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Muchakinock: African Americans and the Making of an Iowa Coal Town

PAM STEK

IN THE EARLY 1880s, recruitment of African American miners to Mahaska County led to the development of a community that would become a thriving settlement, home to black miners, merchants, and professionals. The coal camp of Muchakinock, Iowa, which flourished for about 20 years during the late nineteenth century, was an unusual community for that time in the state's history.¹ After the coal camp management actively recruited African American laborers from southern states, Muchakinock developed a significant population of African American workers who were willing to leave their homes and travel to Iowa as strikebreakers in order to escape the poverty and racial violence of the post-Reconstruction South. The transplanted miners and their families helped to develop a strong and vibrant community in Muchakinock that was relatively free of racial violence and segregation and that included independent African American merchants as well as doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, and other professionals.

1. Although sources agree that Muchakinock is an Indian name, there is little agreement as to its meaning. The name was originally given to a creek that flows through Mahaska County, and the most common interpretation of the name is "bad crossing." See Hubert L. Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa* (Des Moines, 1965). Other sources, however, dispute this explanation. See, for example, the series of articles by O. H. Seifert titled "Ghost Towns of Mahaska County" in the *Oskaloosa Daily Herald* in March 1951.

The development of a small Iowa coal camp into a flourishing African American community seems anachronistic when viewed in the context of race relations in the United States during the late 1800s. The demand for coal by the rapidly emerging railroad industry was the primary impetus behind the development of new coal mines in Iowa. In the case of Muchakinock, however, a number of factors combined to help lead to the formation of an African American community that was not subjected to the enforced segregation, disfranchisement, and racial violence perpetrated against blacks in many other parts of the United States at that time. One factor was the attitudes and business practices of the coal company executives, including the company's rejection of racially discriminatory policies. Ultimately, however, Muchakinock's growth and success depended primarily on the hard work of the miners and their families and the presence of strong African American leaders in the community.

THE MUCHAKINOCK COAL CAMP, which grew up in southern Mahaska County, was located in one of the state's richest coal-producing areas. By 1840, just two years after the creation of the separate territory of Iowa, records indicate 400 tons of coal production in what would later become the state of Iowa. The early mines, located in southeastern Iowa, primarily served steamboats, although some coal was used for domestic purposes as well. Over the next three decades, coal production in the state, which stood at about 15,000 tons in 1850, increased to 42,000 tons in 1860 and 263,000 tons by 1870.²

This growth in coal mining activity coincided with the development of railroads in the state. Beginning in the early 1850s, Iowa's rail history became tied to the need to connect eastern cities, through Chicago, to California and the Pacific Coast. That need led to congressional aid in the form of large land grants provided to the state by an act of Congress on May 15, 1856.

2. "History of Coal Mining in Iowa" [reprinting the State Mine Inspector's Report for 1945], *Annals of Iowa* 29 (1947), 61; Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 27; James H. Lees, "History of Coal Mining in Iowa," *Iowa Geological Survey* 19 (1908), 556; Morgan Thomas, "Pioneer Iowa Coal Operators," *Annals of Iowa* 33 (1955), 120; S. W. Beyer, "Coal Statistics," *Iowa Geological Survey* 19 (1908), 591.

Those land grants were used as bait for railroad builders to encourage the development of four railroads across the state. By 1870, all the major railroads had reached the Missouri River, and the demand for coal as locomotive fuel continued to rise rapidly. By 1873, the Iowa Central Railroad had developed the Muchakinock valley and surrounding areas in Mahaska County.³

The railroad's entry into southern Mahaska County set the stage for the purchase of coal fields in the area by H. W. and W. A. McNeill, brothers and business partners from Oskaloosa. In 1870 H. W. McNeill had become an agent of the Iowa Central Railroad, and in 1873, with his brother, he organized the Iowa Central Company to develop coal fields in Mahaska County. Over the next several years, the McNeills reorganized under the name of Consolidation Coal Company and absorbed several other mines in the area, making their company the largest mining concern in the county; by 1878, they employed 400 men. The Muchakinock mines became the largest and most productive among Consolidation's holdings.⁴

News items submitted by the Muchakinock correspondent to the *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald* provide a sense of the daily life of the camp's residents. The organization of a brass band, the coal company's distribution of land to its employees for gardening purposes, and a Fourth of July celebration featuring contests, a dance, and nonalcoholic refreshments all seem to paint a picture of a satisfying life enjoyed by hard-working employees and a benevolent employer.⁵ These accounts, however, should not necessarily be taken at face value as they also refer to W. A. McNeill as an "excellent good fellow" and tout the advantages of railroads as advancing not only the price of land but also industry and civilization as well. The Consolidation Coal Company, like many other coal companies of the time, seemed to exercise control over not only the land on which the camp was located but the journalistic dispatches as well.

3. Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames, 1974), 109; Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 27; Lees, "History of Coal Mining in Iowa," 557.

4. Manoah Hedge, *Past and Present of Mahaska County, Iowa* (Chicago, 1906), 73; *Portrait and Biographical Album of Mahaska County, Iowa* (Chicago, 1887), 146; Lees, "History of Coal Mining in Iowa," 557.

5. *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 5/20/1875, 5/4/1876, 7/8/1875.

Company management was not able, however, to control all aspects of the labor situation. In early 1880 a strike was called at Muchakinock to protest the level of wages. Consolidation's management maintained that the average miner earned between \$3.50 and \$4.50 per day and that the company treated miners fairly, not even requiring the miners to trade at the company store. The miners, on the other hand, argued that the average earnings were only \$2.75 to \$3.00 per day and that Consolidation's management was not doing all it could on the miners' behalf.⁶

To break the strike, the coal company management brought in about 70 African American miners from Virginia. The company employed Major Thomas Shumate, a white Virginian, as its agent during these early recruiting trips. The striking miners resented the importation of strikebreakers. A correspondent from Des Moines to the *National Labor Tribune*, for example, reported that "McNeill, the 'miner's friend' of Muchakinock, has just arrived at that place with 62 colored men to take the places of the white men of Muchakinock. How's that for a friend?" Work in the mines resumed shortly after the strikebreakers arrived, with the striking miners either going back to work and helping to train the black miners or else moving on to other areas.⁷

Initially, the African American miners were paid a fixed monthly sum plus board and were housed in barracks built by Consolidation. Coal company management brought in a former hotel cook, R. T. Jefferson, from Staunton, Virginia, to cook for

6. *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 2/5/1880, 2/12/1880.

7. *Ibid.*, 3/25/1880, 3/11/1880; *The Lynchburg Virginian*, 1/18/1881 (at <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>); *National Labor Tribune*, 3/20/1880. Although no violence was reported in the local press as a result of the importation of strikebreakers, at least one later source, drawing on the memories of former miners, reports that rioting took place when the African American workers arrived and some were killed. See Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Iowa, "The Negro and the Coal Camps: Muchakinock Camp," 8, WPA Iowa Federal Writers' Project "The Negro in Iowa" Collection, 1935-1942, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. Contemporaneous reports of the events do not, however, corroborate these accounts, which were recorded about 50 years later. On the other hand, the local press does seem to have been controlled or influenced to at least some extent by the coal company, so it is possible that reports of violent encounters due to the company's importation of strikebreakers were suppressed.

the men. When the new arrivals wrote home with satisfactory reports of the conditions and prospects in Muchakinock, friends and family in Virginia were encouraged to make the trip as well. Many did; several groups of a hundred or more arrived during the fall. Later that year, an editorial in the local press praised the African American miners as hard working, honest, and frugal and claimed that half of the miners had already started savings accounts. They were also lauded for their unwillingness to strike.⁸ Again, such press reports may have been designed to further the interests of coal company management; by promoting the acceptance of African American miners in the local community, Consolidation management may have been trying to achieve a long-term, relatively inexpensive solution to its labor issues.

THE McNEILL BROTHERS' involvement in labor disputes at Muchakinock ended in 1881, when they sold their stock in the company to the Chicago and North Western Railroad for \$500,000. Marvin Hughitt became Consolidation's president and John E. Buxton its superintendent. After the sale of Consolidation Coal Company to the Chicago and North Western Railroad, the Muchakinock mines were operated solely to provide locomotive fuel for the railroad. The railroad's plan was to acquire coal mines by purchase or development and work each until it was exhausted; then the mine and the camp would be abandoned. Although that plan made the coal camps temporary enterprises, it offered the miners the benefit of year-round employment. Unlike mines with domestic markets, which were generally shut down during the summer months due to lack of demand, captive mines afforded continuous employment, as the demand for locomotive fuel did not vary seasonally.⁹

Consolidation's new management proposed a change to the miners' wage structure. Prior to the transfer of ownership, min-

8. *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 3/25/1880, 11/18/1880; WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 9.

9. Hedge, *Past and Present of Mahaska County*, 73; Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 46; Lees, "History of Coal Mining in Iowa," 557; Dorothy Schwieder, *Black Diamonds: Life and Work in Iowa's Coal Mining Communities, 1895-1925* (Ames, 1983), 158.

ers' earnings were determined by splitting the income from the sale of the coal equally between the miners and the owners, with the miners' half then divided in proportion to the work done by each. When the railroad took possession of the Muchakinock mines in 1881, it abandoned that system in favor of a proposition to pay the miners a fixed price of 69 cents for each ton of coal produced. Coal mine operators often employed this sort of piece rate compensation, paying miners a predetermined amount for each unit of coal produced, with each such unit defined not just by weight but also by the size of the coal chunks and the amount of impurities. The Muchakinock miners, however, opposed the change in the method of compensation, and they called another strike.¹⁰

Management's response to the strike significantly altered the future development and structure of the Muchakinock coal camp. Perhaps following McNeill's example from the previous year, which was consistent with actions taken by other Iowa and midwestern coal companies facing labor difficulties at that time, Consolidation elected to import African American workers from Virginia and other southern states. As its primary recruiter, the coal company engaged the services of a prominent local African American businessman, Hobart Armstrong. The company recruited men from Staunton, Charlottesville, and other Virginia towns, as well as from Kentucky and Tennessee. Many of the workers—farmhands and bakery and railroad workers, among others—had no experience as coal miners but were promised payment of \$20 per month and keep during training to be provided by the company once they reached Muchakinock. At least some of the workers were not just inexperienced but were also unclear about what type of job they would be doing when they arrived at their destination. One former resident of the town remembered that her father thought that he was going to work in a gold mine in Iowa. Some miners traveled to Muchakinock with extended family groups, including siblings, parents, and in-laws. Others trav-

10. Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 49; *History of Mahaska County, Iowa* (Dallas, 1984), 200; Price V. Fishback, *Soft Coal, Hard Choices: The Economic Welfare of Bituminous Coal Miners, 1890-1930* (New York, 1992), 73.

eled first on their own and then wrote home to encourage friends and family members to join them in Muchakinock.¹¹

Consolidation was not the first company in Iowa to attempt to import African American strikebreakers in large numbers. In the early 1880s coal company operators at other Iowa mines also tried to bring in black miners to resolve labor disputes in management's favor. Such attempts often led to violent encounters between striking miners and imported workers. Just prior to the Muchakinock strike of 1881, the Albia Coal Company in Monroe County brought in African American miners from Missouri to break the strike in its mines. Soon after the strikebreakers arrived, they exchanged gunfire with white miners, but a militia company stationed in Albia restored order before any casualties occurred. At about the same time, in March 1882, African American miners were also imported as strikebreakers in Lucas County. Although the expected deadly encounter between white miners and strikebreakers did not materialize, there were constant rumors of impending racial violence, and tensions between the two groups remained high.¹²

11. *History of Mahaska County, Iowa*, 200; Minnie B. London, *As I Remember* (Iowa City, 1940), 1; *Des Moines Register*, 9/8/1929; Jeanette Adams, Mattie Murray, and Bessie Lewis, interviews, Dorothy Schwieder Oral Histories, 1980–1982, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines. In 1980–1982, Dorothy Schwieder, Elmer Schwieder, and Joseph Hrabá interviewed 75 former residents of Buxton, about half of whom were African American. Several of the interviewees had lived in Muchakinock prior to moving to Buxton. When assessing the historical value of these oral histories, one must take into account that the interviews were conducted at least 80 years after the events they described took place, and the interviewees were children during their time in Muchakinock. The interviewers found, however, that the subjects were able to recall many important details of their early lives, and the information provided was verified, where possible, using newspapers, census data, photographs, and other interviews. For a discussion of the interview process, see Dorothy Schwieder and Elmer Schwieder, "Sources for Social History: A Case Study of a Local Community," *Annals of Iowa* 49 (1988), 240–60.

12. Leola Nelson Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1969), 41; Ron E. Roberts, *Ordinary Ghosts and Everyday People in an Iowa Coal Town* (Dubuque, 1986), 33. Coal camp managers in other midwestern states also attempted to import African American strikebreakers during this period. Violent encounters between striking miners and black strikebreakers imported from Virginia occurred in Braidwood, Illinois, in 1877. A white militia in Coal Creek, Indiana, killed several strikebreakers in 1878, leading to retaliation by armed African Americans. These examples illustrate the transformation of class conflict between striking miners and imported strikebreakers into racial conflict as a

It is not clear whether the workers recruited to go to Muchakinock were informed that there was a strike in progress. Recruiting strikebreakers without full disclosure of the labor situation was not uncommon. Experienced miners would probably have realized that they were being recruited in response to a labor dispute; it is possible, however, that the inexperienced laborers recruited to work at Muchakinock were unaware of the potentially dangerous situation they would be facing.

Whether or not the black laborers were aware of the potentially violent situation that awaited them, they were clearly willing to at least take the risk of leaving behind their homes and families and signing on to work in an unfamiliar occupation in a distant state. The incentives for the workers must have been quite high to justify such risks. The world of African American laborers in the southern United States during the late nineteenth century, however, was already marked by violence, racial conflict, and economic oppression. The decision to move north into a potentially violent atmosphere was balanced against the conditions they faced if they decided to stay in a community where racial enmity was a fact of daily life and where unskilled workers had little economic opportunity.

Many of the miners who came to Muchakinock were from Virginia. The period between 1870, when Virginia reentered the Union, and 1902, when blacks were disfranchised in the state, was marked by a steady erosion of the civil rights that African Americans had gained after the end of the Civil War. In 1870 at least one Virginia railroad began using special Jim Crow cars for black passengers only. By the end of the 1870s, blacks were being driven from the polls by violent intimidation, the threat of economic reprisal, and legal measures such as poll taxes and disfranchisement for conviction of petty theft. In addition, black schools were inadequately funded; in 1880 whites represented 60 percent of Virginia's population, but white schools received 75 percent of state education funds. African Americans were also victimized in the criminal justice system. Black prisoners

result of the systematic use of black strikebreakers by coal company management. For more information on the experiences of African American strikebreakers in other midwestern states, see Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington, KY, 1987).

were much more likely to serve as leased laborers under the convict lease program; in 1877, 561 black convicts—but no white ones—were serving as leased laborers. In addition, the number of African Americans lynched in Virginia steadily increased during this period, with blacks being lynched for all manner of alleged offenses.¹³

It may not be surprising, then, that African American workers were willing to exchange an atmosphere in which racial violence was steadily escalating and their civil rights were being relentlessly eroded for an unknown situation that, at worst, would probably be no more difficult than the one they were leaving behind. The willingness to pull up stakes and move on to new territory in pursuit of better working conditions was also a customary feature of coal districts everywhere. Such mobility was a reflection of the miners' independence as well as a strategy of response to the realities of the work. It was not unusual for a miner to work in numerous mines in various states throughout his career due to the irregular availability of work and variations in pay, treatment, and conditions.¹⁴

In addition to the often migratory nature of coal mining labor and the desire to escape racial violence and economic oppression, the lure of increased wages and other business opportunities may have been a significant factor in the decision of African American miners to move to Muchakinock. Many of the men who came to work in Muchakinock's coal mines had been employed in other fields before leaving their home states. In the 1890s, hourly wages for coal miners in the United States were generally higher, by 10 to 15 percent, than the hourly wages for manufacturing jobs.¹⁵ The higher wages may have provided a strong incentive for men to train to become miners.

In addition to higher hourly wages in the mines, the African Americans Hobart Armstrong recruited were presented with a powerful example of the business opportunities offered in Muchakinock. Armstrong had migrated to Iowa from Tennessee in

13. Charles E. Wynes, *Race Relations in Virginia 1870-1902* (Totowa, NJ, 1971), 39, 69, 14, 129, 137, 142.

14. Daniel Letwin, *Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921: The Challenge of Interracial Unionism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), 25.

15. Fishback, *Soft Coal, Hard Choices*, 80.

the mid-1870s, and, after developing close business ties with the Iowa Central Coal Company, set up his own business, purchasing mules for the company on consignment. His son-in-law recounted that Armstrong got his start in the mule business by contracting with the coal company to provide it with mules to work in its mines. After working with Armstrong for a period of time, the company management thought that it could buy its own mules more cheaply. The mules the company purchased directly, however, were not suitable for mine work and so it went back to contracting with Armstrong, who thereby established his reputation in the mule business. He later opened his own meat market. By 1880, Armstrong owned farmland near Muchakinock and in fact owned enough acreage to employ two hired farm laborers. With such credentials, Armstrong could argue convincingly that Muchakinock offered significant financial opportunities for African Americans willing to move from the South.¹⁶

Armstrong's personal testimony would have carried significant weight about issues other than just financial matters. After moving to Iowa, he married the daughter of a local German farmer.¹⁷ The state code passed in 1851 did away with the state's ban on interracial marriage.¹⁸ As in most other northern states, however, interracial marriage remained rare. In Virginia, whites determined to maintain the social inferiority of African Americans strongly opposed intermarriage. Beginning in 1873, the Virginia legislature began adopting laws meant to limit marriages between blacks and whites; eventually, in 1879, all mixed marriages were declared null and void in the state.¹⁹ In southern states, actual or suspected relationships between blacks and whites were often used to justify racial violence or even lynching of African Americans. Armstrong and his family, however,

16. Carl Kietzman, interview, Dorothy Schwieder Oral Histories; London, *As I Remember*, 1; U.S. Census Bureau, *Federal Census, 1880, Mahaska County, Iowa*, www.persi.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/census/results.

17. Dorothy Schwieder, Joseph Hraba, and Elmer Schwieder, *Buxton: A Black Utopia in the Heartland* (Iowa City, 2003), 25.

18. Robert R. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Ames, 1997), 109.

19. Wynes, *Race Relations in Virginia 1870-1902*, 93.

seem to have suffered no persecution or ill will. Instead, he had developed strong and lucrative business connections and had begun to prosper as a farmer and a businessman. His personal experience, then, would have been strong evidence of the relative lack of racial animosity in Muchakinock and the potential to provide one's family with a life relatively free of racial violence.

Once they arrived in Muchakinock, the transplanted workers faced the task of learning a new occupation. Most of their waking hours were spent working underground, doing dirty, dangerous work. Coal miners were constantly exposed to the dangers of falling slate, improperly fired explosions, and runaway mules, which were used in many mines to pull coal cars out of the mines. In addition to these dangers, miners faced physical discomforts associated with laboring in cramped spaces. The width of the coal seam determined the height of the area in which the miner worked. Most coal seams in Iowa averaged between three and four feet, which meant that miners spent most of their time either bent over or crawling on their hands and knees. If coal seams measured less than three feet wide, miners were forced to work while lying down.²⁰

The mines at Muchakinock operated on a six-foot-wide seam that was worked via seven openings: one shaft and six drifts. Shaft mines were constructed by sinking a shaft into the ground vertical to the seam in places where the coal was so deep that a sloping tunnel would have been too long or difficult to build. Drift mines were constructed when the coal seam lay horizontal and emerged as an outcropping on a hillside; in that case, the entry could be driven directly into the seam.²¹

The independence accorded to coal miners during their daily work schedule compensated to some degree for the dangers and physical discomforts that were part of their job. Although miners were expected to keep specific hours, they made many decisions daily about how to actually perform their job. Most miners worked in their own "room," or hollowed-out space within the mine, and were primarily responsible for the safety of that room, including ensuring that the roof was prop-

20. Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 56, 57.

21. Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 46; Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 28.

erly supported at all times. Each miner worked at his own pace and so to a large extent determined the amount of coal that he loaded out each day. Miners considered themselves skilled workers and a type of independent contractor, providing their own tools, light, and blasting powder. In addition to the independent nature of the work, coal miners enjoyed a certain degree of job security. Coal operators rarely fired miners; most worked until the mine closed down or they decided to quit.²²

Although the growth of the community indicated that African American laborers viewed work in the Muchakinock mines as an opportunity, daily work in the mines remained a difficult and dangerous occupation. The local press carried frequent reports of men being injured or even killed in the mines. One such example was James Bennett, a 36-year-old miner from Virginia, who died after being injured by an accidental explosion in the mines and later contracting blood poisoning. Of the approximately 300 people buried in the Muchakinock cemetery, which was just one of the cemeteries used to bury Muchakinock residents, the burial records note that seven were killed in mine accidents, although the number of deaths due to working in the mines was probably much higher.²³ The men who died in mining accidents were often young and so probably left behind families with young children. One former resident related that her father, a miner, died at age 54, forcing her mother to take a job at a hotel to support the family.²⁴ High mortality and morbidity rates were a fact of life for coal miners in the late nineteenth century, and, although tragic, the mine accidents experienced in Muchakinock were not unusual for coal camps of the period. The mines at Muchakinock were never the scene of any massive accidents of the sort that occasionally occurred in other areas of Iowa, and later state mine inspectors' reports singled out Consolidation Coal Company for praise for having the best equipped and best ventilated mines in the state. Even so, the Muchakinock cemetery's burial records often listed pneumonia

22. *Ibid.*, 27, 57.

23. *Negro Solicitor*, 3/14/1896, clipping from George H. Woodson Scrapbook, ca. 1895-1902, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City; "Muchakinock Cemetery Burials," undated, Oskaloosa Public Library, Oskaloosa, Iowa.

24. Mattie Murray, interview.

or some other type of lung disease as the cause of death, and those, of course, could well have been caused by exposure to coal dust in the mines.²⁵

Due to the hard, physical nature of the work and the presence of experienced miners to train the new workers, the miners Consolidation recruited to Muchakinock were selected based on physical strength rather than mining experience and were paired with skilled miners until they were able to work independently. Some of the workers brought in were physically incapable of performing the work and either returned home or found other employment. On the whole, however, the early recruiting efforts appear to have been successful. In the early 1880s, 350 of the 500 men Consolidation employed were African American. Active recruitment of black workers from the South continued until 1890, when the Miner's Union was established. The black population of Muchakinock eventually reached 1,500.²⁶

BY THE LATE 1880s, Muchakinock had become the state's largest unincorporated coal mining community, with a population of between 1,500 and 1,800 inhabitants in 1887. In addition to the sizeable African American population, Swedish immigrants made up the other significant ethnic group in the town.²⁷ Four churches served the community. The churches were segregated racially, but the segregation was viewed primarily as a by-product of denominational differences. The two African American churches were African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist, while the other denomination represented was Swedish Lutheran.²⁸ The camp did contain at least a few subdivisions, with one section, known as Swedetown, containing Swedish miners and their families. Otherwise, although the camp appeared to be somewhat structured by ethnic group, there does not seem to be any clear indication of conscious segregation by race. Black and white homes intermingled in at least some areas.

25. Schwieder, *Black Diamonds*, 46-49; Stephen H. Rye, "Buxton: Black Metropolis of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 41 (1972), 945.

26. Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 49.

27. London, *As I Remember*, 1.

28. *History of Mahaska County*, 197.

A former resident of the town remembered that all ethnic groups danced, worked, ate, and played ball together; neighbors helped each other regardless of color, and, in fact, "we didn't know what color was."²⁹

The fact that the town was unincorporated meant that there were no elected city officials. Although there was no police force, Consolidation management appointed a constable and justice of the peace for the town; in 1895 and 1896 both appointees were African American.³⁰ The coal company provided city services, giving it a great deal of control over the town. It does not appear, however, that the company chose to exert its control to the greatest extent possible and certainly not to the extent exercised by other operators of the time. In many coal towns, for example, all housing was company owned. In Muchakinock, about half the miners owned their own houses, and a significant number bought farms in the area. When miner Ned Rhodes died in a mine accident in January 1890, for example, he owned 40 acres of land near the town of Albia.³¹

Another area that many coal companies controlled was the company store, a general store located in the town that was owned by the coal operator and at which the coal miners of the camp were expected to make their purchases. Miners often complained about the prices charged at the company store, claiming that the store's captive market allowed it to overcharge its customers. Some coal operators forced the miners under their employ to trade only at the company store.³²

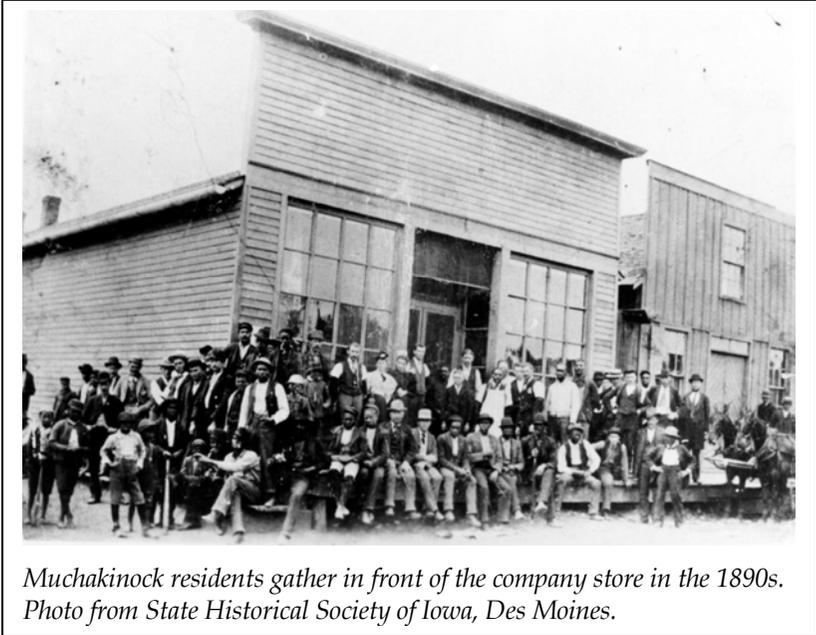
In Muchakinock, however, Consolidation did not take such a heavy-handed approach. Although there was a company store, there were numerous other stores in the community as well. Trade with these privately owned businesses was allowed and

29. Bessie Lewis and Herman Brooks interviews, Dorothy Schwieder Oral Histories, 1980-1982.

30. Woodson Scrapbook.

31. *History of Mahaska County*, 197; *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 1/23/1890.

32. Disputes over company store policies at times even led to strikes. In 1873, for example, workers at the Iowa Coal Company at Beacon, Iowa (also located in Mahaska County), called a strike after some workers who did not trade at the company store were fired. The strike was unsuccessful, however, and the company was able to enforce its policy requiring patronage of the company store. See Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 44.



Muchakinock residents gather in front of the company store in the 1890s. Photo from State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

in some cases even encouraged. To ensure an adequate supply of good meat for the camp, the coal company made an agreement with Hobart Armstrong, the owner of the meat market in town. Each miner's meat bill was charged against the miner's earnings each payday, the same as merchandise bought at the company store, allowing Armstrong to do an extensive credit business with the miners. A specialty grocery store owned by Clayton Foster, an African American who moved from Virginia to Muchakinock in 1880, had the same arrangement. The balance, after subtracting the amount owed by the miner to the company store and other stores with credit arrangements, was paid to the miner in cash.³³

The company store served as a location for social gatherings. At the beginning of each month, the wives of the miners would gather at the company store on "order days." Each family was assigned one day between the first and the fifth day of

33. David G. Smith, "From Virginia Farms to Iowa Coal Mines," *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society* 16 (1997), 115; *History of Mahaska County*, 200.

each month to come to the store and place their grocery order for the upcoming month. The women of the camp viewed order days as an opportunity to socialize and exchange news.³⁴

Muchakinock in the 1890s contained numerous other enterprises. The town's Main Street ran north and south, with Consolidation's property located west of Main Street and privately owned homes and businesses on the east side.³⁵ Along with private dwellings, a number of businesses lined Main Street, as well as Harrison and Monroe streets, which ran perpendicular to Main. A blacksmith and wagon shop was located at the town's southern entrance; traveling north on Main Street, a visitor to the town in 1900 would have passed a meat market, cobbler, restaurant, drug store, public hall, lunch room, and two saloons in the first block, followed by another drug store, general store, post office, restaurant, boarding house, and two barbershops in the next. The third commercial block on Main Street was the site of another saloon, lunch room, restaurant, barber, and druggist. Other businesses in town included a milliner, dressmaker, livery stable, blacksmith, photograph gallery, and lumber yard. At least some of these businesses were owned by African Americans, including B. F. Cooper, one of the druggists, and Charles H. Mease, one of the owners of Star Company Grocers. There were two schools in town, employing both white and African American teachers. In addition, Muchakinock was home to two brass bands, an opera house, and a choir. There were also a number of lodges in the town, including Master Masons and Odd Fellows, which had separate lodges for blacks and whites.³⁶

The lodges, along with the schools and churches in town, helped to build a strong sense of community and represented areas of life in Muchakinock that were largely controlled by the African American population. In addition to the significant independence miners realized during their daily work schedule, miners and their families took advantage of organizations in

34. London, "As I Remember," 2.

35. Digital Sanborn Maps 1867-1970, "Muchakinock [Mahaska County], Iowa, Sept. 1900," <http://sanborn.umi.com>.

36. R. L. Polk & Co., *Iowa State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, microform vol. 8 (1895-96), State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, 811; *History of Mahaska County*, 197.

Muchakinock that allowed them to exercise a great deal of control over many other aspects of their lives as well. In the 1880s the miners established a society called The Colony for their mutual protection. That type of mutual benefit association was not uncommon among mining camps in the United States, with one of the first such organizations formed by Cornish copper miners in Michigan in the early 1860s. John Buxton, Consolidation's superintendent, suggested the formation of The Colony in Muchakinock as a way to ensure medical attention for the miners and their families and to prevent them from becoming a burden on the county. Dues for the organization, which provided medical care for the miners and their families, were 50 cents per month for single men and one dollar per month for married men. A physician received 80 percent of the fund for medical services; the remainder was used to fund disability and funeral benefits for the miners.³⁷

Although Consolidation management encouraged the establishment of The Colony, the miners themselves organized it, and nearly all of the African American miners in the camp belonged to it. The president and secretary, who were elected by the members, signed all checks, but Consolidation's treasurer also acted as treasurer of The Colony and handled all of its funds. Later, after Consolidation moved its operations to Buxton, The Colony was still in operation and all officers, including the president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, along with nine board members, were elected annually by the members; in addition, by that time, Consolidation required all of the African American miners it employed to belong to The Colony. At least in Buxton, a separate mutual benefit association was established for white miners employed by Consolidation.³⁸

The Colony government was also used as a type of court to try cases arising from quarrels among members who did not have access to any other means of settling disputes in an unin-

37. Stuart C. Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism: 1880-1940* (Chicago, 1976), 93; WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 16; Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 49. London, "As I Remember," 3, reported that the monthly dues were 75 cents for single men and \$1.50 for married men.

38. WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 17; *Constitution and By-Laws of the Buxton Mining Colony* (Buxton, 1906); *Constitution of the Mutual Benefit Association of Buxton, Iowa* (Buxton, 1907).

corporated town. The Colony board handed down fines to its members for such infractions as public drunkenness, fighting, and disorderly conduct. Refusal to pay a fine resulted in expulsion from The Colony and dismissal from Consolidation. The establishment of The Colony, then, gave the miners some measure of control over their financial situation and a means to enforce order in their unincorporated community.³⁹

Another event that displayed the strength of the African American community was the annual Muchakinock Fair, which took place on Hobart Armstrong's farm in early September. The black community organized the fair, which was well attended not only by both black and white residents of Muchakinock but by visitors from neighboring towns as well. Work in the mines was suspended for two days so that everyone could enjoy the shooting and horse-racing contests, as well as the display and sale of items handcrafted by members of the African American community. Local women's clubs displayed quilts and other types of needlework, and awards were given for the best floral and fruit displays. The horse races, which took place on the track Armstrong had constructed, were a big draw; betting was open to anyone who could afford to do so, and the purses offered were as large as or larger than the average county fair purse. Additional high points of the fair included shows and attractions, food, and marching bands. The Muchakinock Fair was highly regarded in the region, not only for the great entertainment it provided, but as a financially successful venture as well.⁴⁰

Education was another aspect of daily life that the African American community largely controlled. In Muchakinock, education was valued and accessible, with African American role models in positions of authority. Minnie London moved to Muchakinock as a bride in 1891. She taught in the Muchakinock schools and later in Buxton as well. In addition to black teachers, one of the principals in the town during the 1890s was S. Joe Brown, an African American graduate of the State University

39. *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 10/4/1883; Olin, *Coal Mining in Iowa*, 49; WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 17.

40. *Iowa State Bystander*, 9/9/1898; *Eddyville Tribune*, 9/9/1898, clipping from Woodson Scrapbook; WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 11-12.

of Iowa who later became a prominent attorney in the state, practicing in Des Moines. Hobart Armstrong was also active in the school district, serving as president of the school board for Muchakinock and surrounding towns from at least 1895 until his resignation in 1902, when he moved to Buxton.⁴¹

Educational opportunities were not limited to education of children in the schools. One of the local pastors organized a night school for adults who worked during the day. Many cultural and educational programs were presented for the entire community as well. In February 1899, Booker T. Washington visited the town to present a lecture, and the entire town closed down so that everyone could attend. Washington's lecture highlighted the importance of education and self-reliance. The message was obviously well received in the town, as a few days later the Muchakinock Banking Club was organized to encourage residents to begin savings accounts.⁴²

The value Muchakinock residents placed on education was evident in other ways as well. A newspaper article in 1897 noted that eight members of the community had each purchased a 25-volume set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. At a cost of \$35 in 1895, that would have represented a significant investment on a miner's wages, given that the average coal miner in the United States in 1895 earned approximately \$300 to \$350 annually. Also, in 1899, a young man from Muchakinock, E. A. Carter, graduated from Oskaloosa Senior High School as the only black member of his class. Knowing that he wanted to continue his education and study law, several members of the community organized a benefit for Carter and raised money that helped defray the costs of his education. Carter did continue his education, but his interest switched to medicine, and he later worked as a coal company physician in Buxton.⁴³

41. London, "As I Remember," 1; Caldwell Titcomb, "The Earliest Black Members of Phi Beta Kappa," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 33 (2001), 100; *History of Mahaska County*, 204-5.

42. *Iowa State Bystander*, 5/21/1897, 2/3/1899; *Oskaloosa Tribune*, 2/11/1943.

43. *Negro Solicitor*, 6/5/1897, clipping from Woodson Scrapbook; J. Bradford DeLong, "Slouching Towards Utopia?: The Economic History of the Twentieth Century," January 1997, at www.econ161.berkeley.edu/TCEH/slouch_wealth2.html; Fishback, *Soft Coal, Hard Choices*, 80-81; *Iowa State Bystander*, 7/7/1899.



In December 1898, the Iowa State Bystander ran this photo of the “famous” Muchakinock band, which it called “the best and oldest colored musical organization in Iowa.” The band was “at present in search of a Negro graduate in Music to whom they can give a lucrative position as clerk in the general store of W. A. Wells and Co. and the band will also pay him for tuition.” From Iowa State Bystander, December 23, 1898.

In addition to these examples of formal educational initiatives, Muchakinock residents clearly valued musical education as well. The Muchakinock Cornet Band, a brass band consisting of 20 pieces in 1898, was the pride of the town, due to its musical ability as well as its impressive ermine-trimmed uniforms. Both the members and officers of the band were African American. It played at many events throughout Iowa, such as Fourth of July and Emancipation Day celebrations, and earned much acclaim. The high praise it earned reflected the hard work and dedication the band members devoted to their musical education, since all of the members worked in the mines and, when the band was first organized, over half of the members were unacquainted with music.⁴⁴

Hand in hand with the educational opportunities available in Muchakinock were the opportunities for professionals to work in an African American community. In addition to educational professionals, the town was also home to black journal-

44. *Oskaloosa Daily Herald*, 10/6/1939; *Iowa State Bystander*, 12/23/1898; Woodson Scrapbook.

ists, a black pharmacist, and a black lawyer. During the town's history, it was served by several black newspapers, the earliest being the *Oskaloosa Gazette*, the *Iowa District News*, and the *Negro Solicitor*. The first two were short lived, lasting only about one year each, but the *Solicitor* was published from 1893 to 1899. George E. Taylor, an African American resident of nearby Oskaloosa, edited the *Solicitor*. In 1897 the *Muchakinock State*, an independent weekly journal, was founded by seven residents of Muchakinock, most of whom worked for the coal company, some as miners or laborers. The *Muchakinock State* lasted only one month, as was smugly pointed out by the editor of the rival *Negro Solicitor*. Although short-lived, the *Muchakinock State* was evidence of the ability of blacks from all occupational levels to play strong leadership roles within the community.⁴⁵

Another professional practicing in Muchakinock was B. F. Cooper, probably the first black pharmacist to work west of the Mississippi. He played a leading role in the local business community and managed the local baseball team. An African American midwife, known as "Old Lady" Ross, was also a respected and valued member of the community. Another prominent figure in Muchakinock was George H. Woodson, an attorney who graduated from Howard University at the head of his class in 1895 and the following year moved to Muchakinock, where he practiced law. He soon became active in professional and political organizations, serving as vice president of the Mahaska County Bar Association and also frequently serving as a delegate to county and state Republican conventions. Later he ran unsuccessfully for county attorney of Mahaska County. Woodson was a popular public speaker and often appeared at Fourth of July and Emancipation Day celebrations and other community events, occasionally preaching at the Muchakinock African Methodist Episcopal church as well.⁴⁶

45. *A Bibliography of Iowa Newspapers, 1836-1976* (Des Moines, 1979); *Muchakinock State*, 12/17/1897, clipping from Woodson Scrapbook; *Negro Solicitor*, 1/20/1898, clipping from Woodson Scrapbook; U.S. Census Bureau, *Federal Census, 1880, Mahaska County, Iowa*.

46. *Albia Republican*, 12/15/1910; Herman Brooks, interview; London, "As I Remember," 3; Leroy E. Corlett, "History of Mahaska County Bar," *Annals of Iowa* 29 (1949), 535; *Iowa State Bystander*, 5/18/1899; Woodson Scrapbook.

Professionals were not the only ones who found business opportunities in Muchakinock. Women, as well as men, took advantage of economic opportunities in Muchakinock. Sadie Baxter was the proprietor of a millinery shop, and Mrs. C. H. Mease owned a dressmaking business. Numerous men came to the town to work in the mines but were eventually able to develop their own businesses. Clayton Foster, who followed his brother to Muchakinock in 1881, was working as a mine boss by 1900, but he also owned a specialty grocery store in the town. He later became well known as a public speaker, served as president of The Colony for many years, and was active in local and national politics. Reuben Gaines worked as a miner in Muchakinock and later owned a hotel in Buxton. Albert Rhodes, a miner who had migrated from Virginia with his family in the mid-1880s, eventually operated a livery stable in Muchakinock and a hack service between Muchakinock and Oskaloosa. John Farrall, who was born in Charlottesville, Virginia, and moved with his family to Muchakinock in 1880 at age 12, started working in the mines at a young age while continuing his education at night. He later became an agent and then district manager for Bankers Accident Life Insurance Company. These examples indicate that opportunities to increase one's financial standing were not beyond the reach of any of the residents of the town, regardless of race or occupation.⁴⁷

BY A NUMBER OF MEASURES, the experience of the African American community in Muchakinock in the 1880s and 1890s was positive and in some ways even exceptional. Miners were able to earn a living wage in a working environment that gave them some measure of control over their daily lives. Both the workplace and the community at large appeared to be virtually free of enforced segregation and racial violence. Miners and their families exercised significant control over the structure of their community through their churches, lodges, and other

47. *Iowa State Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 811; Smith, "From Virginia Farms to Iowa Coal Mines," 115-16; Reuben Gaines Jr., undated memoir, Frances Hawthorne Collection, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City; Bessie Lewis, interview; *Buxton Advocate*, 6/23/1911, clipping in Hubert L. Olin Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

social institutions, and The Colony offered a degree of financial stability. Accessibility of education did not depend on race. The combination of these advantages was rare in an African American community of the time. Some possible explanations for why the black experience in Muchakinock was unusual may include the actions taken by coal company management and the efforts of the Muchakinock residents themselves, particularly the leaders of the African American community.

The answer to Muchakinock's success does not seem to lie in the attitudes of Iowans in general. Iowa was not particularly welcoming to African Americans during its early history. During the territorial and antebellum periods, numerous attempts were made to codify into law restrictions on the rights of blacks. After the Civil War, Iowans' attitudes towards the presence of African Americans in the state seem to have changed somewhat. In 1868 the constitution was amended after voters passed a referendum guaranteeing black male suffrage in the state. At the time, only five states, all in New England, allowed blacks to vote.⁴⁸ Although that decision seemed to indicate a more inclusive attitude toward African Americans in the state, some Iowa communities were still intent on excluding blacks. The town of Beacon, also a coal-mining community in Mahaska County, had an informal "sunset law" requiring blacks to be out of town before sunset or face violent expulsion. The coal-mining town of Laddsdale had similar provisions excluding blacks from the town. Even in towns where blacks were allowed to live and work, accommodations and services were often segregated.⁴⁹

Although sources disagree on whether African Americans in Muchakinock initially experienced any ill treatment, there were no reports of violence in the local press. At least some neighboring residents did not welcome their arrival, however. A correspondent from Oskaloosa to the *National Labor Tribune*

48. Schwieder et al., *Buxton*, 19; Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star*.

49. Herman Brooks, interview; Alvie and Mable Harding, "The Ghost Mining Town of Laddsdale, Iowa: 1872-1918" (Eldon, 1971); Harriet Heusinkveld, *Coal Mining Days in Marion County, Iowa* (Pella, 1995), 101, 124. For a general discussion of midwestern towns whose inhabitants either formally or informally excluded African American residents and the methods used to enforce such exclusion, see James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York, 2005).

made reference to the "Zulus in this section." The Oskaloosa press in general seemed to report favorably on the African American miners. Shortly after their arrival in 1880, a reporter visited the camp at Muchakinock and wrote that the men were adapting quickly to work in the mines. In July a correspondent visited the Muchakinock mines and reported that the black miners were proving to be responsible, industrious workers.⁵⁰ These newspaper accounts, however, may have reflected the coal company's influence on the press rather than the sentiments of people in the community. In any event, the black miners and their families were not driven out of town nor were they forced to live in segregated conditions.

The attitudes and practices of the coal company executives may have influenced the acceptance of the African American miners in Muchakinock. For many years, John Buxton and later his son Ben worked as Consolidation's mine superintendent. The miners regarded John Buxton as a tough but fair boss who maintained tight control of the mines' daily operations. The inexperienced black miners who were imported from the South were paid the same wages as the white miners right from the start. White and black miners worked side by side, with more experienced miners training the newcomers until they could work on their own. John, and later his son Ben, did not tolerate racial violence. A former resident remembered that Buxton got rid of those who "didn't treat people right." If some whites were not comfortable with the desegregated conditions, they did not stay long because the coal company management "made it hard for them."⁵¹ The company was able to exercise such control over the community in part because Muchakinock was unincorporated and also because the company controlled virtually all employment in the town. The lack of a city government meant that company management could make decisions that reinforced its desire to maintain order in a racially integrated setting.

50. *National Labor Tribune*, 10/27/1883; *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 3/25/1880, 7/22/1880.

51. *History of Mahaska County*, 200; Bessie Lewis, interview; WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 6-8.

The desire for order and cooperation among ethnic groups does not imply that the company was acting altruistically or to satisfy some ideal of a model community. The motivation behind the promotion of racial equality in Muchakinock may have been simply financial from the company's perspective. Its management viewed the African American miners as hard working, dependable, and productive and not inclined to strike.⁵² The company had every incentive to maintain a satisfied and affordable labor force, and the elimination of racial discrimination and segregation was a relatively cheap way to keep its African American miners happy.

John Buxton and the other company executives were not, however, the only pillars of the community who were responsible for maintaining a harmonious work and social environment. A number of African American merchants and professionals also provided tremendous leadership in the town. The credibility and leadership by example provided by Hobart Armstrong, a highly respected and influential community leader, was essential to the town's success. Whites and blacks alike recognized Armstrong for his business skills and community service. He was one of the primary organizers of the annual Fourth of July celebration in Muchakinock. In 1887 Buxton and Armstrong were credited with providing the food for the day's barbecue, as well as the fireworks display. His farm was also the site of the annual Muchakinock Fair, which was well attended by whites from surrounding areas as well as Muchakinock's African American population. Whites and blacks gambled, ate, played, and laughed together for three or four days each year, courtesy of Armstrong. In addition to operating the Muchakinock Fair, he also backed the Oskaloosa, Albia, and Knoxville fairs with financial and personal assistance. In 1899 Armstrong was elected township trustee for East Des Moines Township, as well as a delegate to the county convention. Considering also his many years of tenure as school board president, he had an admirable record of public service.⁵³

52. WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 10.

53. *Oskaloosa Tribune*, 10/6/1939; *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 7/14/1887; WPA Writers' Program, "The Negro and the Coal Camps," 11-12; *Oskaloosa Daily Herald*, 10/19/1932; *Iowa State Bystander*, 7/21/1899.

Armstrong's business acumen also earned him a great deal of respect in both the black and white communities. Newspaper accounts of the time describe him as a shrewd and capable businessman who amassed a net worth of over \$200,000. After his early success in the mule business, Armstrong diversified his business holdings, eventually owning various businesses and rental properties in Muchakinock and later in the town of Buxton, as well as 16 to 18 farms in Mahaska and Monroe counties.⁵⁴

Armstrong's business success and public service led to his recognition as a leader of the African American community. For African Americans, he was an example of what could be accomplished through hard work. For whites, he was a respected leader whose personal credibility helped lend credibility to the community as a whole. One reason whites feared the influx of African Americans was the belief that blacks would be unwilling to work hard and so would become a burden on the community.⁵⁵ Armstrong's experience, and the experience of the African American miners who followed him to Muchakinock, illustrated that this argument was not a strong one.

The uniqueness of the African American experience in Muchakinock is graphically illustrated in the pages of George Woodson's scrapbook. On one page of the scrapbook are articles clipped from the *Negro Solicitor* that recount the election of black miners as officers of The Colony and report on Woodson's numerous speaking engagements and his candidacy for public office. On another page is a clipping from an unidentified newspaper that reports that 1,000 blacks were lynched in the South from 1882 to 1892. These pages show the stark contrast between the opportunities that existed for blacks in Muchakinock and the violent oppression that they suffered elsewhere in the United States. The miners who emigrated to Muchakinock from Virginia and other southern states found work in a demanding and dangerous occupation that nonetheless provided fair wages and working conditions. The miners and their families were able to escape the poverty, racial violence, and segregation of the South

54. *Eddyville Tribune*, 9/9/1898; *Albia Republican*, 12/15/1910; Carl Kietzman and Earl Smith, interviews, Dorothy Schwieder Oral Histories.

55. *Oskaloosa Weekly Herald*, 7/19/1883.

and took advantage of educational, cultural, professional, and business opportunities at every occupational level. They exercised a great deal of control over the structure of their community and its institutions and worked hard to improve themselves and their town. Muchakinock's success depended to a large extent on the hard work of the miners and their families but was also due to the presence of strong leaders such as Hobart Armstrong. In addition, the progressive policies of the management of Consolidation Coal Company contributed to an environment that provided the African American miners with an opportunity to develop a strong and vibrant community. All that remains of that community today are a cemetery and the faintly visible remains of Hobart Armstrong's race track—and the legacy of the town as an example of what can be achieved through hard work, tolerance, and mutual respect.⁵⁶

56. Coal mining operations continued in Muchakinock until about 1901. In 1896, Consolidation's management determined that the Muchakinock mines would soon be depleted and sent engineers into the surrounding counties to locate new coal reserves. In 1900 the company selected a new site in extreme northern Monroe County and began creating a new community there. The new coal camp was named Buxton, after Consolidation superintendent John Buxton. Beginning in October of that year, Consolidation began moving families—and in some cases even their houses—to Buxton. By 1905, all that remained of the town of Muchakinock were a partial railway grade and a few bricks that had formed the foundations of the miners' homes. See *Des Moines Register and Leader*, 7/23/1905. For the history of Buxton, see Schwieder et al., *Buxton*; and David M. Gradwohl and Nancy M. Osborn, *Exploring Buried Buxton: Archaeology of an Abandoned Iowa Coal Mining Town with a Large Black Population* (Ames, 1984).