

Pocahontas Coal Goes to Norfolk

The drawing of N&W 7124 carrying the second car of coal loaded in the Pocahontas Coalfield to Norfolk Mayor William Lamb was actually drawn on April 12, 1938 and is part of the Norfolk Southern Corporation collection.

E.F. Pat Striplin writes in *The Norfolk & Western*, “... the first car load of Pocahontas coal was accepted by the N&W for use as locomotive fuel. The second car of Pocahontas coal (40,000 pounds) was assigned to the Mayor of Norfolk, William Lamb, a lawyer and Confederate hero. The car was presented to the Mayor by Kimball and its arrival, about 5 p.m., March 17, was signaled by a salute by the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues under a Lieutenant John Whitehead. Detached from the rest of the train and gaily decorated with bunting, it proceeded through the city with many running out to take a souvenir piece of coal. The car rested at the passenger station over the weekend. The engine that pulled the car from Pocahontas was Mogul Engine No. 83. The car was gondola No. 6212. The Mayor declared, “This car was the precursor of a trade which is destined to make our port the most important coaling station on the Atlantic Coast.” The mayor was right.

Astute readers will note that the drawing and Mr. Striplin’s description of the car delivered to the Mayor of Norfolk are not in agreement.

March 10, 2013 marks the 130th Anniversary of the Norfolk & Western Railroad opening the Pocahontas Coalfield. On March 10, 1883 the first N&W train arrived in Pocahontas, Virginia.

Other related 130th Anniversary dates we will see in March 2013 include March 12, the day the first railroad gondola was loaded with Pocahontas coal; March 13, the day the first train left the Pocahontas Coalfield for Norfolk, Virginia; and March 17, the day the first train of Pocahontas Coal arrived in Norfolk.

When the N&W delivered the first train of coal from Pocahontas to Norfolk, it introduced the world to the Pocahontas Coal Seam. Within a few short years Pocahontas Coal became the world standard for coal, and all other coals were measured against the chemical composition of Pocahontas Coal. Pocahontas Coal became the preferred fuel for the world’s navies, and when the United States built the Panama Canal, Pocahontas Coal was used to fuel the steam-powered machines. Pocahontas Coal was used to feed the iron furnaces of Virginia and the steel mills of Chicago and Pittsburgh.

Pocahontas Coal became such an important part of the industrialization of America (and other parts of the world) that the boundaries of the Pocahontas Coalfield were defined and protected by a United States Supreme Court decision lest an inferior product be sold as Pocahontas Coal.

But, before Pocahontas Coal became such a valuable industrial commodity, it changed the plans of a railroad. The value of the coal determined the path the railroad took to secure its future, and Pocahontas Coal provided the revenue that allowed the N&W to become a major railroad.

By the time the N&W merged with the Southern Railroad in 1982 it had hauled over 1.68 billion tons of Pocahontas Coal, equivalent to 33.6 million 50-ton hopper loads.

It all started on March 10, 1883 when the first N&W train rolled into Pocahontas, Virginia with its empty gondolas. The gondolas were loaded from the 40,000 tons of coal that had been mined before the rails reached the mines.

A Brief History of the N&W and the Pocahontas Coalfield

Dr. Thomas Walker recorded the existence of coal on Laurel Creek in Virginia in 1750. Professor W.B. Rogers surveyed the region from 1836 to 1842 and called attention to the rich coal seams between Flat Top Mountain and the Ohio River. In 1873 Major Jed Hotchkiss hired Captain Isaiah Welch to survey the lands of the 500,000 acre Wilson Cary Nicholas land grant on behalf of the Maitland family of Philadelphia.

Welch's survey was read by a few prominent Philadelphia speculators and by Frederick Kimball.

In March 1881 Kimball commissioned his own survey of the southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia coal lands. Kimball also contacted Hotchkiss for more information on Captain Welch's survey. Hotchkiss responded with more information and a map for a railroad up the East River to Laurel Creek, where he identified outcroppings of a coal seam that was 11 feet thick.

Using the information Hotchkiss sent him, Kimball set out on May 14, 1881 to see the land for himself. He was accompanied by his wife, Edward T. Steel, a Philadelphia capitalist, and Mrs. William Dixon of Baltimore. By the evening of May 16 they had reached Saltville, Virginia by railroad travel. On May 22 the party was in Abbs Valley, where they observed the 12-foot coal seam that was included on the map Major Hotchkiss had sent them. It is reported that Mrs. Kimball declared that since they were in Indian country the thick coal seam should be named "Pocahontas."

The sight of the outcropped coal seam caused the N&W to change its plans for westward expansion. Rather than follow the New River to Hinton, West Virginia, the railroad would turn east at the mouth

of the East River and follow the Hotchkiss route to Laurel Creek.

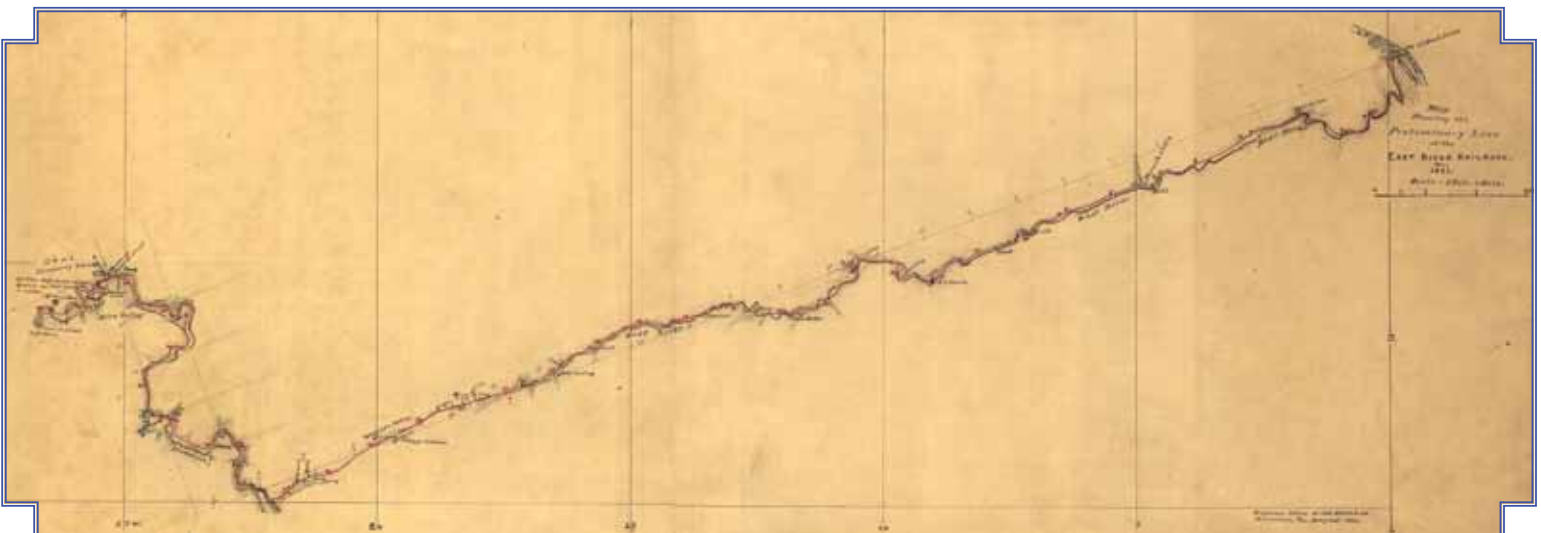
Unfortunately for the N&W the New River Railroad Company of Virginia had received a charter in 1872 to build railroads along the New River, East River, and Bluestone Rivers from New River Depot (Radford) to the West Virginia state line. The New River Railroad Company was owned by Thomas Graham and other Philadelphians. The Graham group had also been securing coal lands.

After some negotiations the N&W and the Graham group signed an agreement on June 23, 1881 whereby the N&W would construct a railroad to reach the coal deposits on Laurel Creek, and the Graham Group would develop the coal property.

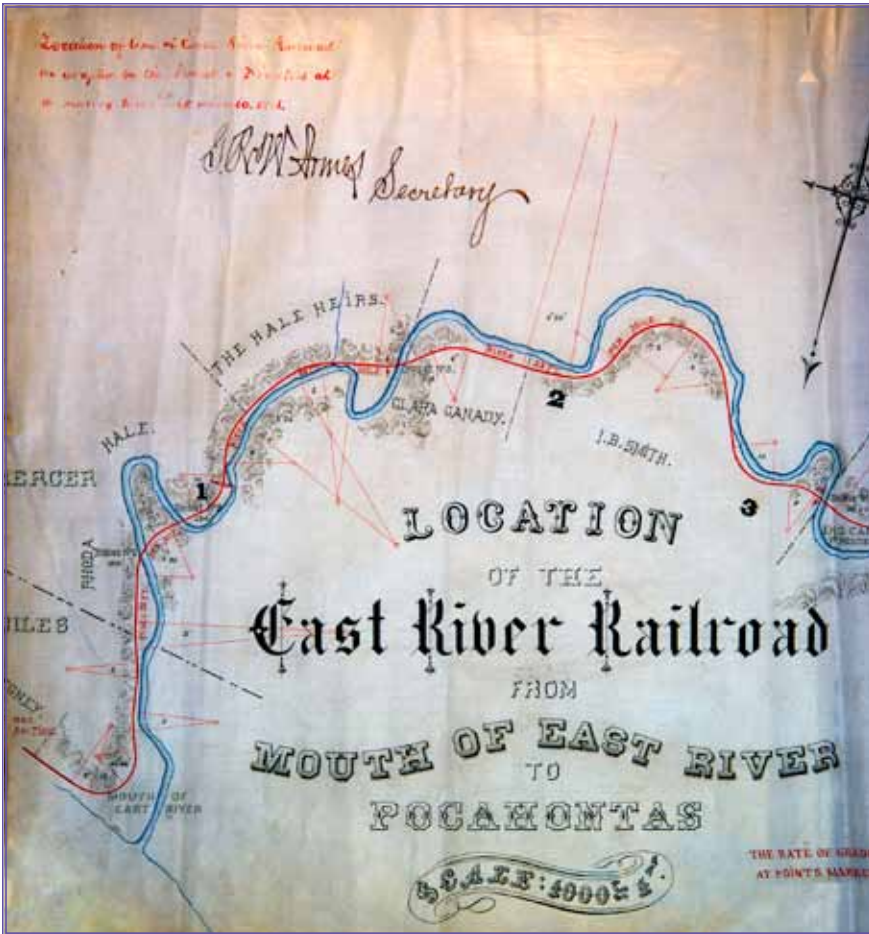
The Southwest Virginia Improvement Company (SWVIC) was chartered in September 1881 to develop the coal property. E.T. Steel was the president and Thomas Graham was the vice-president. E.W. Clark & Company and Clarence H. Clark, the N&W's financial backers, were also large investors in the coal company.

SWVIC hired 27-year old William A. Lathrop to develop its Virginia property. Lathrop and his wife arrived in Abbs Valley in November 1881. A village known as Pocahontas was laid out on Laurel Creek, and in January 1882 mining began. By 1883 Pocahontas had 1,000 inhabitants, seven stores, one hotel and 40,000 tons of mined coal waiting for the railroad to arrive.

Kimball had his own work to do, as he ordered a location to be surveyed for the fastest and shortest route into the coalfield. With the survey complete to Pocahontas, construction began in August 1881 from New River Depot.



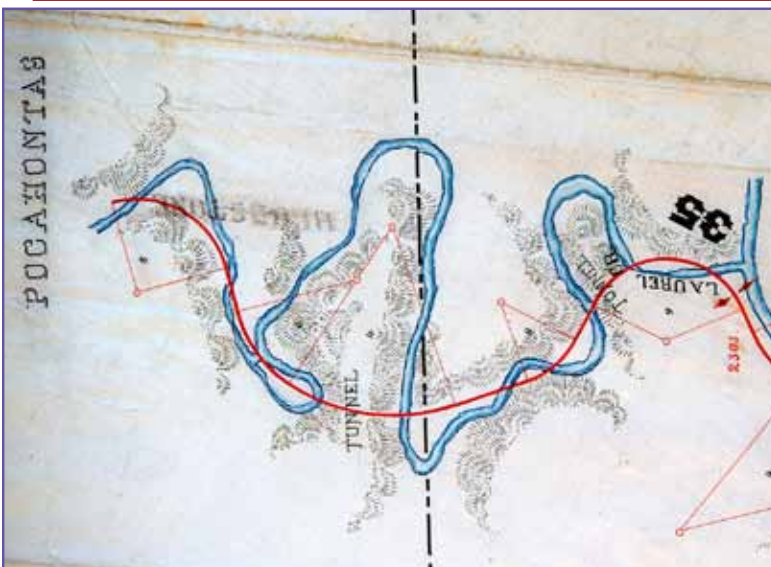
Major Jed Hotchkiss's map, dated May 1881, showed a 39-mile long preliminary route for the East River Railroad from New River to Laurel Creek. It was signed by Hotchkiss in August 1881. *Library of Congress collection*



The map portion to the upper left is from the Location of the East River Railroad Map. This portion shows the railroad location at the Mouth of the East River. The overall map is about 15 feet in length, as it covers the entire railroad from Glen Lyn to Pocahontas. (Note that in contrast to the map on the previous page, south is at the top.) *NWHS Archives*

The map portion to the upper right is from the Hotchkiss East River Railroad Map, taken at the Mouth of the East River. The map has been inverted to allow a somewhat direct comparison between the two location maps. *Library of Congress*

The map portion to the lower left is a portion of the East River Railroad location map showing the planned route of the railroad from the Mouth of Laurel Creek to Pocahontas. The map portion to the lower right is the planned route from the Hotchkiss map. Note that the difference in distance between the Mouth of the East River and the Mouth of Laurel Creek as shown on the two maps is about 1½ miles.



Even though the construction from New River Depot began in August 1881, the final location map for the East River portion of the railroad was not signed off on until December 10, 1881.

While the railroad was under construction, on May 9, 1882, the subsidiary railroads of the New River Railroad Company along the New River and the East River were absorbed into the N&W and became the New River Division of the N&W.

After an expenditure of nearly \$2,000,000 the 75 miles of the New River Division were essentially complete in March 1883. After the delivery of the first coal train to Norfolk on May 17, 1883, the New River Division was opened to regular traffic on May 21, 1881.

When the mainline to Pocahontas was opened, the next decision the N&W faced was how to go west. In August 1884 the N&W started building down the Bluestone River as the Flat Top Extension. The intention was to build down the Bluestone to Crane Creek and then up Crane creek to Peters Gap. The railroad would cross Peters Gap and follow Pinnacle Creek to the Guyandotte River. From there it would proceed to the Ohio River. However, in 1885 a decision was made to build the Elkhorn Extension to reach the coal property on Elkhorn Creek in McDowell County.

When construction began on the Elkhorn Extension in 1887 westward expansion plans changed. The new plan became to build the railroad down Elkhorn Creek to Keystone and then turn up Burks Creek to reach Pinnacle Creek and the Guyandotte River.

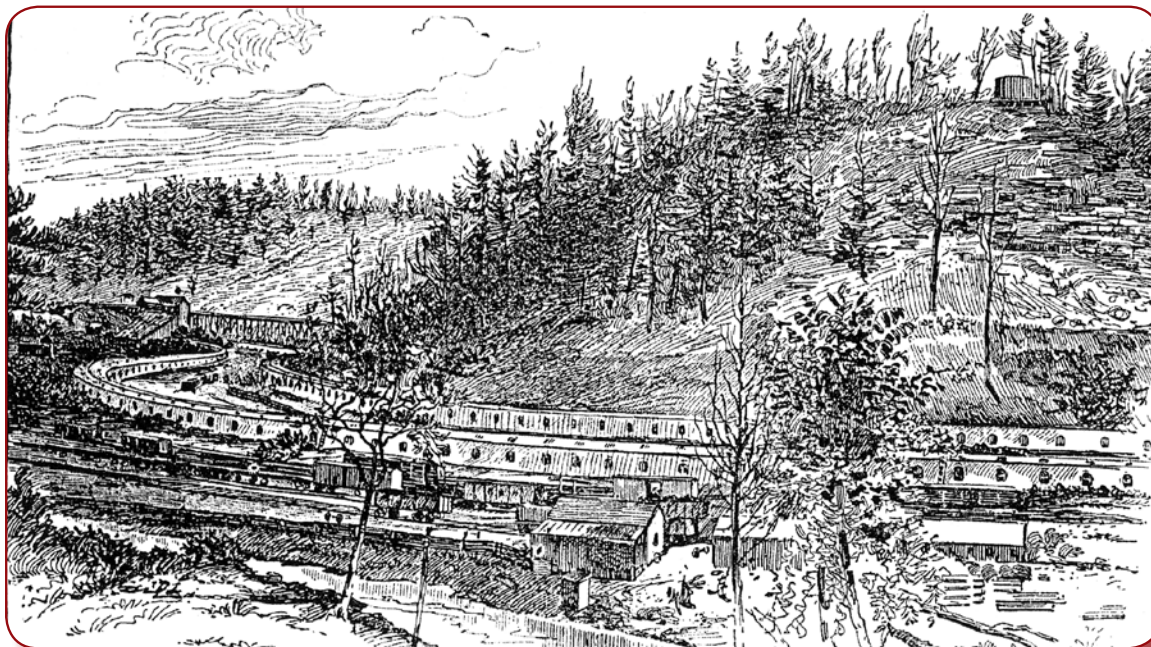
The First Train into Pocahontas

"Your father had the mines opened and 100 coke ovens built before the branch railroad from the N&W was finished, and how anxiously we waited for that event and the arrival of the first train. I was just plain excited the day it did arrive, and could hardly settle down to do anything intelligently; finally we heard the locomotive whistle down the line, and I assure you no operatic music ever thrilled me as that sound did, and the freight train with a dilapidated [dilapidated] looking passenger car on the rear end was a beautiful sight. Everyone turned out to see and welcome it, with cheers and shoutings.

Soon after this a bad spring storm and freshet washed out part of the new railroad, so we had no train for about three weeks, and consequently no supplies. Fortunately I had corned beef, which with some canned vegetables just lasted until the first train arrived."

Written by Mrs. W. A. Lathrop in a letter to her daughter circa 1938

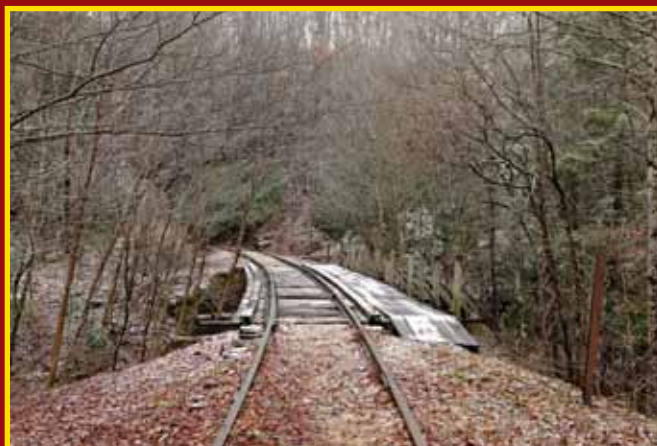
After the railroad was constructed to Elkhorn the plans changed again. This new plan was to build the railroad down Elkhorn Creek to the Tug Fork, follow the Tug Fork to the Big Sandy, and then on to the Ohio River. This plan was the one actually constructed and became known as the Ohio Extension.



An early drawing of the SWVIC operation at Pocahontas, Virginia. In 1901 the company name was changed to Pocahontas Collieries Company. In 1907 the company was taken over by the Pocahontas Consolidated Company and the new company was known as the Pocahontas Consolidated Collieries Company. In 1917 the company name was changed again to Pocahontas Fuel Company. *NWHS Archives*

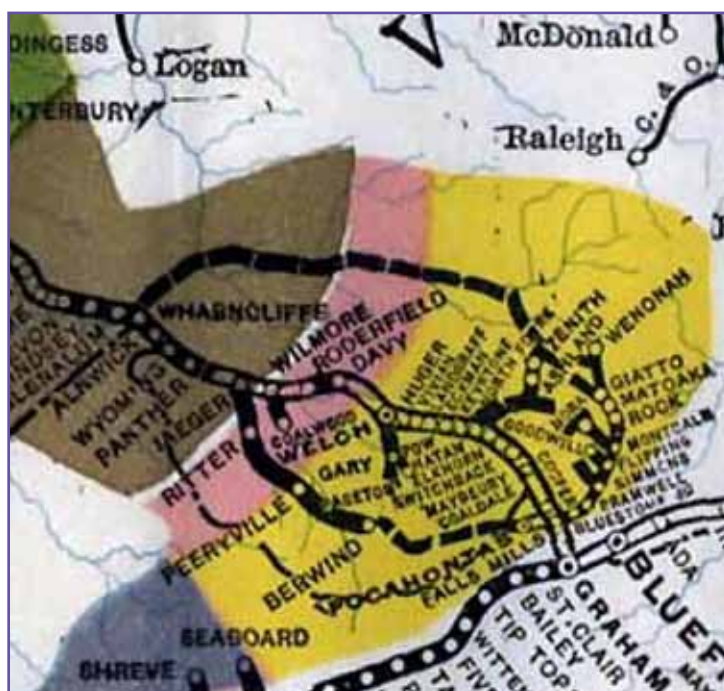
The original Pocahontas Mine operated until October 13, 1955 and produced 44 million tons of coal by mining 2,880 acres.

Pocahontas Branch in 2013



In celebration of the 130th Anniversary of the first train into the Pocahontas Coalfield, Jeff Hawkins has published a feature about the Pocahontas Branch on his Rails in Virginia website. It includes a photo gallery, history and map.

<http://www.railsinvirginia.com/abandoned/nw/pocahontas/index.html>



The Pocahontas Coalfield

The first train into Pocahontas, Virginia opened the Pocahontas Coalfield to the world. In 1907 the N&W published its first coalfield map. The yellow portion is what the N&W considered the Pocahontas Coalfield. The pink portion was considered by the railroad to be the Tug River Coalfield. When the Supreme Court ruled on the boundaries of the Pocahontas Coalfield in 1931, it included the Tug River Coalfield in the boundaries of the Pocahontas Coalfield.

The Supreme Court boundaries included the Pocahontas, Bluestone, North Fork, Dans, King, Tug Fork, Superior, Spice Creek, Clear Fork and Dry Fork Branches of the N&W along with their branches and spurs.

There were over 140 mining operations along these N&W branch lines that produced over 1,000,000 tons of coal each. The leading coal producer was the Alpheus No. 2 coal mine on the Tug Fork which produced over 75 million tons before it was closed in 1986.

More Information on Pocahontas, the N&W and the Pocahontas Coalfield

The NWHS Commissary has a number of publications about the development of the railroad and the coalfield including:

- *Norfolk & Western's Pocahontas Division* by Mason Cooper
- *Bluestone - Norfolk & Western Branch Line* by Alex Schust and Mason Cooper
- *Billion Dollar Coalfield* by Alex Schust
- *Early Coal Mining in Pocahontas, Virginia* by Jack M. Jones
- *The Norfolk & Western: A History* by E.F. Pat Striplin