

THE KEYSTONE COAL AND IRON COMPANY

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Big Stone Gap, Virginia

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In 1871 General John Daniel Imboden, Col. Auburn Pridemore, Col. C. B. Slemp, and Rufus Ayers associated themselves together, at first informally, and began the drive to enlist Northern capitalists in the development of the coal and iron fields of Wise County, Va. In 1880 their labor had come to fruition, and they joined certain Northern capitalists who had made themselves wealthy in the coalfields of Pennsylvania during the Civil War. This was the year that they purchased their major land holding, the Olinger Survey, and incorporated themselves as the Tinsalia Co. The decade of the 1880's was spent by a shakeout of the owners of the company, and of the recruitment of other investors, and by the start of a bewildering array of associated companies, and of the creation of a new master corporation, the Virginia Coal and Iron Co.⁽¹⁾

Also, the main activities of that decade were the tightening the ownership of their land, whose title was confused by overlaying government grants and by adverse possession, as well as surveying ambiguities; the building of railroads into the area from the national system; and the laying out of what was to be their management base, the Town of Big Stone Gap, Va.

This all came to a dramatic climax in 1890, when both the South Atlantic and Ohio Railroad and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad came to the VCI holdings on the northern side of Stone Mountain, at what was to become the Town of Appalachia. Two maps ^(2,3) document that a company owned railroad spur had been built from the point of union of the L&N and SA&O RRs on the southern edge of the future Appalachia up to the first coal mine within the Olinger Survey on Looney Creek (now within the corporate limits of the Town of Appalachia) by 1892. These developments required the existence of a town, with all its schools, churches, merchants, housing and governance. The toe of Ison Rock Ridge dominated the topography. It literally ended in a bluff in a sweeping curve of the Powell River, thus dividing the developable bottomlands in halves. The railroad yard occupied all the available space south of the ridge. Thus, the town would have to be located north of it.

As there were several corporate interests involved in the need for a town besides VCI, such as the owners of the two railroads, a separate corporation was set up to own and to develop the aborning Town of Appalachia. We must go back to Pennsylvania to pick up the threads of the story before 1890. We will look at two men who were to be of major importance to the story of Appalachia.

The first man of importance was John H. Dingee of Philadelphia. He was obviously a man of great significance by the time still existing records pick him up. In 1889 he was the Treasurer of "The Associate Committee of Women of the Pennsylvania Museum of Industrial Art".⁽⁴⁾ His biography describes him as having "business interests in coal and iron in Virginia, W. Virginia, and in Kentucky".⁽⁵⁾ By 1905 he was heavily involved with multiple businesses in Virginia.⁽⁶⁾ The locations suggest an association with George L. Carter, who just happened to be in the same locations. He, along with George L. Carter, owned the Dingee Coal Corporation at Banner, Wise County Virginia in 1890.⁽¹⁾ In 1896 he was President of the Norton Land and Improvement Co.^(7, 8) This company had connections to VCI via the Interstate Railroad Co., and the L&N Railroad. It involved itself in the plats of the Town of Norton, and in the building of coke ovens.⁽⁹⁾

The second man was George Burnham, Jr., also of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was VP of the Baldwin Locomotive Works, VP of the Wartime Prohibition Assn.⁽¹⁰⁾, VP of the Union Trust Co. of Philadelphia⁽¹¹⁾, was on the board of directors of the Annapolis and Baltimore Short Line Railroad Co.⁽¹²⁾, and was simultaneously President and Treasurer of the Philadelphia Municipal League in 1894-1919.⁽¹³⁾

In 1893 the various corporations interested in developing what is now the Town of Appalachia chartered the Keystone Coal and Iron Co. of Virginia. Its role was the laying out and selling the plats of the town. The land, of course, came from VCI. George H. Burnham, Jr. was designated as its President, and John H. Dingee as its Secretary. Its home office was in Big Stone Gap, Virginia.^(14, 8) The prestige residential street that overlooks the Town was named after Otis Mouser, the Vice President of Operations of the Stonega Coke and Coal Co.⁽¹⁵⁾ Because of litigation that challenged the ownership of the Olinger Tract (known as the Van Gunden case) had temporarily stopped development of the VCI coal mines themselves, management concentrated on the development of the Town of Appalachia until this case was favorably resolved.⁽¹⁶⁾

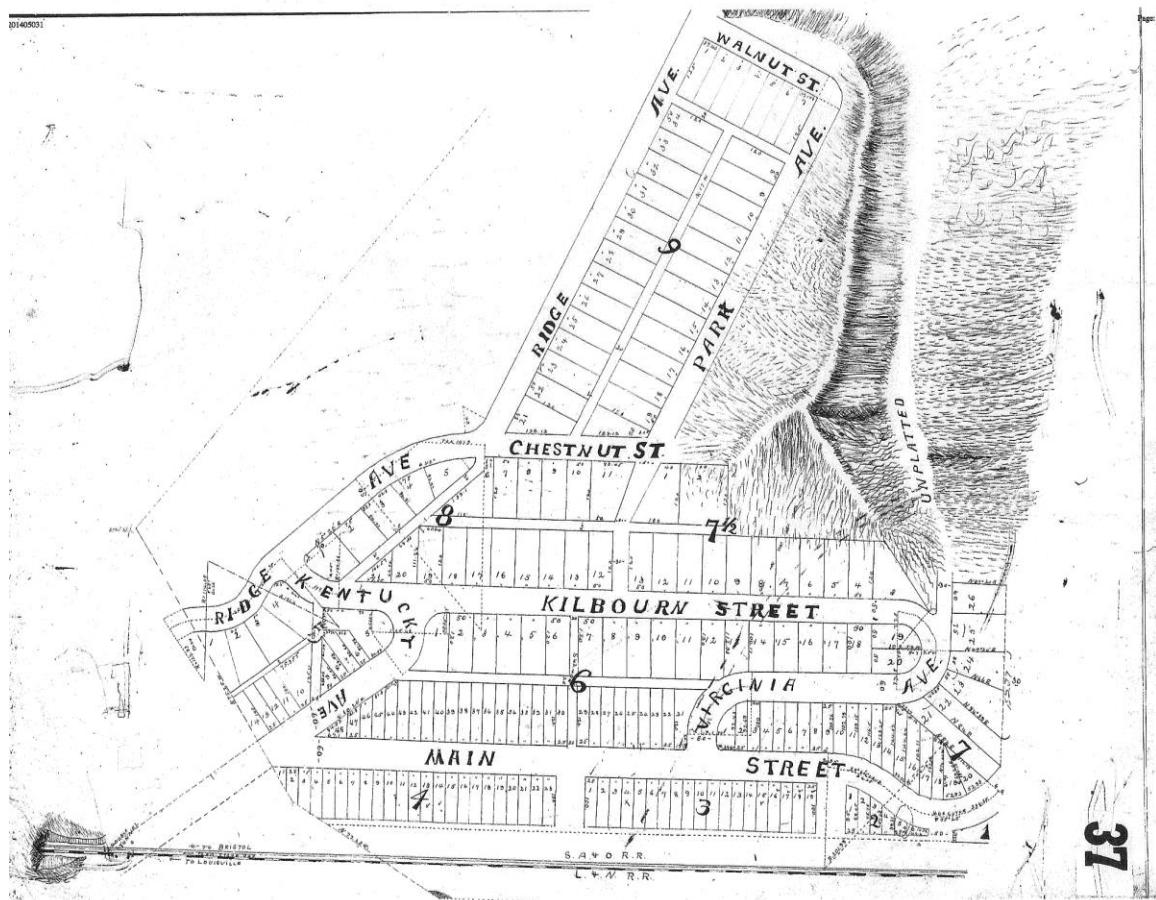
The Keystone plats cover Main Street, Ridge Ave., and Peak's Hill, Callahan Ave., the Old Bottom, and the land between Boggs Ave. and Norton Road. They specifically do not cover the New Bottom, which was the project of John Guntner. There is one plot covering the top of Ison Rock Ridge north of Appalachia's Ridge Ave., and which runs with the northern corporate limits of the Town. This area was settled by squatters in the days before the coal companies, and was farmed by lease holders from VCI until mid twentieth century. This plot has not been digitalized by the Clerk's Office of Wise County, probably because it was never developed. It seems likely that this was intended for platting as the second phase of development of the Town of Appalachia. Development of the New Bottom about 1912, and the dismemberment of Keystone likely stopped this development. (see below)

In 1906 VCI and the Town of Appalachia cooperated in the founding of the Clear Creek Water Company. It was a wholly owned subsidiary of VCI, but served the Town of Appalachia and VCI's camps. This supplemented the well VCI had drilled across the hollow from its electric generator (later the CR & CM shop), and

which supplied Osaka and Stonega. Around 1913 an additional well was drilled at the Ice Plant.(17)

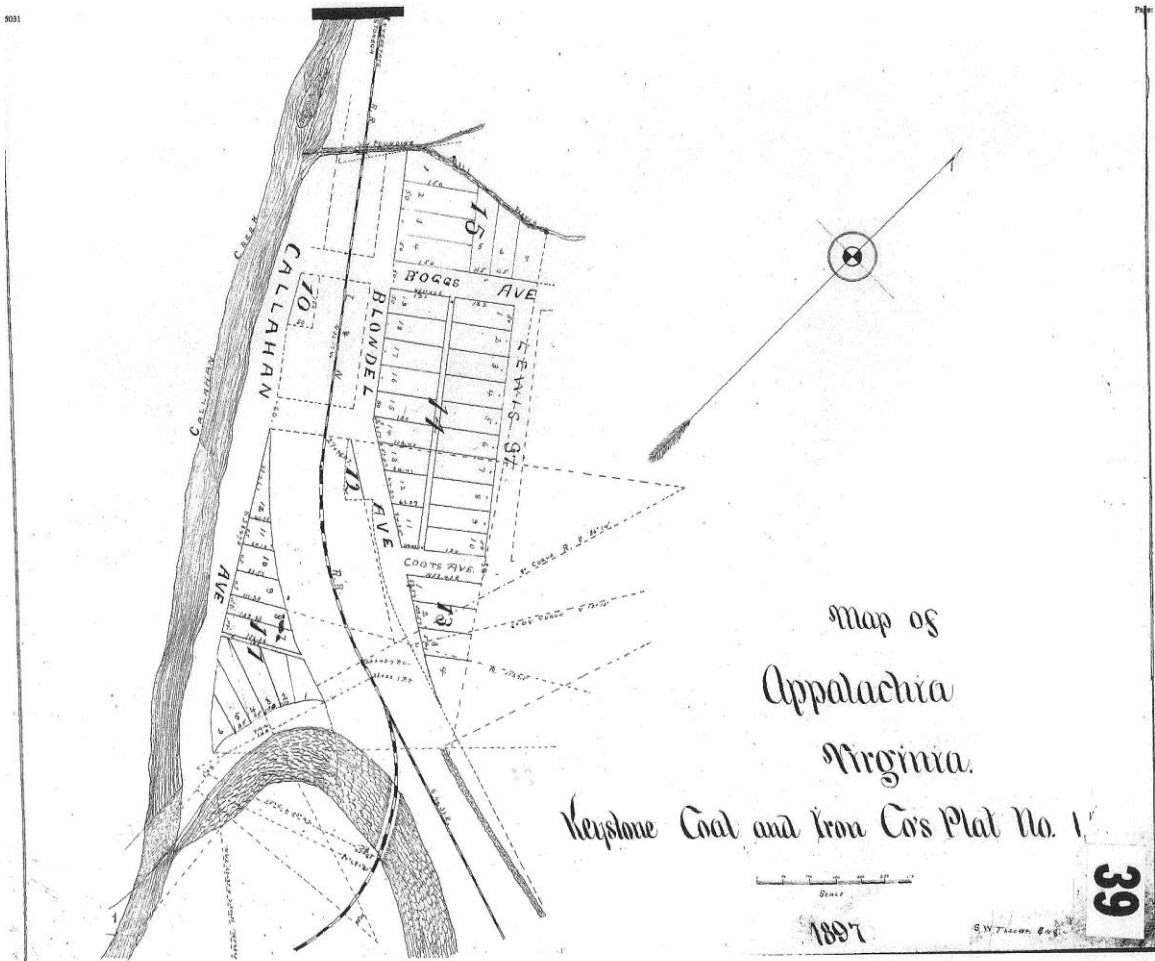
It was discovered that the Keystone Coal and Iron Co. had reserved to itself the use of the town street and alleys for water and sewer lines, and now it refused to relinquish these rights. It is not clear whether the project of connecting to the VCI water mains at Osaka proceeded at this point or not. The situation remained in limbo until 1912, when VCI intervened, and the Town got its water system. This is a rather bazaar turn of events as VCI largely owned Keystone. Perhaps it is not surprising that this is the last reference one can find of the continued existence of Keystone Coal and Iron of Virginia.(18)

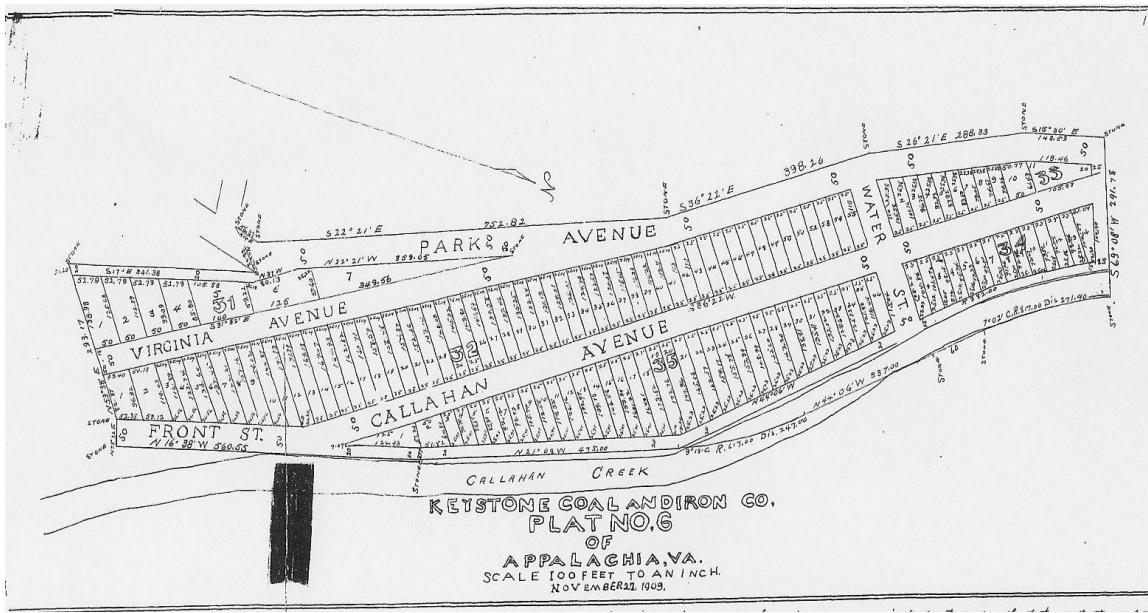
KEYSTONE PLAT
MAIN STREET TO RIDGE AVE.



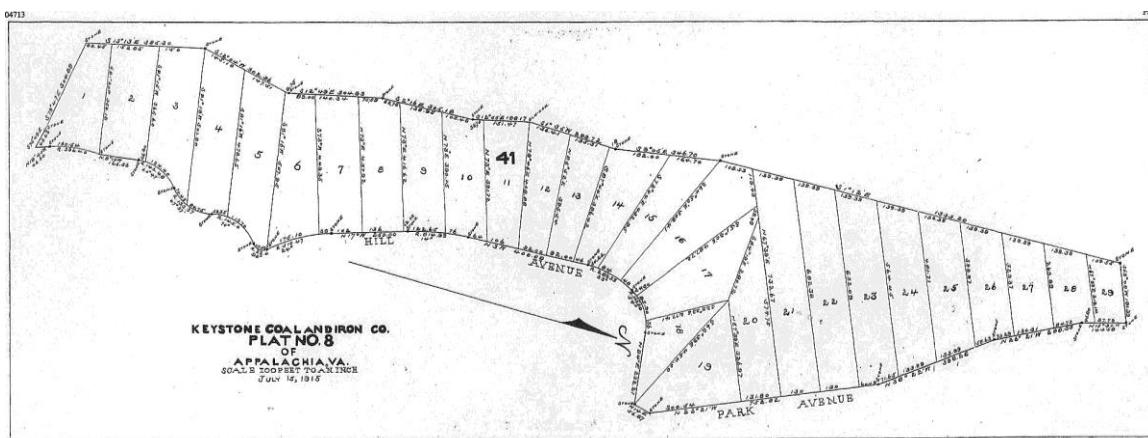
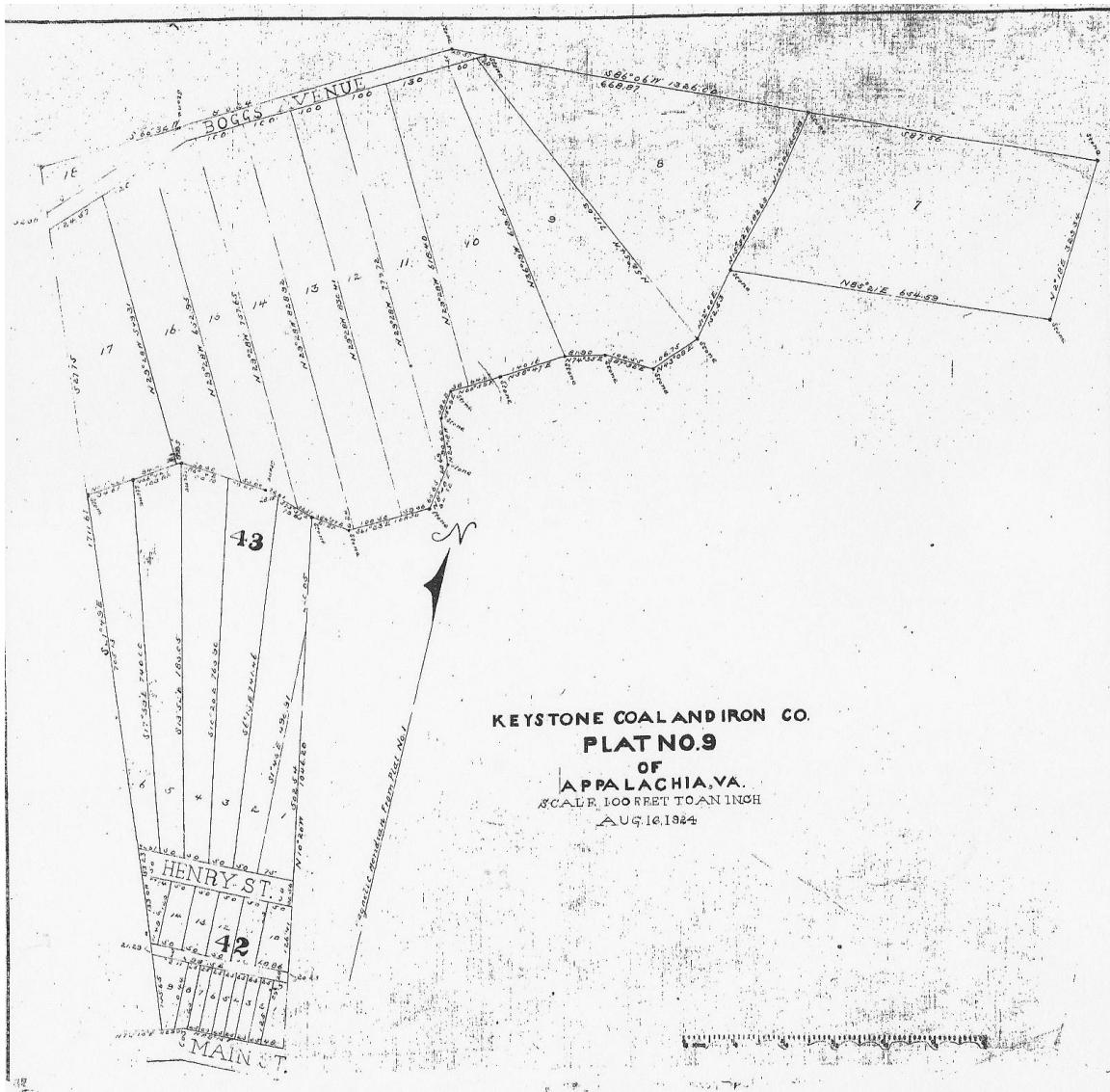
NOTE THAT WHAT WAS TO BECOME MOUSER STREET IS LABELLED ON THIS PLAT AS 'KILBOURN' STREET, NAMED AFTER EARLY OWNERS OF LAND AT THE MOUTH OF CALLAHAN CREEK

KEYSTONE PLATS
LOWER CALLAHAN AVE. & UPPER CALLAHAN AVE.





KEYSTONE PLAT
HENRY ST. TO BOGGS AVE.



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KEYSTONE PLAT EASTERN RIDGE AVE.

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9 -

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