Red Ash/Red Ash Island

Site Type: Historic coal town/historic cemetery
Property Types: House lots, industrial, commercial, social, cemetery
UTM Coordinates: Zone 17: N 497051  E 4201719
Proximity and name of Nearest Stream: New River
Visibility: 0%
Site Size: Unknown
Previous Disturbance: Demolition, construction
ASIMS #: 414

Site Description

The town of Red Ash and Red Ash Island are located in the New River Gorge National River, Fayette County, West Virginia. The town of Red Ash is located on the northern bank of the New River east of Beury and west of Fire Creek on the southern side of the river. Red Ash Island is located just downstream from the town of Red Ash. The “island” is separated from the mainland by a slough. Red Ash Island is also on the north side of the New River, across from where Fire Creek enters the river. The sites encompass the coal operations at Red Ash, the town of Red Ash and Red Ash Island (Figures 4.164-167).

The site includes the remains of coal mining and coke production facilities, as well as the remains of the town of Red Ash, which consisted of homes, churches, schools businesses, and cemeteries. The island contains a cemetery with an unknown number of burials, the remnants of a ball field and one stone building foundation. The Red Ash mine was situated about 450 feet above the river, with coal moved to the railroad by an incline 1350 feet long. The operation also included approximately 80 to 94 coke ovens. The coal mining operations at Red Ash are represented by the remains of coke ovens and tipple remains. The Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Railroad connected the mining operation and town to other communities and provided shipping routes to get coal to market. The remains of the town of Red Ash, includes stone foundations of dwellings, walls, foundation piers and railroad and road beds. The town, coal mining operation and possible health care buildings on the island have been partially destroyed. Foundations and other remnants remain visible. The property types present at the sites include, house lots, industrial, commercial and social resources.

Site History

The Red Ash mining operation was established by the Red Ash Coal & Coke Company in 1891. A few years earlier, the nearby Rush Run mining operation began. The Rush Run mine connected underground to the Red Ash mine; the two mines were operated by the same company under different names (Workman et al. 2005:35). Red Ash was the location of early union activity by an affiliate of the UMWA, the Knights of
Figure 4.164. Location of Red Ash/Red Ash Island on 1988 Thurmond, WV USGS 7.5’ Topographic Map: (1) Cemetery; (2) Possible structure; (3) Possible chimney fall; (4) Stone foundation; (5) Piers; (6) Possible structure.

Figure 4.165. Location of Red Ash/Red Ash Island on 1929 Beckley, WV USGS 15’ Topographic Map.
Figure 4.166. 1945 aerial of Red Ash.
Labor, who organized there in 1893. They generally sought to improve both wages and working conditions (McLean 1982:181).

Red Ash, as well as Rush Run, is best known for the mining disasters that occurred in 1900 and 1905. Many early mining accidents were caused by improper ventilation that lead to a build up of explosive gases, particularly methane. Miners used dynamite and open flame torches and head lamps that in turn could ignite the built up gases. On March 6, 1900 a particularly devastating methane explosion killed 46 miners in the Red Ash mine. In 1905, a mine disaster struck both the Red Ash and Rush Run mines. A methane gas and coal dust explosion ignited by a miner’s dynamite blast killed eight men in Rush Run and five in the Red Ash mines. Rescue teams were sent in but the entire rescue team was killed in a second explosion (Bragg 1995).

During the late nineteenth century, smallpox victims were quarantined and treated on Red Ash Island. Historical accounts discuss three structures associated with the housing and care of the smallpox victims (Bragg 1995). These buildings may include a building for men, a building for women and children, and one for the doctor. C&O personnel buried the small pox patients that died on the island; most were placed in graves marked with only fieldstone markers or in unmarked graves. The cemetery may also contain the remains of a soldier from General Andrew Lewis’ army that fought the Shawnee at Point Pleasant, Virginia in 1774. From the early 1900s to the 1940s, the island was used only as a cemetery. In the 1940s, a baseball diamond was built next to the cemetery to provide a place for miners to participate in recreational activities (Figure 168).
Archaeological Fieldwork

Red Ash and Red Ash Island were examined by a pedestrian survey that included observing and photodocumenting any structural remains. No shovel probes were excavated at this site. The primary goals of the pedestrian survey were to find the historic cemetery, any building foundations, evidence of the 1940s period baseball diamond, and to begin documentation of the town and associated mining activity.

On Red Ash Island the most visible cemetery area was mapped and photographed, information was collected on each formal headstone (Table 4.11, Figures 4.169 - 4.175), and GPS information was recorded. A total of 16 formal headstones was documented on Red Ash Island (Table 4.11). There may be other burials marked with rough field stone markers, which were not discovered and therefore not documented. All of the headstones that were legible date to the early 1900s. Many marked the graves of young children, who were probably residents of the town of Red Ash rather than small pox victims from the surrounding region. There may be many more unmarked burials or burials only marked with innocuous field stones.

Also documented on the island was a building foundation that may be part of the small pox hostel at the western end of the island (Figure 4.172). A building is shown in this general location on the 1929 Beckley 15’ quadrangle map (Figure 4.165). Little
evidence of the mid-twentieth century ball field was observed, although the area west of the cemetery was void of older growth trees, possibly indicating the general location of the activity area (Figure 4.168). Because the ball field was probably ephemeral, very little evidence of the feature would be observable. The ball field may have disturbed some of the unmarked or field stone marked graves on the island, but no other evidence of disturbance, besides general neglect, was observable.

Table 4.11. Formal Headstones from Red Ash Island cemetery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Date of Death</th>
<th>Funeral Home</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broughman, A.W.</td>
<td>Jul 21, 1871</td>
<td>Aug 28, 1914</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>“Although He Sleeps His Memory Doth Live”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broughman, Grace M.</td>
<td>Jun 8, 1902</td>
<td>Aug 24, 1902</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>“In this little grave world wide hopes are buried”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broughman, Susie</td>
<td>Apr 17, 1901</td>
<td>Apr 17, 1901</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>“In this little grave world wide hopes are buried”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter (baby)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunn, Charlie</td>
<td>May 27, 1887</td>
<td>Aug 11, 1911</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edison, Starling</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McAllister, Freda</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>June 8, 1927</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>“Our Baby”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McComas, Elsie M.</td>
<td>Aug 22, 1907</td>
<td>May 31, 1909</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McComas, Frank</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>May 25, 1898</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Age 20 years, 2 months, 1 day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore, Daisy A.</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige, Robert</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>193?</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierce, Rutha</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Nov 28, 193?</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley, Mrs. Mamie</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Apr 5, ?</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td>Age 49 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanklin, Oscar</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Jan 16, 1936</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, C.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Rena</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Collins Funeral Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Census records were examined for more information about those buried on Red Ash Island. The primary censuses examined include the 1900, 1910, 1920 and 1930 United States Federal Censuses. The earliest record documented was for Arthur W. Broughman (age 26) and his wife Sarah (age 20). The two were listed as renters living in the Fayetteville Township in Fayette County, West Virginia. Arthur’s sister-in-law, Margie (age 18), was listed as living with the couple. Arthur’s occupation is listed as “monitor man” or possible “motor man”. A monitor is a large container connected to the tipples that carried coal from the mouth of the mine to bottom of the hill. The Broughman family is also listed in the 1910 census. At that time, Arthur (age 36) was listed as an electrician for a coal mine and rented his family’s home. The household also consisted of Sarah (age 30) and Joseph (age 5), as well as two boarders Fred (age 27) and Ada (age 19) Paulitch. Fred Paulitch was employed in a coke yard. Both Arthur and Fred were listed as being able to read and write.
The other census information comes from the 1930 United States Federal Census. In 1930 Rena Wright (age 26) was married to John Wright and had five children, Bertha L. (age 7), John R. (age 5), Richard A. (age 4), Aron E. (age 2 years and 3 months), and Linwood (age 10 months). Rena’s husband was listed as a coal mine worker and the family rented their home for six dollars per month.

In 1930, Oscar Shanklin (age 30) was married to Marion (age 18). The couple had no children and Oscar is listed as a coal mine worker. In 1930, Daisy A. Moore (age 38) was married to Preston B. Moore and had three children, Sylvester A. (age 19), David (age 18), and William A. (age 15). Daisy’s husband is listed as a coal mine worker and the family rented their home for six dollars per month.

Figure 4.169. Red Ash Island cemetery (see Figure 4.164(1)).
Figure 4.170. Headstone at Red Ash Island (see Figure 4.164(1)).

Figure 4.171. Map of main concentration of burials at Red Ash Island.
The town of Red Ash was examined by pedestrian survey. In addition, all visible features were photographed and GPS readings were taken (Figures 4.173-4.175). No shovel probes were excavated and no artifacts were observed on the surface of this site. Stone foundation piers, wall ruins and foundation stones were found throughout Red Ash. The mine is located west of the Red Ash settlement towards Rush Run. The foundations recorded correspond to the general locations of buildings shown on the 1929 Beckley WV 15’ quadrangle (Figures 4.165). It was difficult to determine if the foundations represent houses, businesses, or mine related structures. Most of the domestic and coal mining related buildings were disassembled in the mid-twentieth century. This appears to have involved the removal of wood, some brick, windows and roofing materials. The remaining foundations appear to be intact; this suggests that removal of these buildings did not involve a great deal of ground disturbance. As such, this site has a high potential to contain subsurface features.
Figure 4.173. Building foundation at Red Ash (see Figure 4.164(near 2)).

Figure 4.174. Railroad grade at Red Ash (see Figure 4.164(near 3)).
Artifacts Collected or Observed

No artifacts were observed or collected during fieldwork. No shovel probes were excavated. Only the cemetery area was mapped.

Summary and Recommendations

Based on this investigation, several observations and recommendations can be made about the Red Ash sites. The sites contain a number of different property types, including, house lots, commercial, social and industrial resources and the site relates to the coal mining industry historic context developed by Unrau (1996) for the New River Gorge National River. While no artifacts were collected from the site, extensive, intact archaeological remains in the form of domestic and commercial foundations were documented, and it is likely to have a high potential to contain intact archaeological deposits.

Because there are intact archaeological remains present at the Red Ash sites, it represents an opportunity to study one of the coal mining communities of the region. Because Red Ash Island was once a recreational area and treatment area for contagious illnesses, further investigations of both the island and the town might provide important information about intra-community relationships different from communities without these contexts. In addition, the archaeological remains at Red Ash may be able to speak to the effects of labor unionization or lack thereof, as well as reactions and consequences of mining disasters.
The following recommendations are provided:

1. The Red Ash site should be protected with all available means. It is historically unique and the archaeological remains are intact and sensitive to episodes of looting, development, or natural disturbances.

2. To better define the nature and extent of the archaeological resources at this site, and to collect sufficient information in order to determine its eligibility for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, it is recommended that phase I testing and mapping of the site be undertaken in conjunction with a cultural landscape inventory. This work should consist of systematic shovel probing across the site. After the site’s landscape features are mapped, the goals of the shovel probing should include the identification of the locations containing subsurface cultural materials and indicate their spatial relationship to building ruins and landscape features. This testing should also include shovel probing of potential primary refuse deposits associated with residential and industrial structures. Finally, site boundaries should be refined on the basis of historical records and the distribution of archaeological remains.

3. Depending on the results of the survey, phase II exploratory archaeological investigations may be necessary. This work should assess the integrity of cultural deposits at the Red Ash site by excavating several test units throughout the site. The results of these kinds of investigations should produce data from which interpretations about the life of the people who lived there can be articulated.

4. More intensive archival research should also be undertaken to identify the inhabitants of Red Ash and official documents that may provide some insight into their lives, such as, but not limited to, doctor’s notes, patient records, tax records, census records, mining company payrolls, and company store credit lists.

5. The results of the above investigations can and should be used to compare what we know about other locations in the New River gorge, such as nearby Beury and Firecreek. Once accomplished, such comparisons should be made in view of the relationship(s) that the town of Red Ash had with other communities in the New River valley and in the surrounding uplands.

Given these investigations, the Red Ash sites should be considered potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under criterion D. The recommended archaeological and archival research should be able to provide additional information on the size of this site and the nature of the associated archaeological deposits. Taken together the recommended archival research and field investigations should produce the information needed to more fully evaluate the significance of this site.