier years, mostly the Black people got the dirty jobs, even when some West Indians arrived with trades they could not use.[61] In one explosion in the early 1950s, Steve MacCormick remembered about seven people being killed, including "two coloured chaps."[62] Jimmy Kennedy similarly recalled a deadly explosion on the south side of No. 20 that killed several men, including Black miners from the Desmond family, along with a horse.[63] Ernest Meyer, a Belgian migrant miner, was buried underground three times.[64] In 1940, doctors diagnosed him with silicosis and later arthritis, yet he received no compensation for those conditions. After one burial accident, he drew only $13 a week. When he told officials he was not improving, they told him they had already overpaid him, but he refused to return the money.[65]

Victor Jones also recalled a serious injury of his own. While moving an electric drive with a tugger and snatch block, he saw a sudden flash and heard a bang beside his head; blood ran down his face, and he later lost sight in one eye.[66] After five months of treatment and recovery in Halifax, he returned underground wearing safety glasses. Those glasses later saved him from another injury when a hydraulic hose burst and struck his face, knocking them off. In another interview, Jones recounted an explosion involving the Desmond brothers, Bill and Herb, and a man named Charles Blackman. Bill Desmond, he remembered, died immediately in the mine. Herb Desmond was badly

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[60] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

[61] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 96.

[62] Interview with Batten and MacCormick, T-4637.

[63] Interview with Jimmy Kennedy, T-4656, DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[64] Interview with Ernest Meyer, T-4686, DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[65] Interview with Meyer, T-4686.

[66] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

burned—"like a piece of meat," as Jones's father described him at the funeral home—though he lived for a time after the blast. Blackman, who had been moved into that section from another, crawled out on his hands and knees through smoke and dust, and Jones remembered that he "cried for a week" after seeing what had happened to his co-workers.[67] Jones also recalled the death of Roy King's father, who was found face down in the last box of a man-rake, a train of mine cars used to transport workers underground, while working alone at the rear.[68] A live trolley line ran overhead, and the men believed he had struck it with his head and been electrocuted, although the company recorded the death as a heart attack. For those who had worked with him, the danger was obvious.[69]

The effects of accidents and deaths did not end at the moment of impact. They opened into a bureaucratic afterlife in which miners and their families dealt with doctors, company officials, compensation boards, and, eventually, commemorative forms. William Borne recalled that a falling stone had injured his foot in the mine.[70] A doctor put his foot in plaster, and Borne initially received compensation, but the payments later stopped. He also recalled a gas explosion and noted that, after an accident, a miner required both a certificate and a medical examination before returning to work.[71] The unnamed Black miner (interview T-5337) described the longer-term effects of coal dust on his health. He suffered breathing difficulties and later learned that he had black lung. During the interview, he was told of a hearing in Sydney that month on pneumoconiosis, and he replied that such a hearing should have been held in Glace Bay or New Waterford, where miners actually lived. He went on to describe the Halifax bureaucracy as so confusing that he never completed the medical examination process. He also learned that, because he had not served overseas, he did not qualify for

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[67] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 93; Interview with Jones, T-5380.

[68] Interview with Jones, T-5380, Miners Museum Tapes, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS

[69] Interview with Jones, T-5380.

[70] Interview with Borne, T-4642.

[71] Interview with Borne, T-4642.

a veterans' pension even though the army had discharged him on medical grounds. In old age, he and his wife survived on a small hospital pension from his second job and on old-age benefits while paying rent and fuel costs in a leaking, drafty house.[72]

Elmena Vaughn's memory of her mother's survival after her father's death points to the same pattern. The company paid some compensation, but it did not support a young widow and child on its own. Her mother "got compensation," Vaughn recalled, but she also "took boarders" and sold West Indian hot sauce. "The hot sauce wasn't much for that," she added, making clear that the household survived only by combining compensation with informal income-generating work.[73] For Black mining families in Cape Breton, even receiving compensation offered only one thin strand in a broader web of financial survival.

Beyond Cape Breton, Black mining families faced similar combinations of danger, inadequate compensation, and partial remembrance. Pearleen Oliver, a major Black community and civil rights leader in Nova Scotia, recalled that her father, a Black miner at the Allan Mines in New Glasgow, was killed by a fall of coal when she was four: "He was digging coal, and I think the coal came and crushed him."[74] Her widowed mother survived on a small company pension and on hens, ducks, geese, and a garden, and she received even that pension only after a doctor recognised that she was "the wife of this miner that was killed" and intervened with the company. Decades later, Oliver's daughter-in-law checked the names on the local miners' monument and reported, "You know his name is not there." Oliver responded: "You know, his name is not there. But this monument is recent. Maybe, they just have the big explosions."[75] Her recollection captures the

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[72] Interview T-5337.

[73] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 58.

[74] Nova Scotia Women's Oral History Project, interview with Pearleen Oliver by Marjory Whitelaw, Summer 1992, Sound 1995-009, transcript, Mf 420-01, Nova Scotia Archives, Halifax, NS.

[75] Pearleen Oliver interview by Marjory Whitelaw, Nova Scotia Archives.

selective logic of memorialisation: monuments often honoured disaster in the abstract while overlooking the dispersed and ordinary deaths that marked mining life.

Collectively, these accounts indicate that accidents, disease, compensation, and memorialisation served as mechanisms through which the racial and class hierarchies of industrial Nova Scotia were both reinforced and, at times, challenged. Black miners and their families faced the same hazardous work environments and unstable safety systems as other workers, but with reduced access to alternative employment, more precarious claims to company and state support, and less representation within the material and symbolic frameworks that determined whose suffering was acknowledged.

To mine underground while Black meant occupying particular spaces, performing the hardest and least desirable labour, waiting longest for shifts, and often standing closest to injury while remaining furthest from recognition. The much-invoked solidarity of coal miners was therefore real but limited. It existed alongside a racial order that shaped work, danger, compensation, and remembrance. The next chapter, Life Above Ground, examines how that same racial logic extended into everyday life in the coal towns and how Black families built institutions, relationships, and survival strategies within and against it.

Chapter IV - Life Above Ground

Chapter III, *Life Underground*, examines how racial structures influence class experiences within the mining industry. It demonstrates that Black miners, while subject to the same inherent dangers of underground labour as all workers, were disproportionately relegated to the dirtiest, most hazardous, and insecure positions. This chapter shifts the focus to the coal towns of Industrial Cape Breton, analysing how racial and class relations were constructed and experienced within the community's social framework. It posits that, despite the shared conditions of dependency, economic insecurity, and labour hardship characteristic of company towns, Black miners and their families encountered these conditions through a racially structured social order. This order fundamentally shaped aspects of housing, mobility, policing, and access to public life, thereby organising social relations above ground in ways that differentiated them from the broader working-class population.

David Frank's account of the Cape Breton coalfields remains a fundamental reference for understanding the town as a site of power shaped by industrial capital, municipal political structures, and labour struggle.[1] The assembled evidence indicates that the coal communities of Industrial Cape Breton were also organised through racialised spatial arrangements that concentrated Black residents in specific districts, subjecting them to targeted policing and racial violence, thereby framing them as problematic within public discourse. This chapter further examines the social worlds constructed by Black families through practices of mutual aid, household labour, migration, religious engagement, and institutional development. Notably, the formation of Black communities was central to life in these settings. The discussion is guided by two primary propositions: first, that the structural organisation of the coal towns was fundamentally influenced by corporate power and racial

[1] Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926."

geography, which determined housing patterns, mobility, policing practices, and daily security; and second, that Black miners and their families sustained community cohesion through pragmatic and enduring forms of care, labour, subsistence, mobility, and institutional participation.

This chapter draws on archival oral histories, reminiscences collected in Joan Weeks's history of African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton, and relevant secondary literature to reconstruct life above ground for Black miners and their families in Industrial Cape Breton. It addresses the following questions: How did company power, housing conditions, credit systems, local governance, policing practices, and racial hierarchies shape life in the coal towns? In what ways did Black miners and their families endure and navigate these conditions through household economies, mutual aid networks, subsistence practices, and mobility? Which institutions sustained Black public life and collective identity within these communities? The chapter is organised into three sections. The first examines the coal town as both a company town and a racialised space, focusing on corporate authority, settlement patterns, policing, and violence. The second explores survival, household economy, and mobility. The third turns to institutions, community belonging, and Black public life, with particular attention to halls, churches, and other forms of associational life. By shifting the analytical focus from the pit bottom to the streets, kitchens, gardens, and halls, this chapter supplements *Life Underground* by illustrating that Black labour and Black community life were fundamentally embedded in industrial Cape Breton, both beneath and above ground.

Coal Town, Company Town, Racial Town

Life above ground in Industrial Cape Breton unfolded within a social and material environment deeply shaped by coal-company power. Employers such as Dominion Coal, Scotia, BESCO, and later DOSCO did not confine their authority to the pithead alone. Their influence

extended outward into housing, stores, sanitation, local services, and the everyday organisation of town life. In this sense, the coal town formed part of the same industrial order as the mine itself. As David Frank shows, coal companies exercised a far-reaching influence over the municipal and civic life of the coalfields, and local government developed under conditions strongly shaped by the corporations' economic dominance.[2] Above ground, as below, miners and their families inhabited and moved through structures that tied work, shelter, consumption, and public authority closely to the company's fortunes and priorities.

Housing served as a prominent manifestation of this power. In the rapidly expanding coal towns, companies built and controlled large numbers of workers' dwellings as part of their labour recruitment and retention strategies.[3] In Glace Bay, where Dominion Coal decisively shaped the town's development, company houses stood close to the pithead, and by 1901, the company owned roughly 1000 tenement houses for miners.[4] Access to this housing was closely tied to employment. Rent was relatively cheap, and families in company houses often received some protection during periods of scarce work because they could remain in place and continue purchasing provisions at the company store, though this arrangement also deepened indebtedness and dependence on the company.[5] Housing conditions varied sharply. Those who secured company tenements were generally better off than many single men and recent arrivals who were often lodged in boarding houses or shacks (see Fig. 10). These shacks could hold as many as 72 men, with two men assigned to each bed, while many others lived in crude homemade board-and-tar-paper shanties or crowded

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[2] Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926," 178–80, 191–96.

[3] Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 127.

[4] Newton, *Where Coal Is King: The Story of the Cape Breton Miners' Museum*, 8-9.

[5] Newton, *Where Coal Is King: The Story of the Cape Breton Miners' Museum*, 8; Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 128-129.

into private homes that housed large numbers of boarders.[6] In places like Glace Bay, the pressure of rapid migration produced as many as one thousand one-room shanties.[7]



Figure 10. A Coal Company House, MG 12.179 Rossetti Collection B Box 2 82-459-7159, Beaton Institute Archives, Cape Breton University.

These accommodations were frequently inadequately maintained and poorly constructed. Steve MacCormick, a white miner, recalled that company housing lacked indoor plumbing and that sanitation workers attended to sanitation needs at night, with their services ultimately charged back

[6] Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 127.

[7] Newton, Where Coal Is King: The Story of the Cape Breton Miners' Museum, 8.

to miners through wage deductions.[8] Such arrangements illustrate the extent to which corporate authority permeated the private spheres of daily life. Expenses related to rent, heating, sanitation, and household upkeep were closely integrated into the wage relationship. In numerous coal mining communities, the company store served as the principal provider of provisions, offering groceries, clothing, furniture, and household necessities, often on credit extended against future earnings. Miners referred to this deduction system as the 'check-off,' whereby workers were systematically charged for rent, groceries, medical services, and other related expenses.[9] As Melvin Sheppard noted, some miners "never drew a cent" because their debts to the company for food and housing exceeded their underground earnings.[10]

The company's influence extended deeply into local government and public order. In early twentieth-century coal towns, municipal politics were significantly shaped by the economic dominance of coal corporations, which functioned not only as employers but also as landlords and merchants. In towns such as Glace Bay, company officials maintained a longstanding influence over municipal councils, and corporate power was evident in debates over taxation, assessment, utilities, and broader civic administration. Even in municipalities with some degree of self-governance, this authority was limited by the industry's control over employment, property, and essential services. These arrangements fostered a landscape of working-class dependency beyond formal structures. Family life depended not only on wages from the mines but also on access to housing, utilities, credit, and local services closely aligned with corporate interests. The rise in municipal debt, tax arrears, and relief expenditures during the crises of the 1920s illustrates the extent to which the daily functioning of coal towns was contingent upon the fortunes of the coal industry.[11] Although all

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[8] Interview with Batten and Steve MacCormick, T-4637.

[9] Demont, *Coal Black Heart: The Story of Coal and Lives It Ruled*, 130.

[10] Interview with Sheppard, T-4709.

[11] Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926,"177-178, 181-190.

mining families lived within the dependency of the company town, Black miners and families experienced these conditions through a racialised social geography that shaped where they lived, how they moved, and the forms of vulnerability they faced.

Race in the Coal Towns

The company-town structure did not operate on a blank social landscape. Housing and employment arrangements were systematically organised through ethnic and racial clustering, which influenced both residential patterns and mobility within coal towns. From the outset, coal and steel companies strategically structured housing and employment along ethnic and racial lines, often concentrating workers of similar backgrounds in the same mines and adjacent districts. This resulted in neighbourhoods that frequently embodied distinct ethnic and racial identities.[12] Consequently, this practice inadvertently fostered the development of towns segmented along ethnic lines, such as Italian neighbourhoods in Dominion, Belgian neighbourhoods in Reserve Mines, and Black and West Indian neighbourhoods in Glace Bay, New Waterford, and Donkin.

In Glace Bay, Black settlement was closely tied to work in particular collieries, especially No. 2, also known as the Hub, where many Black and West Indian men found employment in the early twentieth century.[13] Weeks notes that a vibrant Black community developed near the New Aberdeen area of Glace Bay, particularly around Gordon and Jessome Street.[14] In New Waterford, the principal Black settlement was known as Fourteen Yard, where at least 29 men originating from the West Indies resided during the early 1900s, occupying company housing near Mines No. 12 and No.

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[12] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 12.

[13] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

[14] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 12.

16.[15] By 1921, the census recorded the population of African Nova Scotians in the town as 58 individuals. William Jones, a lifelong resident of Fourteen Yard, recalled the neighbourhood as a diverse enclave comprising Black, Italian, and Belgian-French residents.[16] In Donkin, the extent of Black settlement was comparatively smaller, with Lem Skeete estimating that approximately six Black families resided there, while a greater number of men passed through as boarders employed at Dominion No. 6.[17] These settlement patterns reflect a combination of migrants' preferences–seeking neighbours with shared language, culinary customs, and religious practices–and the influence of corporate and municipal policies regulating residential arrangements and conditions. Across these communities, ethnic clustering cannot be attributed solely to individual preference; shared origins, religion, and cultural familiarity were significant factors. Furthermore, migrants often sought neighbours who could provide support and uphold cultural connections. Nonetheless, it is evident that industrial employers' hiring practices profoundly shaped ethnic concentration within the coalfields, as workers were frequently recruited in groups and settled in proximity to their workplaces.

Racial exclusion also shaped everyday life in the coal towns by limiting where Black residents could go and how safe they felt in public. Victor Jones recalled that Black people could not move freely through all parts of the town without risk.[18] In some areas, he remembered, they might have stones thrown at them. He also recalled that when Black residents sought help from the police, they were often told simply to leave rather than receive protection. In another interview, Melvin Sheppard

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[15] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 13.

[16] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 96.

[17] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 61.

[18] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

described an incident in which Black men were refused service at a barbershop, prompting members of the Black community to boycott the business in response.[19]

At moments of tension, these daily forms of exclusion could give way to collective violence. Notably, in 1918, a riot began during the annual "coloured" picnic on South Street in Glace Bay after a bicycle collision between a Black and an Italian man quickly escalated into a broader attack on Black residents in the town.[20] White rioters chased Black people through the town, while police and soldiers moved in and officers detained dozens of Black men, ostensibly for protection or arrest. During the violence, someone fatally shot Irvin Yard, a Black man, near Sterling. The *Sydney Record* characterised this incident as indicative of an increasing "feeling of white against black" and called for the relocation of the Black community beyond the town limits, as well as police presence at future Black picnics.[21] Here, the paper explicitly portrayed the Black settlement as a problem to be removed. Multiple interviewees also referred to the race riot. Steve MacCormick described the bicycle collision between an Italian from No. 6 and a Black miner and the shootings that followed, while Batten recalled crowds moving through town and soldiers arriving from Sydney on electric rail cars to restore order.[22] Likewise, Thomas Phalen remembered 500 or 600 men chasing Black residents through the town and recalled that many Black people left town afterwards.[23]

Such stories indicate that Black families not only faced the same structural dependencies and deprivations as white families but also encountered additional social barriers. For example, Victor Jones observed that it took 93 years after Glace Bay's incorporation for the town to have its first Black teacher, his niece.[24] Another Black worker in the municipal street department spent

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[19] Interview with Sheppard, T-4709.

[20] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 16-32.

[21] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 19.

[22] Interview with Batten and MacCormick, T-4737.

[23] Interview with Thomas Phalen, T-4699, DeRoache Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[24] Interview with Jones, T-5381.

twenty-three years as a casual labourer before he was finally admitted to the union. Collectively, these accounts show that Black families shared in the broader hardships of company-town life while also living under an additional layer of racial vulnerability. Low wages, insecure work, and poor housing were accompanied by exclusion from services, restricted movement, indifference from police, and the possibility of open violence. The coal town was therefore organised not only through company power and working-class dependency, but through racial boundaries enforced in everyday life and in moments of crisis alike.

Survival, Household Economy, and Mobility

Black miners and their families developed dense networks of mutual aid, domestic economies, religious and educational practices, and formal institutions that allowed them to persist and reshape the social landscape of the coal towns. These networks served to mitigate the structural conditions described earlier—such as company dominance over housing and credit, municipal arrangements favouring industrial interests, and a racial geography of neighbourhoods and policing—and foster alternative modes of community and living.

Survival in the coal towns often depended on neighbours as much as on wages, and Black women's labour—both paid and unpaid—was central to that work of survival. Even in contexts where male breadwinners remained predominant, women's contributions underpinned household stability and community cohesion through roles such as child care, domestic cleaning, nursing, food preparation, and organising social functions. In Whitney Pier, Beryl Braithwaite recalled the work of the Black Cross Nurses, a women's auxiliary associated with the UNIA. As Braithwaite explained, they "would go and they would help women look after their children and clean their homes"; they remained "around for years, many years," a steady presence in a working-class district with limited access to formal health care.[25]

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[25] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 71.

Comparable practices appeared in Glace Bay and New Waterford, whether or not they operated under the name Black Cross Nurses. Victor Jones and William Jones both noted that wakes often took place in halls or private homes.[26] Victor Jones recalled that when someone died, neighbours washed down the house, prepared food, and sat up all night singing hymns with the bereaved family. Elmena Vaughn, whose father died in a fall of stone in No. 2 Colliery, recalls that her mother relied on compensation, but also took boarders and sold hot sauce to keep the household afloat.[27] Vaughn also remembered women preparing food and organising meals for Founders Day at the New Aberdeen UNIA Hall, where Albert Francis and his wife cooked West Indian dishes for the community. In Reserve Mines, Lenora Brewster similarly recalled her mother's efforts to hold the family together when her father's tailoring and dry-cleaning business faltered and after he was jailed for bootlegging to pay the mortgage; her mother sought assistance from the Cape Breton Post to keep the family home.[28]

Black households did not survive on wages alone. They combined earnings from coal and steel work with gardens, livestock, and small-scale food production. Victor Jones recalled that "90% of the Blacks always had chickens or some garden because they were used to that."[29] Black households commonly kept hens, ducks, goats, and sometimes pigs, while cultivating vegetables on small plots near their houses. These practices reflected cultural familiarity, but they also served a clear economic purpose. Families used them to stretch cash income amid low wages and irregular work. A Black miner in New Waterford described keeping 2 goats, 2 pigs, and more than 100 chickens in his yard at one point.[30] Now retired, he spoke nostalgically about raising chickens again

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[26] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 100; Jones, T-5381.

[27] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 54-58.

[28] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 76-78.

[29] Jones, T-5379.

[30] Interview T-5337.

and recalled the satisfaction of supplying his household with eggs and meat. In Donkin, Lem Skeete remembered that his family always had pigs, cows, a horse, and lots of chickens and ducks, and their garden produced enough vegetables to supply them through the winter months.[31] Such practices complicate any simple account of miners as fully wage-dependent. However, check-off and company-store credit tied many families closely to company systems, and domestic production allowed for a level of autonomy and supplemented household economies. In addition to subsistence production, some Black people engaged in small-scale food sales. Vaughn's mother sold hot sauce after her husband's death, while William Jones recalled that "you always had hot sauce around," either homemade or purchased from women in Whitney Pier and elsewhere.[32] Across these examples, food appears as income-generating labour and cultural continuity. Dishes such as peas and rice, fish cakes, cou-cou, and hot sauce linked Cape Breton households to Barbados and other Caribbean worlds even as they helped families endure industrial living conditions. In addition, Black households supplemented wages by converting domestic space itself into a resource. Vaughn's mother took in boarders to supplement compensation and support the household.[33] Likewise, in Donkin, Skeete recalled that his mother took in boarders.[34] Taking in boarders and housing newly arrived migrants allowed families to turn precarious shelter into part of the household economy while also anchoring wider networks of support.

The social world of Black Cape Breton extended well beyond the island. Black miners and their families moved through wider circuits of labour and migration that linked Cape Breton to Barbados, the Caribbean, the Canadian Prairies, Montreal, Toronto, and other industrial centres. Mobility was one of the ways families navigated unstable work, sought opportunity, and sustained

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[31] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 66.

[32] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 58, 97.

[33] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 58.

[34] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 61.

ties of kinship and belonging across distance. As Weeks and Bonner show, West Indian migrants often moved between industrial centres according to the availability of work: from Barbados to the Panama Canal Zone, Cape Breton, and later to central Canadian cities or back to the Caribbean.[35]

Lem Skeete's parents came to Cape Breton from Barbados, seeking work and intending to enter the coal industry. They first worked in the mines, then travelled to the wheat fields in Western Canada when mine work became scarce, before returning to settle in Donkin, where Skeete was born.[36] William Borne, after arriving from Barbados in 1914, worked in a series of collieries—No. 2, No. 9, No. 15, No. 16, and No. 14—in jobs such as horse-driving, pushing boxes, and loading coal.[37] In 1923, he went to Toronto and worked as a cook on a boat between Toronto and Niagara Falls, then returned to Cape Breton in 1924 and resumed mining. During the 1930s layoffs, he worked on highway construction between New Waterford and Sydney. He returned to Barbados only once, in 1970, and noted the changes in wages and prices.[38] Another Black miner followed a similar path: employment as a cook in Barbados, migration to Sydney, years underground in various mines, work in steel and brick plants, and then a move to Montreal, where he worked as a window cleaner at the General Hospital until he was laid off at 65.[39] He returned to Barbados for one month in 1963 after saving for ten years to pay for passage and noted that he would like to retire there if he could still receive his Canadian pension.

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[35] Bonner, "A Caribbean Community in the North Atlantic: DISCO, Labour Migration, and the Creation of Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, C. 1900–1930."; Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*.

[36] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 59–60.

[37] Borne, T-4642.

[38] Borne, T-4642.

[39] T-5337.

These circuits also involved money. Jones recalled that his father sent money back to relatives in Barbados and that others in the community did the same.[40] Remittances and return visits linked Black households in Cape Breton to places elsewhere. These migration histories also intersected with race and status. As Calliste and Mathieu show, Black migrants from the Caribbean encountered an immigration regime that formally and informally tried to keep them out, even as employers sought their labour.[41]

Institutions and Black Public Life

The informal practices that sustained Black communities in the coal towns—such as sharing meals, caring for children, tending to the sick, supporting the bereaved, and housing newcomers—served as the foundational activities upon which more formal institutions were subsequently developed. From these quotidian practices, a structured institutional life emerged, providing stability and continuity to these social relations. Churches, women's organisations like the Black Cross Nurses, and halls of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Whitney Pier, New Aberdeen, and New Waterford became the primary sites for organising care, fostering sociability, facilitating political expression, and promoting collective self-representation within Black communities. The establishment of these institutions can be understood as a response to the systemic exclusions enforced by segregation and daily hostility. As Victor Jones noted, white objections to Black self-segregation overlooked the essential reality that Black residents had established their own spaces precisely because they faced rejection elsewhere.[42]

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[40] Jones, T-5381.

[41] Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks From the Caribbean, 1900-1932," 131–35.

[42] Jones, T-5381.

The historical development of the UNIA and associated institutions elucidates two salient aspects of Black life in Cape Breton. Firstly, it demonstrates that the Black social sphere was not merely informal but also institutionally structured, characterised by organised spaces for membership, leadership, ceremony, and duty. Secondly, it reveals that these institutions operated across multiple scales. The halls and churches of industrial Cape Breton served as focal points for local community life while simultaneously linking Black residents to broader currents of Garveyism, diasporic political movements, and Black internationalism. In this manner, they interconnected domestic and local contexts with expansive circuits of political thought, mobility, and identity that spanned Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States.

The UNIA in Cape Breton belonged to a broader context of Black political organisation in Canada and the Black Atlantic. Canadian involvement in interwar Pan-Africanism has often been underrepresented in national historiography. Wendell Adjetey contextualises Canada within the networks of Garveyism, Ethiopianism, and Black internationalist thought, which connected African American and Caribbean migrants to efforts of racial uplift, redemption, and collective self-determination.[43] Ethiopianism gave diasporic Black politicians in Canada a distinctly messianic form. Biblical language and the symbolic figure of Ethiopia supplied a vocabulary and a redemptive framework through which Black migrants could recast racial subjections within a larger history of African dignity and future redemption during what Adjetey describes as Canada's nadir of anti-Black racism and subordinate citizenship, roughly from 1865 to 1930.[44] The political language mattered in places such as Cape Breton, where Black migrants entered an industrial world organised through race and civic exclusion. Under these conditions, Garveyism gave Black migrants a historical and political vocabulary through which to interpret their place in Canada and to imagine forms of

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[43] Wendell Nii Laryea Adjetey, "In Search of Ethiopia: Messianic Pan-Africanism and the Problem of the Promised Land, 1919–1931," *Canadian Historical Review* 102, no. 1 (January 22, 2021): 53–78.

[44] Adjetey, "In Search of Ethiopia: Messianic Pan-Africanism and the Problem of the Promised Land, 1919–1931," 57–58, 66.

belonging that exceeded the narrow terms offered by industrial capital and the settler state. Garvey, for his part, assumed a singular place within this political movement, serving not only as an organiser and theorist of Black nationalism but also as a symbol through whom the redemptive and quasi-messianic aspects of Ethiopianist politics were rendered publicly intelligible.[45] A Jamaican activist and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914, Marcus Garvey emerged as the most prominent Black nationalist leader and a key architect of contemporary Pan-Africanism.[46] Through the UNIA, Garvey advocated for racial pride, economic self-sufficiency, institutional autonomy for Black communities, and the reclamation of Africa, which, within Garveyite ideology, was regarded as the symbolic epicentre of a widespread Black global consciousness.[47] Through the dissemination of the UNIA's newspapers and conventions, Garvey transformed these ideals into a broad-based political culture that extended beyond Jamaica and Harlem, permeating Black communities throughout North America.

West Indian migrants constituted the foundational membership of numerous UNIA divisions in Canada, significantly contributing to the movement's organisational robustness and ideological framework.[48] These migrants brought with them extensive experiences of mobility, literacy, community engagement, and political awareness cultivated across the Caribbean and North America. Many had traversed imperial labour circuits, acquiring an understanding of race that transcended local boundaries.[49] Cape Breton's UNIA divisions emerged within this wider

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[45] Adjetey, "In Search of Ethiopia: Messianic Pan-Africanism and the Problem of the Promised Land, 1919–1931," 53–57, 60, 66.

[46] Carla Marano, "'Rising Strongly and Rapidly': The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940," *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 238.

[47] Adjetey, "In Search of Ethiopia: Messianic Pan-Africanism and the Problem of the Promised Land, 1919–1931," 56-58, 66.

[48] Marano, "'Rising Strongly and Rapidly': The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940," 236–37.

[49] Marano, "'Rising Strongly and Rapidly': The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940," 236–37; Carla Marano, "'for the Freedom of the Black People': Case Studies on the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1900-1950," *UWSpace (University of Waterloo)* (2018), 22.

institutional and ideological field. Leo Bertley notes that early Cape Breton Garveyites, such as Mr Francis of New Waterford, attended conventions in New York and later took part in efforts to rehabilitate the organisation after Garvey's death.[50] CBC's documentary *The Road to Whitney Pier* also recalls Garvey's visit to Menelik Hall and to audiences in Sydney and Glace Bay, placing Cape Breton within the movement's Canadian itineraries and within the wider circuits of Black political culture that linked local communities to transnational currents of thought and organisation.[51] Yet the importance of the UNIA in Cape Breton cannot be grasped fully at the level of transnational politics alone. Its significance also lay in the local chapters through which Black residents organised collective life. In Whitney Pier, Glace Bay, and New Waterford, the UNIA gave material and social form to a broader politics of Black self-determination. It created spaces in which mutual aid, sociability, leadership, and public culture could be organised on Black terms.

As Weeks' account of African Cape Breton documents, the UNIA adopted a distinctly local form while maintaining a broader political framework centred on Black collective identity. In Whitney Pier, Sydney, the UNIA branch, founded circa 1919, comprised approximately 250 members and held meetings in a hall located on Lingan Road between Frederick and Tupper Streets. This division supported a marching band of roughly 35 musicians and a contingent of Black Cross Nurses. According to Beryl Braithwaite, the community organised social events, such as dances, with performances by the West Indian Band.[52] The Black Cross Nurses, affiliated with the hall, assisted women in caring for their children and maintaining their homes.

In Glace Bay, Albert Francis, a Barbadian migrant who arrived in 1916 to work in the No. 16 Colliery in New Waterford, organised the New Aberdeen division on his own property around

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[50] Interview with Leo Bertley, T-730, Sound and Moving Image Collection, Beaton Institute Archives, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[51] The Road to Whitney Pier, T-747, Sound and Moving Image Collection, Beaton Institute Archives, Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS.

[52] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 37, 70-71.

1918.[53] The division received its charter in 1920 as Division No. 35 and, in 1923, moved into a dedicated hall on Maple (Jessome) Street in the heart of the Black neighbourhood. Francis and his wife ran a small kitchen from the hall, preparing West Indian food—peas and rice, fish cakes, hot sauce—for dances, Founders Day events, wakes, and funerals. For people like Elmena Vaughn in Glace Bay, these halls were central to social life. As a teenager, she went to "socials and dances and things at the Hall," sometimes in Sydney, sometimes in New Waterford, travelling between communities for events. She recalled bands mainly composed of West Indian men—Charlie Black, Elvin, Boston, "old Josh" Eastman—who played drums, guitar, saxophones, trumpets, and clarinets, and were taught by a local music teacher, Professor Thomas. Saturday-night dances, Founders Day celebrations, wakes and funerals, beauty contests, and church services all took place under the same roof. West Indian food—peas and rice, fish cakes, hot sauce—was cooked by men like Albert Francis and his wife.[54]

In New Waterford, the UNIA hall, which opened on 1 September 1929, became a crucial institutional centre despite the relatively small size of the town's Black population, which numbered 36.[55] William Jones, who later served as both treasurer and president of the hall, described an earlier two-storey building owned by the division, with beds upstairs for newly arrived migrants from the West Indies and a recreation room below for meetings, dances, and church services.[56] The building, therefore, addressed several needs at once: it provided shelter for newcomers, space for sociability, and an institutional base for Black communal life in a town marked by racial marginalisation and the broader insecurities of industrial labour. The history of the hall also reveals the importance residents attached to controlling its resources. As Jones recalled, some members objected to sending a portion

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[53] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 38.

[54] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 55.

[55] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 38.

[56] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 96-99.

of local dues to UNIA headquarters in New York and argued that money raised in New Waterford should remain within the community. The resulting dispute went to court, and the judge ruled that the hall should be held in common for "all Black men and their families" in the town, after which the organisation continued under the name Negro Social Club.[57] Yet this reorganisation did not diminish the institution's local significance.

For Black families, these halls served multiple social functions integral to community cohesion and resilience. They functioned as entertainment venues, hosting band concerts, masquerades, and beauty contests that provided members with moments of leisure amidst demanding labour in mines and domestic work. Additionally, these spaces served as sites of education, where Sunday schools and youth clubs imparted literacy, Black history, and public speaking skills; lectures by visiting Garveyite leaders and local preachers were also held in these halls. Furthermore, they served as spaces of communal care, with events such as wakes and funerals at Liberty Halls and New Aberdeen's UNIA hall mobilising community support. Women's organisations, including the Black Cross Nurses, coordinated activities such as food provision, sanitation, and overnight vigils. Concurrently, the halls embodied explicitly political functions. As Bonner observes, many Caribbean migrants in Sydney affiliated with the UNIA due to their disenchantment with low-wage, low-status employment in steel manufacturing and the racial gatekeeping that hindered their access to skilled trades.[58] During the 1920 UNIA convention in Harlem, delegate George Creese from New Aberdeen addressed the assembly, highlighting that Cape Breton possessed a notable number of Black skilled workers—mechanics, printers, carpenters, masons, photographers, engineers, riveters—yet these individuals faced employment barriers in their trades, relegating them to manual labour in the steel and coal industries. Creese also denounced

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[57] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 37-38, 96-99.

[58] Claudine Bonner, "Bridging Religion and Black Nationalism," in *Cape Breton in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Parnaby (Athabasca University Press, 2024), 78–79.

discriminatory policies such as poll taxes and housing restrictions targeting Black residents.[59]

Churches and Religion

Churches constituted a vital component of Black institutional life in Industrial Cape Breton. These religious institutions served as spaces where Black residents could gather for fellowship and organise community activities. In communities characterised by migration, racial exclusion, and economic instability, religious establishments played a crucial role in stabilising social cohesion and providing moral and institutional frameworks for Black public culture. Oral testimonies further indicate that religion influenced family discipline and daily routines. Victor Jones recalled that the majority of Black individuals identified as Anglican and described his family as deeply religious, noting that his father ensured consistent church attendance.[60] In Cape Breton, religious institutions intersected with the organisational spheres established through the UNIA and affiliated groups. The same families frequently navigated between halls, churches, clubs, and mutual aid networks.[61] Consequently, religion was an integral part of the broader infrastructure that facilitated the continuity of Black communities amidst the demands of industrial life.

The connection between religion and Black associational life is especially visible in Whitney Pier, where the St. Phillip's African Orthodox Church developed within the broader historical movement that gave rise to the UNIA. Bonner shows that St. Philip's, founded in 1921, was the only Canadian branch of the African Orthodox Church and emerged within a transnational religious and

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[59] Bonner, "Bridging Religion and Black Nationalism," 78–79.

[60] Interview with Jones, T-5379.

[61] Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*, 38.

political milieu shaped by George Alexander McGuire, Marcus Garvey, and the wider currents of Black nationalism in the early twentieth-century Black Atlantic.[62]



Figure 11. St. Phillips African Orthodox Church. Beaton Institute Archives, CA BI 88-644-18154.

McGuire's position within both the African Orthodox Church and the UNIA gave the church a close historical relationship to Garveyite politics, even though the church and the UNIA remained formally distinct institutions. St. Phillip's was founded after Black workers petitioned Archbishop George McGuire for a minister, and in June 1921, Reverend William E. Robertson arrived in Whitney Pier to organise the congregation. The church quickly became part of the community's wider social life. St. Phillip's hosted annual picnics, socials, and excursions, activities

[62] Bonner, "Bridging Religion and Black Nationalism," 85-88.

that brought together family and neighbours and gave the church a place in the routine of the Black community.[63] Jones's recollection of regular church attendance suggests that religion helped shape family discipline, while his memory that UNIA branches often held Sunday meetings indicates how closely associational and religious life could intersect in Black Cape Breton.[64] Church affiliation also connected Black Cape Breton to wider networks of support. For instance, through the church organ, the Negro Churchman, St. Philip's highlighted the economic hardships faced by Black families in Sydney during the 1920s, including unemployment and hunger, and sought assistance from readers within the African Orthodox Church network.[65] Donations from outside Cape Breton helped support members of the congregation during these difficult years.

Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence in this chapter shows that life above ground in industrial Cape Breton was shaped by more than the shared hardships of company-town existence. Black miners and their families inhabited that world through a distinctly racialised social order that organised where they lived, how they moved, the kinds of vulnerability they faced, and the terms on which they could participate in public life. Housing, neighbourhood formation, policing, and everyday encounters in streets, shops, and workplaces all bore the marks of this racial structuring. Yet these conditions did not produce only exclusion. Black residents responded to them by building dense social worlds through household labour, mutual aid, subsistence practices, migration networks, churches, halls, and community organisations. These practices and institutions allowed families to endure precarious work, inadequate housing, and racial hostility while also creating forms of

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[63] Bonner, "Bridging Religion and Black Nationalism," 86-90.

[64] Jones, T-5379; Jones, T-5380.

[65] Bonner, "Bridging Religion and Black Nationalism," 89-90.

belonging that exceeded the narrow place assigned to them within the dominant order of the coal towns.

The chapter extends the argument developed in the previous chapter by showing that race shaped not only the organisation of labour in the mines but also the wider social terrain on which mining life unfolded. Read alongside the historiography of Black life in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada, and the literature on race, whiteness, and Black labour, these findings underline that Black miners' experiences in Cape Breton were not anomalous but part of broader patterns in which Black workers occupied indispensable yet marginalised positions within industrial economies. At the same time, the institutions, household economies, and community networks described here point toward the forms of endurance and collective world-making that scholars of the Black Atlantic and African Nova Scotian history have emphasised for this period. Situating Cape Breton within these wider currents helps clarify that the racialised geographies of the coal towns were locally specific expressions of more general structures of anti-Black racism, labour exploitation, and community formation in early- and mid-twentieth-century Black histories.

Chapter V - Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the lived experiences, labour conditions, and collective memory of Black coal miners in Industrial Cape Breton through a central tension between presence and absence. Black miners' participation in mining operations, the development of coal towns, and their contribution to the region's industrial economy are evident; however, their visibility within archival records, scholarly discourse, and commemorative narratives of Cape Breton's mining history remains partial. The argument articulated across these chapters posits that this marginalisation is not necessarily incidental but rooted in historical processes. Black miners were not simply omitted from a comprehensive historiography of Industrial Cape Breton; rather, their relative absence elucidates how categories such as miner, worker, community, and heritage have been constructed through racialised assumptions that normalise whiteness as the default and universal standard.

The thesis began with an examination of issues related to historical visibility. In Cape Breton, the miner has historically been memorialised as a symbol of sacrifice, tenacity, militancy, and collective belonging. This figure is prominently featured across museums, memorials, oral histories, and scholarly narratives, serving as an emblematic representation of regional labour. However, this symbolic prominence has traditionally been contingent upon a predominantly white conceptualisation and historical experience of labour. Although Black men participated in the coal industry, they are scarcely acknowledged within the prevailing discourses of this history. Their lives, therefore, could not be recuperated solely by inserting an overlooked group into an existing narrative; it was necessary to analyse the processes through which the narrative itself was constructed, interrogating how certain workers became recognisable and representative, whereas others were rendered peripheral, fragmented, or obscured.

Chapter II addresses this issue through the conceptual frameworks of archive, memory, and visuality. It contends that the archive functions not as a neutral repository of the past but as a locus

where power is exercised via classification, arrangement, and omission. The absence of Black miners from archival and memorial records exemplifies the underlying logics through which historical significance is constructed and maintained. The chapter demonstrates that representations of Black individuals are often preserved only in fragmented, elusive forms—such as oral histories, partial references, unnamed photographs, marginal positions in museum displays, and silences within institutional histories. Furthermore, it argues that Cape Breton's memorial landscape has constructed mining history through a visual regime that depicts the miner as a white masculine archetype. Under such conditions, Black miners are obscured because prevailing representational frameworks have historically failed to depict them as miners.

Chapter III then turned underground to reconstruct the working lives of Black miners, drawing on previously neglected oral histories alongside existing scholarship. It demonstrates that while underground labour was perilous and exploitative for miners generally, Black miners encountered these conditions within a racially structured labour regime. Race influenced access to specific collieries, shift allocation, the distribution of hazardous tasks, limits on mobility and promotion, and language used in the pits. Although Black miners shared the physical dangers associated with the coal mining "workscape" with white and other immigrant workers, they did so on inherently unequal terms. They were frequently concentrated in the most arduous and least desirable tasks, experienced prolonged waits for employment, and remained disproportionately vulnerable to injury and a lack of recognition. Additionally, this chapter reveals that although camaraderie and practical cooperation existed underground, these forms of solidarity did not undermine the structural operations of racial hierarchy. Rather, solidarity and exclusion coexisted within the mining community.

Chapter IV transitioned to an exploration of the above-ground environments within the coal towns and neighbourhoods that shaped the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of mining life. The chapter posited that a racialised social geography fundamentally influenced the organisation of

company-town life in Industrial Cape Breton. Authority exerted by coal companies shaped housing policies, credit systems, local services, and broader structures of dependency for all mine workers in these towns. However, Black miners and their families experienced these structures through additional layers of exclusion, segregation, and vulnerability. They inhabited racially delineated districts, navigated public spaces unevenly, and encountered hostility and apathy from police and other authorities, remaining susceptible to acts of racial violence. Nonetheless, the chapter also emphasised that the social life of Black communities in these settings could not be fully understood through the lens of exclusion alone. Black families established resilient social worlds characterised by household economies, mutual aid, subsistence practices, migration networks, religious institutions, community halls, and associations. Institutions such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and St. Philip's African Orthodox Church played a central role in maintaining cultural identity, a sense of belonging, collective memory, and avenues for political self-representation. While the coal towns were evidently racially structured, they also constituted spaces of complexity and resistance, reflecting a multifaceted social landscape in which Black residents made a community in and against the structures that constrained them.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that Black miners played an important role in the development of Industrial Cape Breton, both materially and historically. Materially, they contributed labour to an industry that shaped the region's economic and social identity. Socially, they participated in the construction of households, neighbourhoods, institutions, and community networks that sustained life in the coal towns. Historically, however, their contributions have been marginalised through archival, historiographical, and commemorative practices that have often rendered their role as partial or secondary. This thesis argues that such marginalisation reveals essential aspects of how mining history has been constructed. This claim carries significant historiographical implications. While this work addresses a notable gap in the literature on Cape Breton coal mining, it also suggests that this gap has been created by the very frameworks that have

traditionally shaped labour history. The dominant historiography of Industrial Cape Breton has produced compelling narratives regarding class formation, dependency, industrial capitalism, labour militancy, and working-class communities. These contributions remain indispensable. However, when race is regarded as secondary or incidental, the universal figure of the worker tends to default to whiteness, and the miner's racial identity remains unexamined. Centring Black miners necessitates a reconsideration of the categories organising this narrative. Furthermore, this thesis extends beyond Cape Breton, emphasising the importance of examining the intersections of race, labour, and public memory within Canadian history. The extant absence of Black people from dominant histories should be understood as a product of the ways archives, museums, and public histories reproduce the prevailing assumptions of the societal contexts that produce them. In this regard, absence is a form of historical agency—an expression of power that determines who is rendered visible as a worker, a citizen, a subject of memory, and a component of collective history.

This thesis invites a rethinking of several established narratives. For labour and regional historians, placing Black miners at the centre of Industrial Cape Breton undermines accounts that treat the coalfields as implicitly white working-class spaces and shows that class formation, militancy, and underdevelopment were lived through racial hierarchies as well as economic ones. For historians of Black Nova Scotia, following Black miners underground and into the coal towns extends a literature that has often focused on slavery, Loyalist settlements, migration, or steelwork, demonstrating that Black life in the province was equally entangled with extractive industry and resource capitalism. For scholars of archives and public history, finally, the study illustrates how institutions, catalogues, and commemorative forms have actively produced Black miners as marginal or invisible subjects, and how repositories such as the Beaton Institute can function as counter-archives that make different histories thinkable. The broader contribution of this thesis is to show that Black miners should be read not as an addition to Cape Breton's history, but as part of what made Industrial Cape Breton what it was.

This thesis additionally delineates potential avenues for future scholarly inquiry. Further investigation is necessary into Black labour within Nova Scotia's extractive and industrial sectors; the interplay between the coal and steel industries in the formation of Black communities; the labour and family dynamics of Black women in industrial Cape Breton; and a comparative analysis of Black miners and industrial workers in other Canadian contexts. Moreover, advancing research through family archives, community collections, photographs, church records, and oral histories developed in partnership with Black communities could significantly enrich the understanding of this history. Nonetheless, there are inherent limitations to the scope of what this thesis and related projects can recover, given the partial nature of the surviving record, which often obscures many names, experiences, and familial narratives. The oral histories used here were not collected with Black mining life as their primary focus, and they capture only fragments of a broader social fabric. At the same time, the Beaton Institute's oral history and sound collections have been crucial to making this study possible. By preserving the voices and experiences of Black miners alongside other coalfield memories, the Beaton Institute serves as an important repository of Black memory and experience in Industrial Cape Breton, helping to partially counter the silences and exclusions that continue to shape other mining institutions and commemorative projects in the region. To rehistoricise Black miners within Cape Breton's narrative entails not merely restoring marginalised subjects but also critically interrogating the frameworks through which mining history has been conceived, known, and remembered. In doing so, this thesis shows that Industrial Cape Breton's past cannot be understood without confronting how racialised labour made the region and how the erasure of Black miners has shaped both historical understanding and public memory.

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