

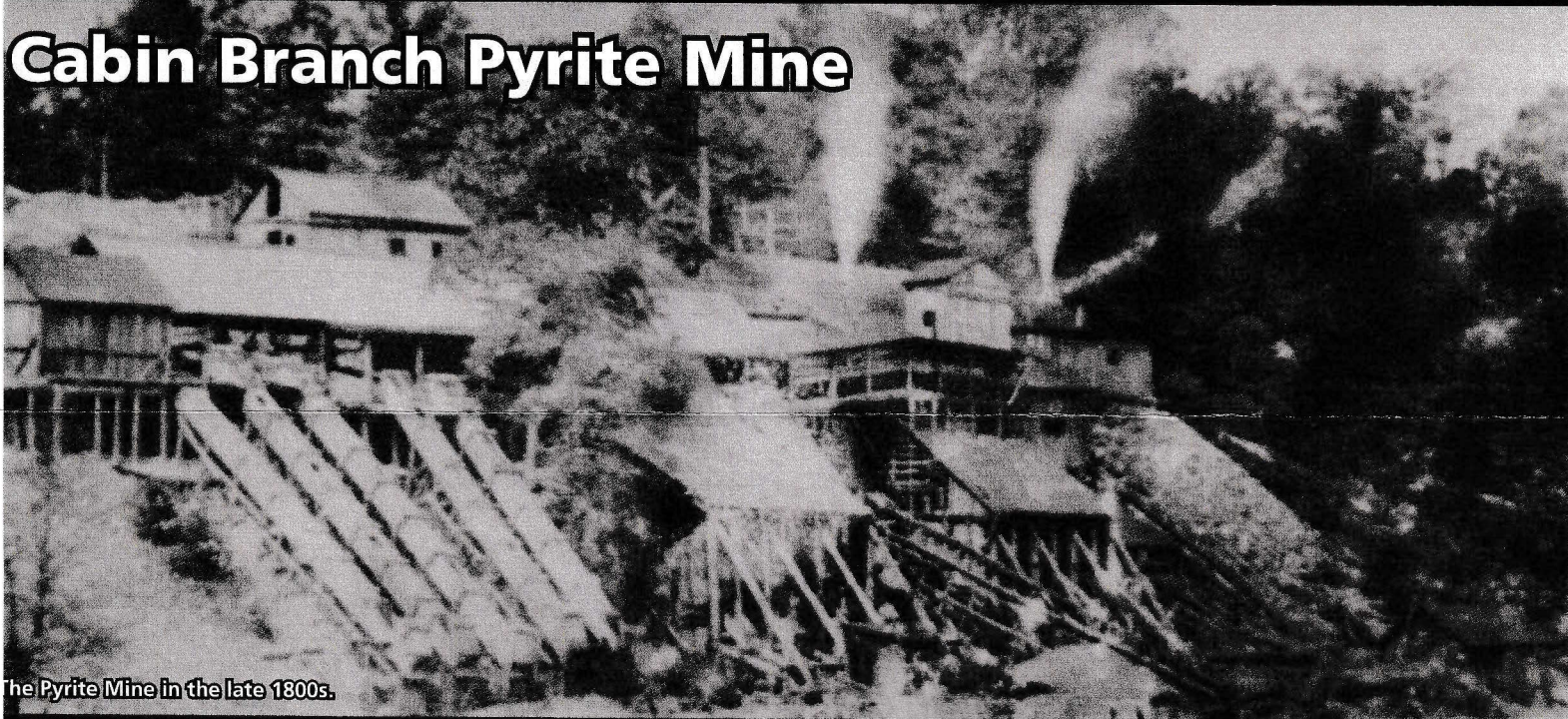
Prince William Forest Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Prince William Forest Park
Triangle, VA



Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine



The Pyrite Mine in the late 1800s.



Overview

One day all that changed when a Baltimore man named John Detrick hiked along Quantico Creek. Near the confluence of the North and South Forks, he noticed something shiny in the water. It was pyrite, known commonly as “fool’s gold” and scientifically as Iron Sulfide. The Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine began operations on a limited basis from 1889 to 1908, when the Cabin Branch Mining Company formed. In 1916, the American Agricultural Chemical Company bought the mine. The large number of patents in the mid-nineteenth century and industrial growth after the Civil War made pyrite profitable. Sulfur was a necessary ingredient in products such as glass, soap, bleach, textiles, paper, dye, medicine, sugar, rubber, and fertilizer. When World War I broke out, the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine contributed to the production of gunpowder.

Dirty Work

The mine provided additional income to local subsistence farmers. Workers earned roughly \$3.50 a day, though estimates vary. Some sources say workers earned as much as \$4.25 a day. They worked two shifts, between ten and twelve hours a day, six days a week. Children sorted ore clumps into small, medium, and large sizes for 50 cents a day. Despite any economic benefits, there was a human toll to the work. While the mine provided some additional income to local families, it was not enough to make a significant difference. Laborers returned to their farms after their long shifts to work the land. There were also numerous deaths and injuries. One worker was decapitated by an elevator. Euriel Reid, who is buried in the park, died of poisonous gas.

Several others were injured, including an African American railroad engineer whose train derailed.

The mine was, interestingly, an integrated workplace (the town of Dumfries was segregated), where Italian and Irish immigrants and African Americans worked side-by-side. The daily challenges of the mine brought the residents of Batestown and Hickory Ridge closer together. Laborers relied on their friends and neighbors for support.



Company Town with a Company Store

There was also a company town, consisting of more than seventy buildings. There was a store, machine shop, blacksmith, engine room and a small gauge railroad. When the railroad was not being used for mine operations, it took families, especially children, to the Potomac River to fish. Part of workers' salaries came in the form of coupons for the company store. The town also included six dormitories for black workers and small houses for white employees and their families.

The company store was owned by the Payne family (shown right), many of whom are also buried in the park's Cole Hill Cemetery.

CABIN BRANCH STORE.

W. W. PAYNE, PROPRIETOR.

Dumfries Va. Aug 30 - 1900

PAY TO THE
ORDER OF

L. C. Smith

\$1000

One thousand and no/100 Dollars



Shutting Down the Mine and the Local Economy

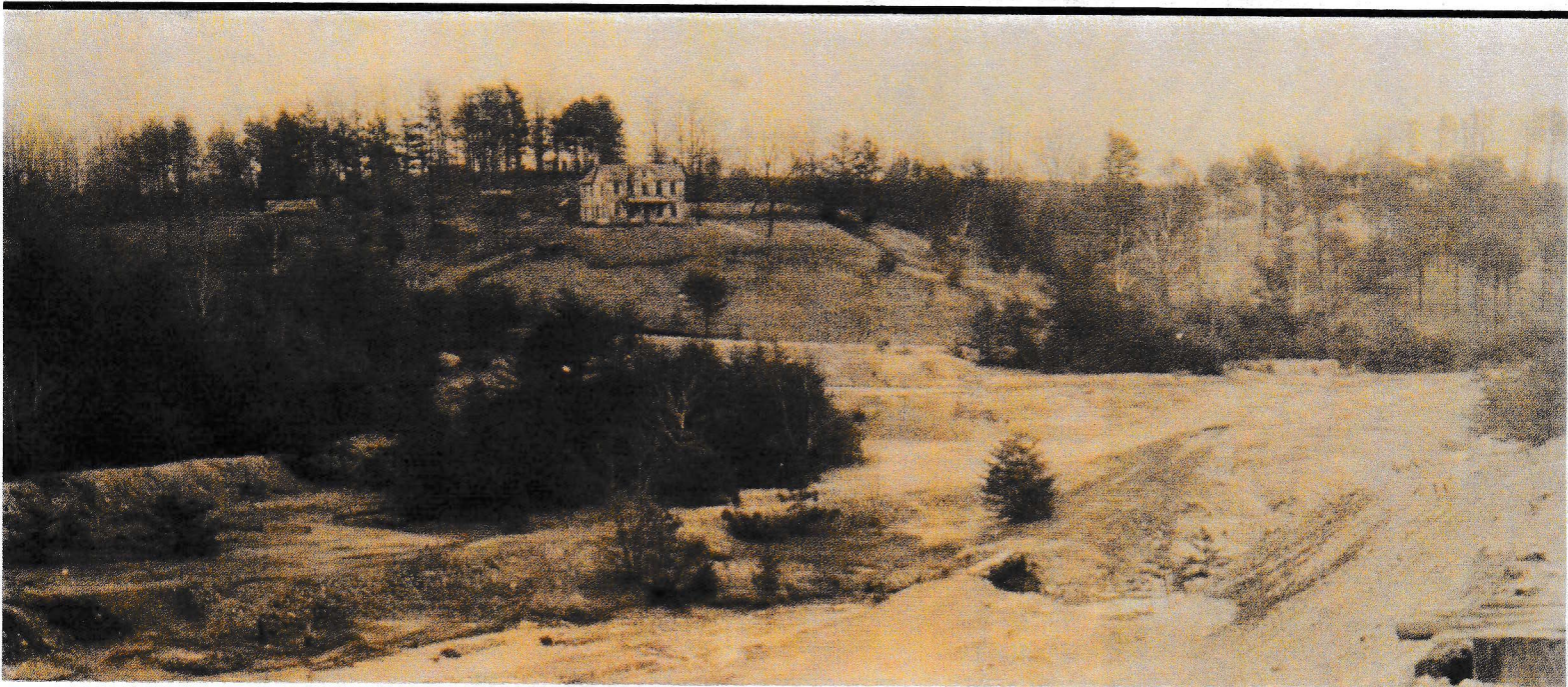
After World War I, the price of pyrite dropped. Nationwide, in many industries, workers struck. While there is no evidence of union activity, workers at the Cabin Branch Mine struck in 1920. They demanded a 50 cent raise. The owner of the mine allegedly responded, "Before I will give you another penny, I will let the mine fill up with water and let the frogs jump in!" By this time, cheaper sources of sulfur were found overseas.

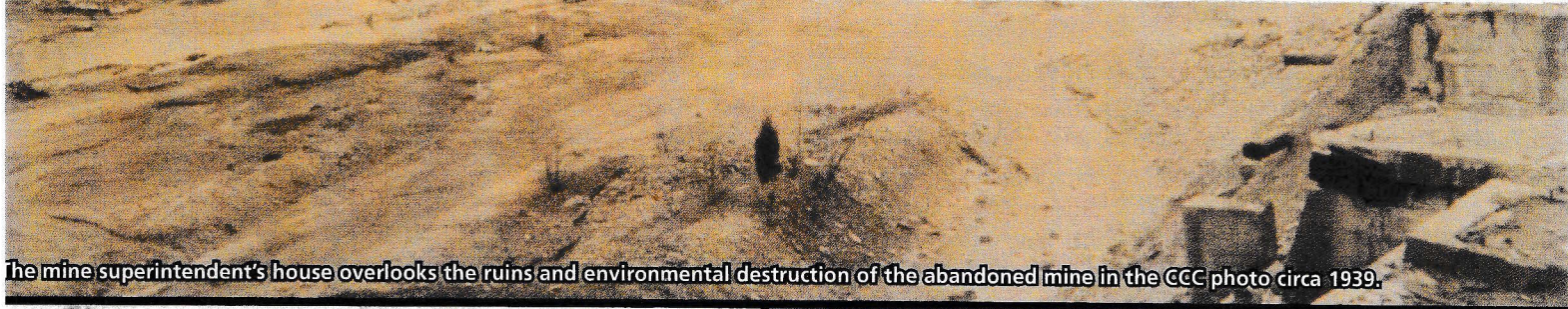
The mine closed in 1920, and most workers returned to their farms. A fortunate few found work in Dumfries and Quantico, but most remained on their small homesteads. The company left piles of pyrite tailings along the banks of Quantico Creek, and the concrete and wood buildings of the company town stood empty. While the mine's closing certainly affected workers and their families, it affected the environment for generations.

With the exception of the Civilian Conservation Corps using wood from the buildings to construct the cabin camps, the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine remained untouched for years. Following the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1970, the National Park Service began its work to reclaim the site. The pH of the water in Quantico Creek (directly in front of the mine site) was 2.8, equal to that of vinegar.

The largest reclamation project to date began in 1994. The pyrite tailings were buried under top soil and lime. Channels around these hotspots diverted rainwater, preventing acidic runoff from flowing into the creek. Measures were also taken to keep the creek's bank in place. The mine shafts were capped with concrete. Since this reclamation, which has been somewhat successful, the National Park Service has planted Virginia pines.

As the National Park Service continues to reclaim the site, the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine serves as a reminder of the American dream: making things better for the next generation. The workers sacrificed themselves through hard work to give their families a chance to see some social and economic success.

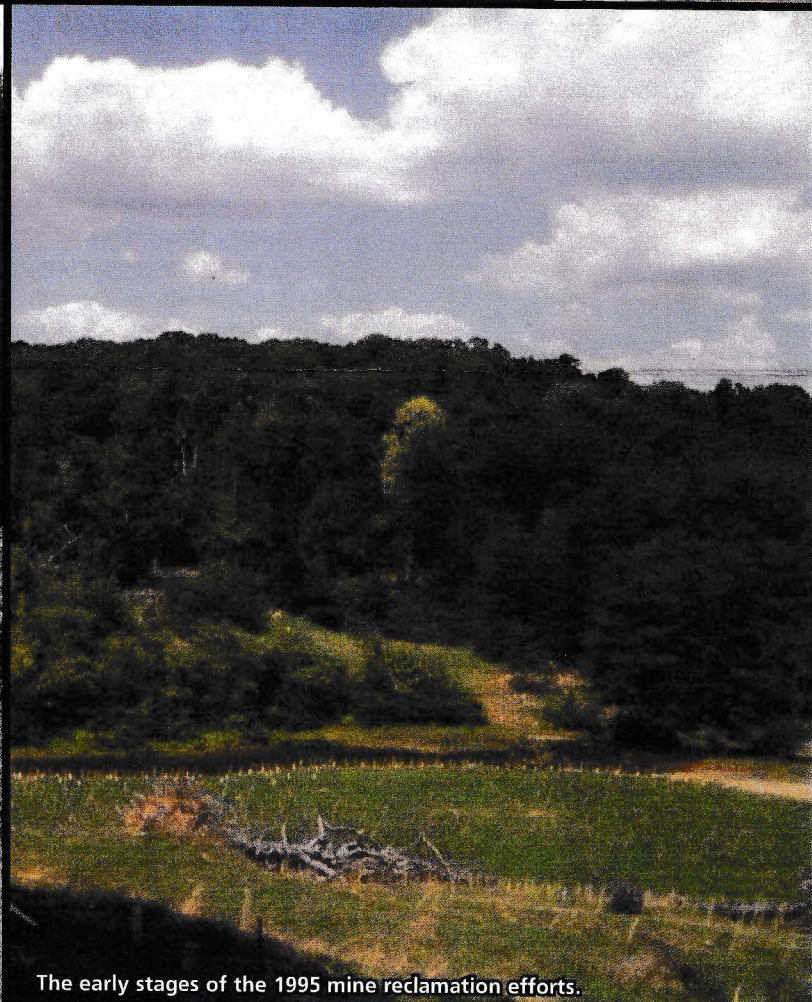




The mine superintendent's house overlooks the ruins and environmental destruction of the abandoned mine in the CCC photo circa 1939.



The struggling ecosystem surrounding the pyrite mine site in the late 1970s, early 1980s. NPS photo.



The early stages of the 1995 mine reclamation efforts.