

A HISTORY of COAL MINING in NOVA SCOTIA

“IN THE BOTTOM of a small brook, running through a wild forest of beech and maple, a poor farmer has been digging coal, one of the greatest treasures of the earth.”

The first account of coal at Springhill by Abraham Gesner in 1836

The mining of coal has been a major factor in the industrial and social development of the Province of Nova Scotia. Nicholas Denys, governor of Nova Scotia, stated in dispatches to France in 1673 that there was “a mountain of very good coal four leagues up Spanish River,” near Cow Bay, Cape Breton Island. By 1720, a mining operation had been initiated to supply the French fortress Louisbourg and, soon after, French Acadians began extracting coal from the famous fossil cliffs at Joggins in Cumberland County. The first officially recorded export of minerals from Canada occurred in 1724 when a shipment of coal was exported from Cape Breton to Boston. In Pictou County, coal was discovered on the East River in 1798 by Reverend McGregor; by 1807 a small seam was being worked.

From 1826 to 1857, the General Mining Association (GMA) held a virtual monopoly on the Province’s coal resources under a lease from the Duke of York, who had been granted the right to all minerals in Nova Scotia by the British Crown. In 1857, the GMA surrendered much of its monopoly to the Crown and since that time the Province has owned the coal resources of Nova Scotia. With this relinquishment, several new companies became lease holders (Figure 24), thus accelerating the pace of coal development through the nineteenth century in Cumberland, Colchester and Pictou counties.

On Cape Breton this development opened the coal-rich Glace Bay district to new operators; by 1870 some twenty collieries were operating (Figure 25). The formation of the Dominion Steel and Coal Company (Dosco) in 1893 consolidated operations in the Glace Bay—New Waterford districts. Meanwhile the GMA continued to operate at Sydney Mines until 1900, when it was succeeded by the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company. Peak production was reached in the mid-1940s, but the post-war period brought a steady decline; by 1960 only half of the original mines were still producing. The Princess colliery, which operated at Sydney Mines from 1908 to 1975, is now open to the public as a miners’ museum. Roughly one hundred mines have been opened in the Sydney coalfield, more than in any other field in Nova Scotia.

On the west coast of Cape Breton, the Cape Breton Coal Mining Company commenced mining at Port Hood in 1865. Mining began the same year at Inverness, and commenced at Chimney Corner in 1867. During the late nineteenth century, mining was sporadic in these areas. At Broad Cove, the Broad Cove Coal Company was engaged in small-scale mining during this time.



FIGURE 24. A group of nineteenth-century entrepreneurs poses before a coal seam outcrop at Broad Cove, Inverness County. *NSDME*.



FIGURE 25. The Caledonia colliery, which operated at Glace Bay in the Sydney coalfield from 1864 to 1892. *Nova Scotia Museum*.

Various attempts were made to develop mines in the geologically complex Mabou coal district during the late 1800s and early 1900s by companies such as Port Hood Collieries Ltd. and the Eastern Trust Company. In 1961, the Scotian Coal Company Limited once again attempted to develop a mine at Mabou but abandoned this project in 1964.

During the early twentieth century, Port Hood Collieries Limited and Inverness Railway and Company operated mines at Port Hood and Inverness. In 1947, the St. Rose mine began operation, and continues to operate today, under the direction of Evans Coal Mines Ltd.

The Pictou coalfield is one of the most extensively worked areas of the Province in relation to its size. The original Acadia Coal Company was formed in 1864; however, the General Mining Association continued operations until it sold its rights to the Halifax Coal Company in 1872. Several other companies were involved in mining the Pictou coalfield during this period, including the Intercolonial Coal Company, the Montreal and Pictou Company, and numerous others (Figure 26). The Acadia, Halifax, and Vale companies merged in 1886 to form a new Acadia Coal Company. Through the rest of that century and on into the early twentieth century the Acadia Coal Company was the major mining concern, although many others worked seams in various parts of the county (Figure 27).

The Intercolonial Coal Company continued operation of the Drummond colliery at Westville, well past the colonial era from which its name is derived, until purchased by the Drummond Coal Company in 1961. (The mine, purchased by Pioneer Coal Co. in 1983, closed in 1984 due to a fire underground.) The brick buildings of the Drummond, now showing signs of age, are a testament to the grandeur of the industry early in this century, when everything from side-tip rail cars to the bricks themselves were manufactured on site.

Many of these companies were instrumental in building railways to connect with the Intercolonial Railway, opening previously inaccessible areas of the Province. It was the General Mining Association which in 1839 utilized the steam locomotive Samson for the first industrial railway in Canada, which ran between Albion Mines (Stellarton) and the wharves at Dunbar Point on the Northumberland Strait.

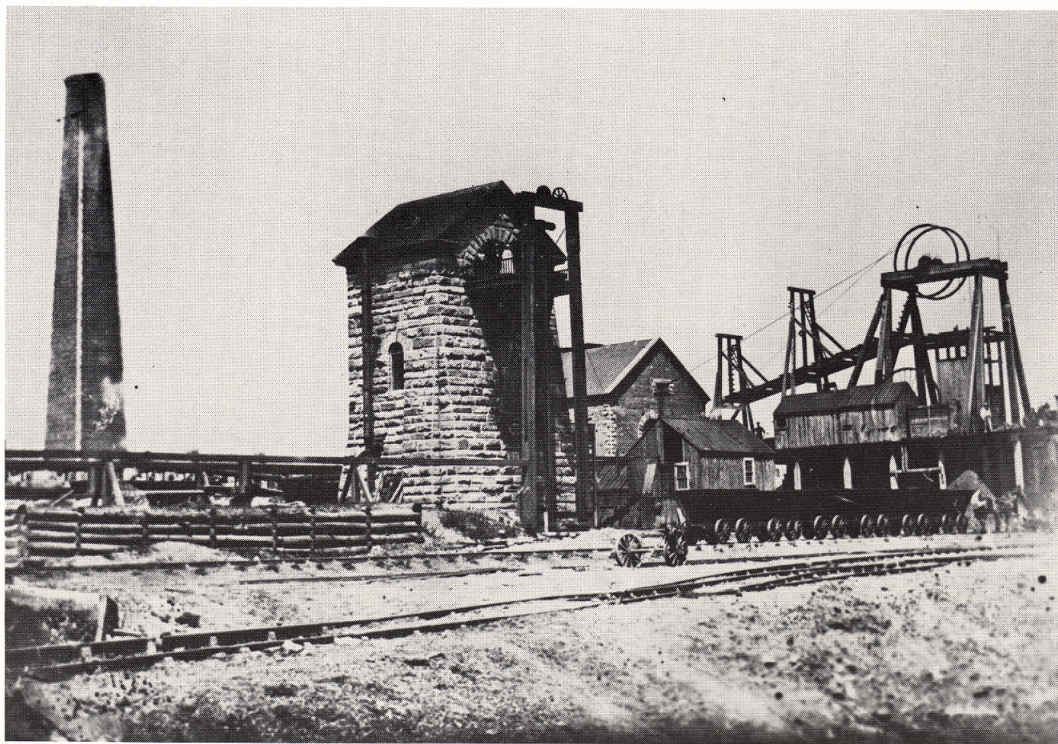


FIGURE 26. The Foord pit, Albion Mines (now Stellarton), Pictou coalfield, circa 1870-1880. The ruins of the Cornish Pump House (the major stone structure) can be seen today along the Trans Canada Highway between New Glasgow and Stellarton. *Courtesy of Stellarton Miners' Museum.*

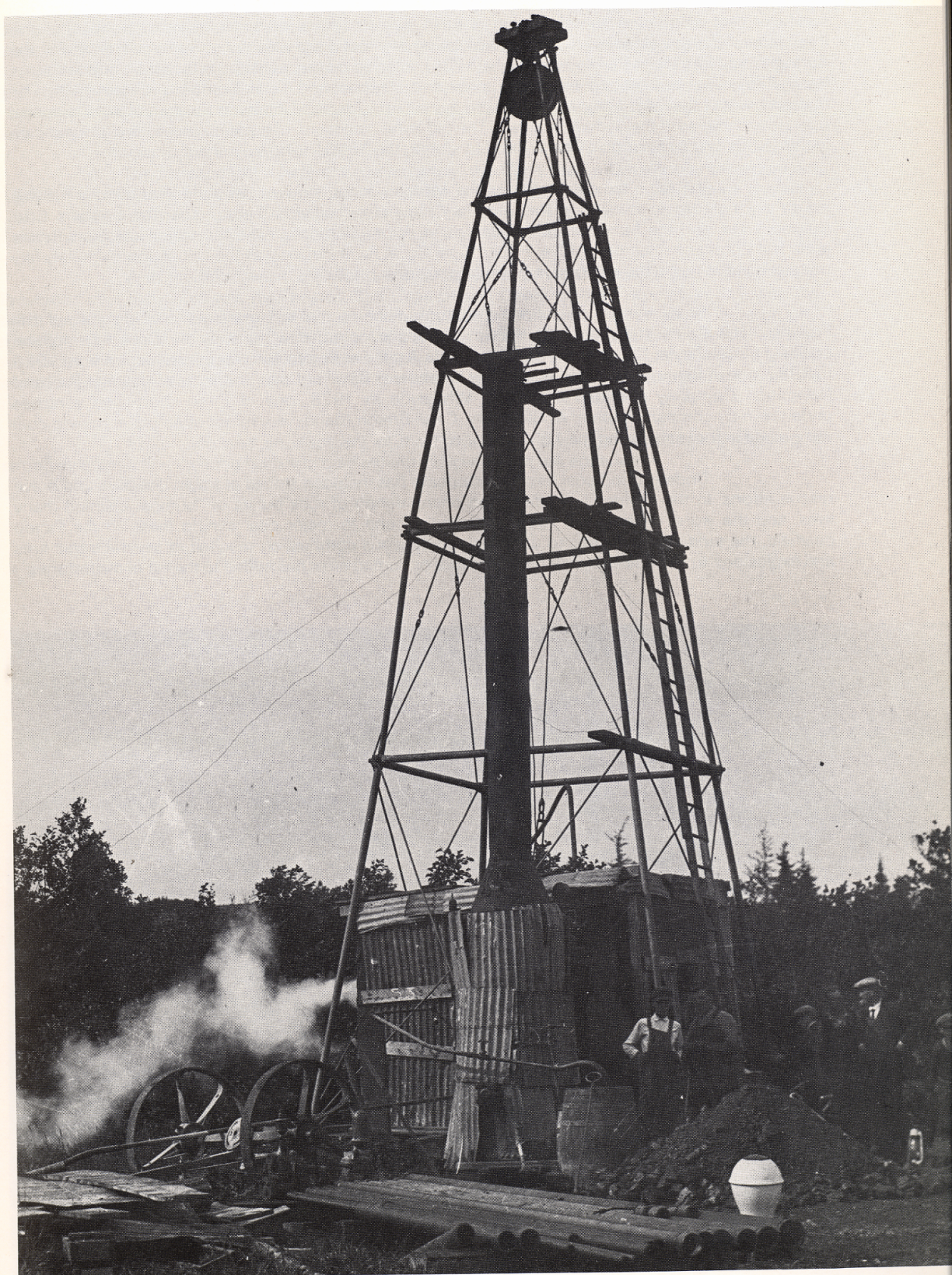


FIGURE 27. Nova Scotia Department of Mines drill no. 1, which was used to drill for oil shale at McLellan's Brook, Pictou Coalfield in 1926. *J.P. Messervey.*

In Cumberland County, many companies opened small mines in the Joggins-Chignecto coalfield after 1858, but these did not flourish due to transportation problems. Soon after the Intercolonial Railway opened in 1872, coal mining increased significantly at Springhill. In 1879, the Springhill and Parrsboro Railway Company (SPRC) received mining rights from the GMA, and five years later, SPRC was succeeded by the Cumberland Railway and Coal Company (Figure 28). The management of the latter company was taken over in 1917 by the Dominion Steel and Coal Company, operators of mines in the Sydney coalfield. The old Syndicate mine, operated by an American syndicate in the 1880s and by Springhill Coal Mines Ltd. during the 1960s, is now a miners' museum.

In 1887, the connection of the Maccan-Joggins railway with the Intercolonial Railway led to an increase in mining in the Joggins-Chignecto coalfields (Figure 29). The Joggins Coal Company Ltd. and the Maritime Coal Railway and Power Company were the major operators in this area. The Cochrane mine of the River Hebert Coal Co. at River Hebert was the last of approximately fifty underground mines in the coalfield; it ceased operations in 1980.

Small mining operations also took place in the less-extensive coal districts of the Province. The Colchester Coal and Railway Company operated a mine in the Debert-Kempton coalfield of Colchester County from 1903 to 1910. A mine at Kempton was in production from 1920 to 1932, one at Belmont in 1925. In the River Inhabitants Basin of Cape Breton, the Tidewater Fuel and Navigation Company operated a mine at Whiteside in 1928, one of three short-lived ventures undertaken by companies there. At Glengarry, Cape Breton Island, very minor attempts at mining coal were made before and during the 1930s.

Underground coal mining historically has included stories of tragic disasters and brave rescue efforts. In the Springhill coalfield, the phenomenon of rock bursts or "bumps" claimed many lives, and the worst of these, in 1958, signalled an end to major coal mining there. In the Pictou coalfield, the tendency of seams to undergo spontaneous combustion resulted in several tragic fires and explosions. In all coalfields, mechanical failure or human error has added to the list of misfortunes.

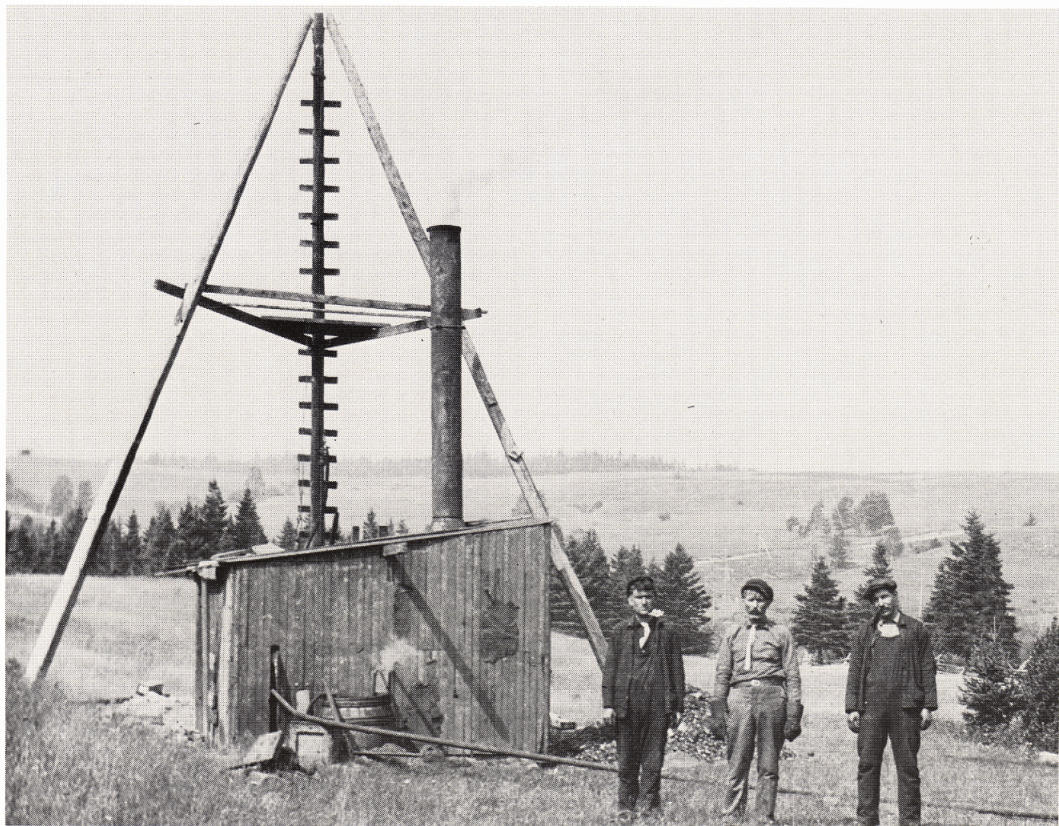


FIGURE 28. A Cumberland Railway and Coal Company drill exploring for coal at Rodney (Springhill coalfield) in 1913 (drillhole CRCC32). *Courtesy of Mrs. Daniel Davis.*

Despite ever-present dangers, coal mining prospered throughout Nova Scotia during the first half of the twentieth century. By the late 1950s, however, coal mining in the Province experienced a sharp decline because abundant, inexpensive imported oil was replacing coal in many of its traditional industrial and domestic markets. High transportation costs to the central Canadian market also helped make Nova Scotia's coal noncompetitive. Mining in the once prolific Springhill and Pictou coalfields came to a virtual standstill, although smaller operations continued in the River Hebert, Pictou and western Cape Breton coalfields.

The formation of a federal Crown agency, the Cape Breton Development Corporation (CBDC), in 1966 eventually led to a revitalization of the coal-mining industry in the Sydney coalfield. CBDC initially incorporated the Dominion Steel and Coal Company and the Nova Scotia Steel Coal Company. Several smaller, independent operators were later absorbed.

With the upheaval in the world energy situation during the late 1970s, interest in the Province's coal resources was rejuvenated. The Cape Breton Development Corporation has, with the aid of the Nova Scotia Department of Mines and Energy, begun work on the expansion of underground mining in the Sydney coalfield. Given the volatile and, at times, unstable status of available energy resources, the Coal Section of the Nova Scotia Department of Mines and Energy has delineated several emergency supply sites where coal could be mined quickly through open-pit operations should the need arise.

Exploration and development of the Province's known coal resources is ongoing, a strong indication that the long history of coal mining in Nova Scotia will continue.



FIGURE 29. Joggins, Cumberland County, circa 1900. *Nova Scotia Museum.*