

Buxton: A Lost Utopia

What key decisions influence whether a community thrives?

Most early Iowa settlers lived on farms. Some, however, were merchants, lawyers, doctors, newspaper publishers, ministers or craftsmen who lived in the new towns springing up across the prairie. Not all the towns survived. Some never attracted many people and others lost population when conditions changed. The result was Iowa “ghost towns” that exist across the state.

Iowa Ghost Towns

Most early towns came into existence to serve the surrounding farm population. When a trip to town could take several hours, farmers wanted services and supplies close at hand, and towns sprang up every five to six miles apart. The coming of the railroads in the 1870s and 1880s both helped and hindered Iowa. Towns along the rail lines became trading centers where merchants could receive goods from the East and farmers could sell their cattle and hogs for shipment to eastern cities. Towns that had no railroad connection lost customers and usually became ghost towns. Sometimes the railroads even created towns due to the fact that steam engines needed coal and water. This impacted western Iowa especially as rail lines arrived before major waves of population.

Some towns were created with a special purpose. This is especially true of those based upon coal mining, a big industry in Iowa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The railroads again were a major factor because trains were the main buyers for Iowa coal. Many small coal mines sprang up in southeastern and central Iowa. Miners and their families occupied cheap housing nearby, and the rail company sometimes operated general stores and other services for their workers. When the coal ran out in the mine, the mine closed and the miners moved away. Sometimes the houses and other buildings were loaded onto trains and moved to a nearby location where a new mine was opening up.

Buxton

The town of Buxton in southeastern Iowa was unique in that a majority of its residents were African-American. The Consolidated Coal Company worked for the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. Having a hard time recruiting white miners, Consolidated Coal sent agents to southern states to hire black workers. In 1873, it founded the town of Buxton and opened nearby mines. It grew quickly and, according to one source, became the largest coal town west of the Mississippi. In the 1905 census, the town boasted 2,700 blacks and 1,991 whites. The town supported black doctors, lawyers and other professionals, and an African-American YMCA with a gymnasium, an indoor swimming pool and many programs for Buxton residents. The town was proud of its baseball team, the Buxton Wonders. White residents included immigrants from Sweden and elsewhere, and they existed peacefully with the African-Americans throughout the community's history.

Buxton coal production peaked during WWI but afterward, mechanization and conversion of train engines to diesel fuel decreased the demand for coal. Several severe fires ravaged the community and the mines. By 1919, Buxton's population had declined to only 400. The last mine closed in 1927. Residents moved away but fondly remembered their Buxton days. Many blacks moved to Des Moines or Waterloo. Very little physical evidence of the town remains today.

There have been many articles and several books written about this unique African-American experience in rural Iowa. While it is only one of Iowa's many ghost towns, it is probably the most famous.

Supporting Questions

How was Buxton a unique community?

- [Benjamin C. Buxton, Founder of Buxton, Iowa, Date Unknown \(Image\)](#)
- [Postcard View of Center Street in Buxton, 1908 \(Image\)](#)
- [Panoramic View of Buxton, 1910 \(Image\)](#)
- [Postcard Showing Buxton Coal Bank in Shaft of #12 Mine, 1910 \(Image\)](#)
- [Postcard of Miner with Mule-Drawn Cart in a Shaft of Buxton's #12 Mine, 1910 \(Image\)](#)
- [Monroe Mercantile Company Opening, 1911 \(Image\)](#)
- [Monroe Mercantile Company Interior, 1911 \(Image\)](#)
- [Monroe Mercantile Company Employees, 1911 \(Image\)](#)
- [Map of Bluff Creek Township \(Buxton\), 1919 \(Map\)](#)

In what ways did Buxton prosper?

- [Buxton Wonders Baseball Team, 1915 \(Image\)](#)
- [Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992 \(Document\)](#)
- ["Back to Buxton," July 1, 2009 \(Document\)](#)

What caused Buxton to turn into a ghost town?

- [Aftermath of Explosion in Buxton's #12 Mine, Date Unknown \(Image\)](#)
- ["Buxton Review" in the Iowa State Bystander, June 26, 1914 \(Document\)](#)
- [Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community, 1987 \(Document\)](#)
- ["As I Remember" by Minnie Driver, 2003 \(Document\)](#)

[*Printable Image and Document Guide](#)

Additional Resources

Images of America: Lost Buxton by Rachelle Chase (2017): This recent publication is loaded with rich images and meaningful quotes from dozens of Buxton citizens. The author synthesizes many sources to concisely tell the story of Buxton with meaningful details.

Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community by Dorothy Schwieder (1987): Professor, researcher and author Dorothy Schwieder provides details and explanations of many causes and effects of the formation and decline of Buxton.

CRI News Package: Home from Buxton, Iowa: This two-minute video tours a house from Buxton that was moved to Oskaloosa around the 1920s, and then was moved again to the Nelson Pioneer Farm during October 2008.

“Searching for Buxton” Documentary (Part One and Part Two): A young African-American goes searching for his family’s past in a long-disappeared Iowa coal mining town and discovers that much of the prosperity and goodwill his relatives enjoyed nearly a century ago is elusive today. Narrated by Simon Estes.

Reclaiming Iowa’s Abandoned Coal Mine Lands: This eight-minute Iowa Outdoors video focuses on Iowa’s coal mines. A century ago, southern Iowa was home to hundreds of surface coal mines. As the coal boom died so did the companies that mined for it, leaving those mines abandoned and open to the elements. Today, decades after the industry died, efforts slowly continue to clean up the deserted mines and reclaim the ground that was once rich with coal.

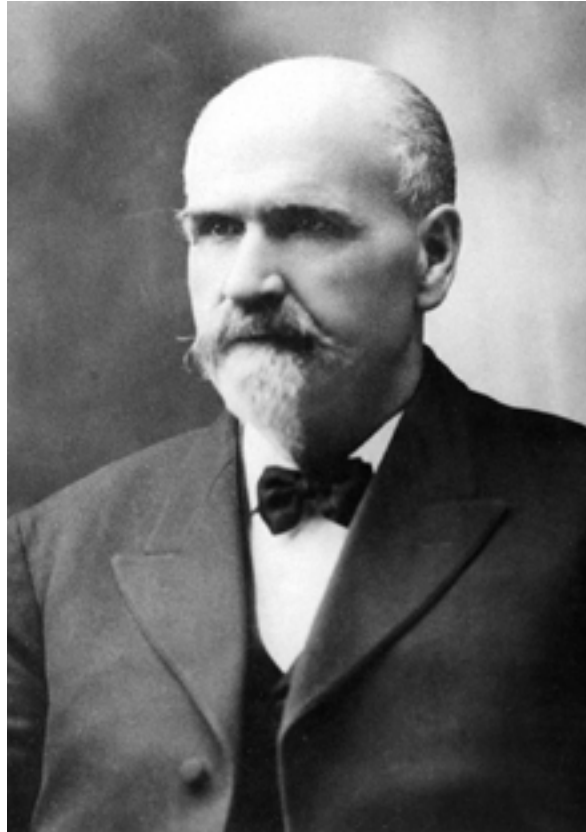
“Editor’s Observations” from the Iowa State Bystander (Oct. 29, 1909, pg. 4): This newspaper article by John Lay Thompson, editor of the Iowa State Bystander, describes the success of African-Americans in Buxton, Iowa. During an era of Jim Crow laws in the South, those who were recruited from Virginia to come and work for Consolidation Coal Company experienced a far different reality in Buxton than they had in Virginia. In his editor’s column, Thompson writes about the demographics, businesses, prominent citizens and services located in Buxton, Iowa, in or around 1909.

“The Buxton Souvenir Number” from the Iowa State Bystander (Dec. 6, 1907): This additional resource includes eight newspaper pages of photos and articles about Buxton.

C. & N.W. Ry. Depot in Buxton, Iowa (1905): A photo of a train depot for Chicago and Northwestern Railway in Buxton, Iowa, in 1905.

[Additional Buxton Photographs from the State Historical Society of Iowa](#)

Benjamin C. Buxton, Founder of Buxton, Iowa, Date Unknown



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Date Unknown

Description

Benjamin Buxton was the namesake and main planner of the town of Buxton. Benjamin Buxton took over as superintendent of Consolidation Coal Company from his father, John Buxton, in 1896, when he was just 25 years old, until 1909. The town of Buxton, established in 1900, was located near 10 mines, had many businesses and recreational opportunities, and continued to actively recruit black and immigrant workers. The Consolidation Coal Company abandoned Buxton in 1923 and ended coal mining altogether in 1927.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Using evidence from the photo, how would you describe Benjamin Buxton?
- Benjamin Buxton recruited people of all races and ethnicities to work in Buxton. Why do you think he did that?

Postcard View of Center Street in Buxton, 1908



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1908

Description

This photograph, featured on a postcard, shows many people seen at a distance walking down "Center Street" in Buxton, Iowa, in 1908. Also called "coal chute hill," coal was moved from railroad cars at the bottom of the hill to the coal conveyor and chute at the top of the hill. Wagons backed under the chute, took on a load of coal and delivered to homes and businesses throughout the community. Its secondary use was as a sledding hill in the winter.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the roads/streets in Buxton. What kinds of weather conditions might make transporting items difficult in these streets?
- What do you notice about the structure of these buildings? How are they similar, different? Why might these buildings be constructed in this way, and why might they be organized like this?
- What role might coal have played in daily life in Buxton? Keep in mind that Buxton's citizens were not only coal producers, but also consumers.

Panoramic View of Buxton, 1910



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Flanders, 1910

Description

This “Panoramic View of Buxton, Iowa” was photographed in 1910. The image shows two water towers, a few two-story buildings, dozens of identical houses, along with streets of the town. Since Buxton was designed and built by the Consolidation Coal Company to be a central community where workers could live and then travel by passenger train to work in the various coal mines in the area, it was a town that was built rather quickly. For many Buxton citizens, the living conditions and recreational opportunities in Buxton were a significant improvement from the sharecropping they had left behind.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Describe the types of buildings and structures in this photo.
- What can you infer about life in Buxton based on what you see here?

Postcard Showing Buxton Coal Bank in Shaft of #12 Mine, 1910



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1910

Description

An unknown photographer captured this photograph inside Buxton #12 mine showing pieces of shale and coal that miners were working on moving in 1910. Miners entered the shaft with an empty cart and were paid based on the amount of coal that they brought out at the end of the work day. Miners had to separate the coal from the shale in the mine. Based on 1915 U.S. Census information, 97 percent of men who lived in Buxton that reported having a job said they worked as a coal miner.

Text-Dependent Questions

- *Before students look at the document:* Imagine what the inside of a coal mine might look like, describe what you think.
- *After students view the document:* Then look at the document and compare what you thought you would see to the actual picture. How are they the same? How are they different?
- What challenges would coal miners face getting coal from this location to a railroad car?
- How would coal mining change the land of Iowa?

Postcard of Miner with Mule-Drawn Cart in a Shaft of Buxton's #12 Mine, 1910



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1910

Description

An unknown photographer captured this image that shows a miner in 1910 with mule-drawn coal cart in the shaft of mine #12 at Buxton, Iowa. In his interview, [Paul Wilson](#) remembers how mules and mine cars were used to move coal from the “rooms” in the mine to the entrance where they were loaded onto railroad cars. According to Dr. Schwieder’s research in the 1915 Census of Iowa information, mule drivers made almost double the amount of money as a miner did.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How would the low ceilings, darkness, dirt and muck impact workers in the mine?
- How did the miner’s clothing and equipment help him do his job?
- How does the annual income of this mule cart driver compare to other occupations in Buxton? Use to “Annual Income of Selected Workers” from [Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community](#) to help answer this question.

Monroe Mercantile Company Opening, 1911



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1911

Description

Monroe Mercantile was the Consolidation Coal Company's company store. The original Monroe Mercantile building was destroyed by fire on February 21, 1911. By March 21, 1911, the construction of the new company store was underway, and they held the grand opening of the second building, which also housed Buxton Savings Bank, six months later. The second store was much larger than the first and was organized by department. People could buy many things there: groceries, hats, tailored clothing, carpets, musical instruments, tools and more. If a desired item was not on hand, the store could order nearly anything from automobiles to the latest fashions. The store even had a full mortuary service. Monroe Mercantile was so busy that they had to organize an ordering system in which people from a certain area of town were allowed to place their orders only on certain days of the month.

Text-Dependent Question

- Look closely at the photo; describe what is happening in front of Monroe Mercantile Company.
- How would you describe the relationship between the Monroe Mercantile Company and the town of Buxton, based on this photo? What about the relationship between Monroe Mercantile Company and the Consolidation Coal Company?

Monroe Mercantile Company Interior, 1911



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1911

Description

Monroe Mercantile was the Consolidation Coal Company's company store. It had a wide variety of products and is reported by some to have had fair prices and others to have been higher priced. The original Monroe Mercantile building was destroyed by fire on February 21, 1911. By March 21, 1911, the construction of the new company store was underway, and they held the grand opening of the second building, which also housed Buxton Savings Bank, six months later. The second store was much larger than the first and was organized by department. People could buy many things there: groceries, hats, tailored clothing, carpets, musical instruments, tools, and more. If a desired item was not on hand, the store could order nearly anything from automobiles to the latest fashions. The store even had a full mortuary service. Monroe Mercantile was so busy that they had to organize an ordering system in which people from a certain area of town were allowed to place their orders only on certain days of the month.

Text-Dependent Question

- Based on the products in this image, infer how Monroe Mercantile impacted the community of Buxton.

Monroe Mercantile Company Employees, 1911



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1911

Description

The photograph shows employees from Monroe Mercantile, which was the Consolidation Coal Company's company store. It had a wide variety of products and is reported by some to have had fair prices and others to have been higher priced. The original [Monroe Mercantile building](#) was destroyed by fire on February 21, 1911. By March 21, 1911, the construction of the new company store was underway, and they held the grand opening of the second building, which also housed Buxton Savings Bank, six months later. If a desired item was not on hand, the store could order nearly anything from [automobiles to the latest fashions](#).

Text-Dependent Question

- What do you notice about the employees of Monroe Mercantile?

Map of Bluff Creek Township (Buxton), 1919



Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives, "Standard Atlas of Monroe County Iowa," Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1919

Description

This atlas and plat map book of Monroe County, Iowa, was compiled and published by Geo. A. Ogle & Co. in 1919 and funded by the federal government. This image shows a plat map of Bluff Creek Township and Buxton. The township was divided into sections and the owners of the various land parcels.

Text-Dependent Questions

- By closely observing the map and Buxton's surroundings, why do you think the community of Buxton was built in that particular location?
- What geographic features, both natural and constructed, are near Buxton? How would that have affected the transportation of goods and people into and out of Buxton?

Citation Information

"Standard Atlas of Monroe County Iowa," Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1919. [Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives](#)

Buxton Wonders Baseball Team, 1915



Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives, Osborn, Nancy, "Buxton Wonders Baseball Team," 1915

Description

The Buxton Wonders Baseball Team was partially sponsored by the Consolidation Coal Company through the donation of land to play on, building bleachers and even paying for uniforms for this traveling team. It is reported that this team always had both black and white players and traveled to such places as Chicago, Illinois, Kansas City, Missouri and Birmingham, Alabama, though they were not always well received in other towns. Admission to the Buxton home games was \$0.50, and often the city band held concerts after the games.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Is having a traveling baseball team a "need" or a "want" for a community?
- What does the existence of the Buxton Wonders baseball team tell us about the economic success of Buxton?
- Why would a coal company sponsor a baseball team?

Citation Information

Osborn, Nancy, "Buxton Wonders Baseball Team," 1915. [Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives](#)

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, May 13, 1992



Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives, Hawthorne, Francis, "Interview of Paul Wilson," 13 May 1992

Description

This transcribed interview is of Paul Wilson, who was born in Buxton, Iowa, and grew up in the town. He then moved with his family, to Haydock, Iowa, and subsequently, to Des Moines, Iowa, where he spent the rest of his life. This interview was done in 1992 by Francis Hawthorne, the project director for the African American History Project, and it was financed by the Iowa Humanities Board. The first excerpt focuses on how the Consolidation Coal Company recruited black workers from the South. Excerpt two talks about how blacks and whites in Buxton did not experience the riots and harassment that was happening elsewhere in the United States. And excerpt three looks more at the hours and labor required to work in Buxton's mines.

[Full Transcript of Paul Wilson's Interview](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from Paul Wilson's Interview](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- **Excerpt 1:** Why did the Consolidation Coal Company to seek out so many black workers and cause blacks to be the majority in Buxton, not the minority?
- **Excerpt 2:** Many years ago, people who were black were not treated fairly in many places in the United States. Something called "Jim Crow Laws" were rules put in place to keep blacks from having access to the same things as whites. If Buxton didn't have "Jim Crow laws," how would that impact the people who lived there?
- **Excerpt 3:** Describe what a typical day might have looked like for a coal miner who lived in Buxton.

Citation Information

Hawthorne, Francis, "Interview of Paul Wilson," 13 May 1992. Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives

“Back to Buxton,” July 1, 2009



Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives, Biss, Eula, “Back to Buxton,” *Poroi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis and Invention*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, pg. 6-14, 1 July 2009

Description

This article by Eula Biss, entitled “Back to Buxton,” was published in 2009 by the Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry at the University of Iowa. The article focuses on the general components of Buxton, Iowa, featuring its remarkable reputation as being a town where blacks and whites lived and worked together in peace and prosperity. The first excerpt talks about the physical location of Buxton. The second excerpt talks about the luxurious living conditions folks in Buxton enjoyed. The third excerpt acknowledges that no one knows exactly why the Consolidation Coal Company developed a community like Buxton.

[Full Transcript of “Back to Buxton”](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from “Back to Buxton”](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- **Excerpt #1:** The Consolidation Coal Company was owned by the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. Why would a railroad company want to own a coal mining company?
- **Excerpt #2:** What luxuries did people in Buxton enjoy?
- **Excerpt #3:** In Buxton, the Consolidation Coal Company created the town and set many of the laws in the town. In our town today, people vote to pick the leaders who make the rules in our town. What would be the good things about a company making the town rules and what might be the bad things about that?

Citation Information

Biss, Eula, “Back to Buxton,” *Poroi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis and Invention*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, pg. 6-14, 1 July 2009. [Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries and Archives](#)

Aftermath of Explosion in Buxton's #12 Mine, Date Unknown



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Date Unknown

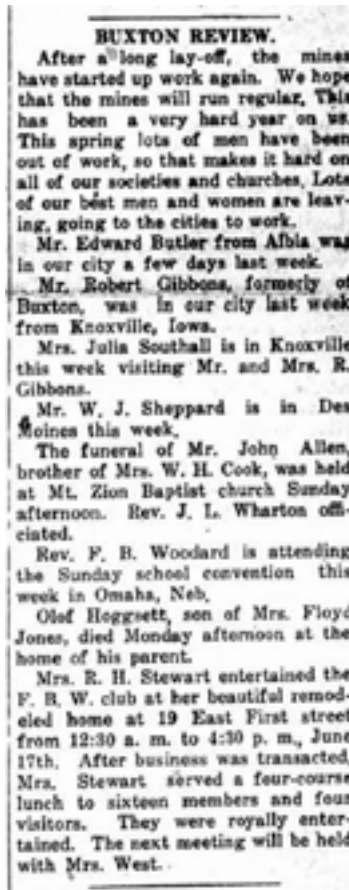
Description

In 1914, an explosion at mine #12 in Buxton led to the shutdown of that mine. Coal dust is highly flammable, and explosions were not uncommon. There is no record of anyone being hurt in the explosion since it happened after the mine closed for the day. The Consolidation Coal Company decided that the damage from the explosion would cost more to repair than the profit from the remaining coal in that mine. They decided to abandon that mine and open new mines in other locations which eventually led to the attempted relocation of Buxton citizens to nearby Haydock. In this photograph, the shell of the structure is still standing, but much of the interior was destroyed by either the fire or the impact of the blast.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What evidence can you find in the picture that there has been an explosion?

“Buxton Review” in the Iowa State Bystander, June 26, 1914



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Buxton Review,” Iowa State Bystander, 26 June 1914

Description

This brief article about Buxton was published in the Iowa State Bystander on June 26, 1914. The article included parts about how a Buxton resident was glad that the coal mines have resumed work after several months. The lack of work has impacted community organizations and caused many people to move to the cities to look for work.

[Transcript of “Buxton Review” Article in the Iowa State Bystander](#)

[Printable Image of “Buxton Review” Article](#)

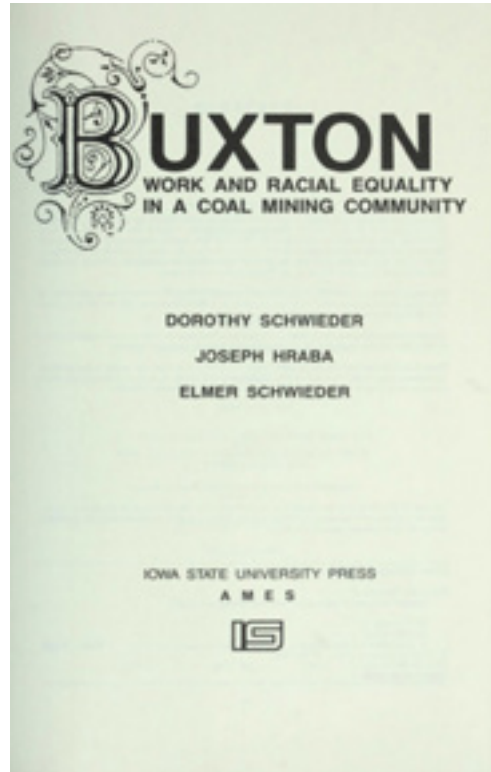
Text-Dependent Question

- How did the Consolidation Coal Company’s decision to stop mining coal impact the residents of Buxton? How did that impact cities and towns around Buxton?

Citation Information

“Buxton Review,” *Iowa State Bystander*, 26 June 1914. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community, 1987



Courtesy of Iowa State University Press, Schwieder, Dorothy, "Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community," The Iowa State University Press, 1987

Description

Professor, researcher and author Dorothy Schwieder published "Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community" in 1987. The first excerpt from this source is a table showing the annual income of selected workers in Buxton in 1914. It shows how lucrative jobs with the railroad were for the citizens of Buxton, and there is no mention of any differences in wages for a person's ethnicity. The second excerpt from this source provides insight into Buxton's demise.

[Transcribed Excerpts from "Buxton: Work and Racial Equality on a Coal Mining Community"](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- How did the incomes of railroad workers compare to other professions in Buxton in 1914?
- Coal mining and railroad construction were physically difficult and often dangerous, especially thinking about working conditions, materials and tools - even dynamite! What would people have to think about with these kinds of "high risk, high rewards" jobs? Why would they accept such a dangerous job?

Citation Information

Schwieder, Dorothy, "Buxton: Work and Racial Equality in a Coal Mining Community," The Iowa State University Press, 1987.

“As I Remember” by Minnie London, 2003



Courtesy of University of Northern Iowa, London, Minnie, “As I Remember,” Explorations in Iowa History Project, 2003

Description

This article was written by Minnie London, who first moved to Muchakinock as a bride and then to Buxton a few years later. London writes of her life as a coal miner’s wife including scheduling time to place orders with the company store, how people from many states moved to Buxton when it started, prominent citizens and businesses within the community and community organizations, including vibrant churches and a highly respected baseball team. The article was entitled “As I Remember” for the “Explorations in Iowa History Project” through the University of Northern Iowa in 2003.

[Full Transcript of Minnie London’s “As I Remember”](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from Minnie London’s “As I Remember”](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- **Excerpt 1:** What opportunities did people in Buxton have to do for fun?
- **Excerpt 2:** Why did miners move away from Buxton?

Citation Information

London, Minnie, “As I Remember,” Explorations in Iowa History Project, 2003. [Courtesy of University of Northern Iowa](#)