

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Life-Affirmations From Within the Veil

Black Lives Matter in a myriad of ways. We have come to understand this proclamation primarily as a response to the ways in which aspects of American anti-black racism through police actions treat black bodies. But there are other ways in which *Black Lives Matter*. Writing as early as 1903, in *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois spoke of a veil. This was a veil in two senses. In the first, it was about how the rich complexities of African American life were opaque to dominant American society. Secondly, there was a sense that African American life was able to construct, from slavery through to Jim Crow, ways of life which grappled with affirming their humanness in the face of all the brutalities of American anti-black racism. Part of these life-affirming practices was a search for home, the search for spaces in which different communities could be created, a search for breathing and survival spaces. Part of that search in the early 20th century resulted in what historically, we now call the African American Great Migration. Between 1910–1970, over six million African Americans moved out of the southern United States to the West, Northwest, Northeast and the Midwest. The conventional history of this historical moment tells us that it resulted in the growth of major American cities, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh and Indianapolis amongst others.

Coal tippie at Big Looney Creek in Lynch, Kentucky.

Courtesy of Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College and the Appalachian Archives.

At level of the political, the movement was the basis for rich forms of black political expressions including the single largest black political movement of the 20th century, the Universal Negro Improvement Association led by Marcus Garvey, the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the publication of one of the most critical newspapers of African American life, *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois and the literary, artistic explosion in the early 20th century, known as the *Harlem Renaissance*. *The Migration Series* comprising sixty tempera panels by Jacob Lawrence visually tell us this story. Yet within the historical imagination about this moment, we elide, then forget other aspects of this history of mass African American movement.

Karida Brown's work brings this "forgotten" and elided history in full view. Here we have the rich stories of the "layover" stops. The geographic spaces where African Americans paused in movement and then created home. This exhibition tells the multilayered stories of African Americans *fleeing* Alabama. In flight, they were escaping Jim Crow and a convict leasing system that had replaced chattel slavery in the South. They paused in places like Kentucky to work in the coal mines of company towns. They made their lives in places like Harlan County and Appalachia, and in towns with paradoxical names like Lynch. As they escaped from Alabama, they were not seeking the warmth of another sun but rather trying, in the words of Richard Wright, "to bloom."

And The Migrants Kept Coming, The Migration Series,
Panel No. 60, 1940–41.
Jacob Lawrence
Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in. (30.5 x 45.7 cm).
Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art. © 2016
The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation,
Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



How to bloom in a company town in which coal mining became a black shackle? How to bloom in a segregated town with a "colored school?" How to bloom when the company controlled your housing, your pay, and created an economic life in which one was going to be regularly in debt? The life in Lynch or in Harlan County was not yet free but it was not slavery and the convict leasing system. Yet, the shadows of both haunted, and so African American coal miners and their families carved out spaces of song, of social engagement, and of fashion to grapple with an affirming force, a new space of possibility.

This exhibition through careful and imaginative scholarship tells us that story in all its richness.

The Center for Study of Slavery and Justice (CSSJ) has been committed since its inception to a form of Public Humanities in which we tell new and different stories that are often hidden in plain sight. For us at the Center, history and memory are critical to our work because these issues of slavery, of justice, of freedom and of creating a more humane world are not matters only for academic discussion. They are at the core of what we think engaged scholarship and research requires us to do today. The exhibition *The Black Shackle: African Americans and the Coal Economy* opens up a different narrative and space for us to imagine another side of American history. We hope you, the viewer will leave here wondering how many more untold stories need to be told. We remain committed to telling them.

ANTHONY BOGUES

DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SLAVERY AND JUSTICE
ASA MESSER PROFESSOR OF HUMANITIES AND CRITICAL THEORY
AND PROFESSOR OF AFRICANA STUDIES, BROWN UNIVERSITY

On Making History—Curating The Black Shackle

ARCHIVES, RECORDS, AND THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

History is *made*.

Being party to, or even sharing, the story of “what happened” is not enough. History requires access to the venues and institutions through which stories can enter the public sphere. There is a certain legitimacy that comes along with being “out there,” on the record. Think about that one sensational story that circulates in your own family about a relative who did something grand back in the day—a grandfather who was an alleged spy for the CIA, an uncle who was secretly Martin Luther King’s best friend and confidant, a great-grandmother who passed for black or white but was actually



EKAAMP Interview #123 with Vera Robinson of Lynch, KY in Indianapolis, IN. Aug. 2, 2014

full-blood Cherokee. Although they are often quite captivating, these stories only have currency in the private sphere, for they belong to the families, friends and communities that share a connection with them. The traces of “what happened” are often embodied in repertoire: casual storytelling, song, dance, gestures, jokes, silences, and repetition. But they do not necessarily become a part of history.

In my own work, I have come to think a lot about how the experiences of some people come to earn the status of history—a public artifact—while other folk’s lives and memories remain private goods—invisible, tenuously believable, and slippery in the hands of history.

My research is based on the African American experience in and through Appalachia. When I turned to the archive, the media, and to the historical record, I was disappointed to find a bounty of imbalanced representations of the white, toothless, backwards mountaineer, a trope that has continued to titillate the American imagination when it comes to the people of Appalachia. But where were the black folks? In fact, I personally knew Appalachia to be a diverse place that embodied a long history of Native American, European, Jewish, and recently, Latino and South Asian migrations. I knew about this diversity because my own mother and father were born in “bloody Harlan County,” an infamous coal mining community in the Appalachian region of southeastern Kentucky. And, like the thousands of

other families in their community at the time, they were the children of black coal miners. Yet the disparaging image of the white hillbilly persists. It was through these early encounters with the archives that I learned that history is largely a matter of who has the pen: *Who gets to make history? Who gets to write about whom? And on what terms?*

This is why I became an oral historian.

I took up the challenge of reconstructing the rich history of the African Americans who lived and worked in the company-owned coal towns of eastern Kentucky during the first half of the 20th century. As a descendant of the sons and daughters of coalminers, I was already familiar with many of the African American families, stories, and traditions that were associated with the region. But if there was to be a history of this experience, we had to *make it*.

Oral history was the only way to go about accomplishing this goal. I got an old-school Marantz plug-in audio recorder and hit the road. I of course went back to Harlan County to interview the few folks who still lived there, but due to the precipitous decline of the coal mining industry in the mid 20th century, few black families remained in the region. Therefore, I spent two years travelling across the country, from Newington, Connecticut, to San Jose, California and everywhere in-between, conducting oral history interviews with the descendants of black coal miners from eastern Kentucky. I found that my participants were living archives.

Now in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, they not only lived through the experience of growing up as black children in Appalachia, they also witnessed, lived, and were party to some of the greatest transformations of the 20th century—events such as the African American Great Migration, school desegregation, the urbanization of the American city, the pre-and post Civil Rights era, and the election of the first black President. I learned early on that if I really wanted to get *their* story right, I had to learn to listen.

Listening is not a passive act. It requires sincerity, energy, care and humility. Listening is an act of giving. This was a game changing epiphany for me, because it made me question my role as a researcher. Who was really in charge here? Oral history opened up the space for my participants and I to co-create historical records through relationship. As opposed to sharing a document to convey “what



EKAAMP Interview #114 with Dwayne Baskin of Lynch, KY in Indianapolis, IN. Jul. 31, 2014

happened,” the participant becomes the author of his or her own history through storytelling—sharing moments of success and triumph, disappointment and shame, turning points, drama, and regrets. In my opinion, oral history is the most capacious instrument for capturing the complexity and the sheer messiness of life.



EKAAMP Interview #87 with Timothy Motley of Benham, KY in Benham, KY. June 24, 2014

The oral histories I collected are way too good to keep to myself. History is a public artifact, right? So in 2013, I founded the Eastern Kentucky African American Migration Project (EKAAMP) in partnership with the *Southern Historical Collection* at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Through this partnership, we embarked on the journey of forming one of the institution’s first participatory archives—a practice through which communities take an active role in transmitting their history through archival preservation. In addition to the collection of oral history interviews that I recorded for the project, individual participants have donated thousands of documents, photographs, and objects to the collection to ensure that their contributions to Appalachian *and* American history would not die with them.

Together, we *made history*.

CURATING THE EXHIBITION

Curating this exhibition was a collaborative effort. A team of students and faculty, staff and exhibition experts came together to produce *The Black Shackle* in the spirit of the participatory archive. Most importantly, this exhibition is rooted in the stories of the African Americans who experienced this migration through the coal-mining towns of Appalachia first-hand. Excerpts from the EKAAMP oral histories drive the narrative throughout the exhibition both through text and audio. It is through this life-affirming form of expression that we recover this little known piece of American history, while at the same time attending to the lived experiences of the tens of thousands of African Americans who once called Appalachia home.

Yet the reach of these stories extends far beyond any one single group of African American migrants. It instead illuminates the perpetual striving of African Americans to create a place of belonging for themselves in the United States, as black folks and as American citizens.

I see my family in the exhibit, *The Black Shackle*. Stories of migration and labor weave together so many African American family histories. My great grandparents were sharecroppers, in South Carolina and with grandparents who left Jim Crow South Carolina at the age of 18 and 20 for New York in search of economic freedom and opportunity. I truly am humbled by Karida’s research. Our ancestors did the work and made the journeys they did so we could be who we are today. Their sacrifices do not go unnoticed but instead become legitimized experiences and histories.

MATYAH GAMBLE-RIVERS, Curatorial Team

M.A. CANDIDATE 2016, PUBLIC HUMANITIES
2ND YEAR PUBLIC HISTORY OF SLAVERY FELLOW, CSSJ BROWN UNIVERSITY

In the telling of history there is always discovery. In the realm of the African American archive this takes on the unearthing of new knowledges often hidden in plain sight. This is what our collaboration on *The Black Shackle* has meant to me.

A native of Virginia, I knew nothing of the labor and contributions of African Americans, Native Americans, and other nameless non-white communities to the coal economy. A controlled historical silence.

As an archivist, I find again and again - when faced with Herculean challenges to our American residency, our strategies are historically rooted in honoring ancestors, family and community. We have created new knowledges with wisdom, courage, love and laughter.

I hope your experience of *The Black Shackle*, like mine, leaves you with the desire to look further into our personal and historical narratives, and the beauty that lies therein.

RENÉE ELIZABETH NEELY, MLIS

CURATORIAL TEAM, PROJECT ARCHIVIST
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SLAVERY AND JUSTICE, BROWN UNIVERSITY

It is our hope that through your experience of interacting with *The Black Shackle* exhibition, whether it be through interacting with the physical space, visiting the exhibition website, or listening to the exhibition soundtrack, that you too will see yourself in this slice of American history.

KARIDA L. BROWN, Ph.D., Curator

FOUNDER, THE EASTERN KENTUCKY AFRICAN AMERICAN MIGRATION PROJECT
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY, UCLA

Town center in Lynch, Kentucky.
Courtesy of Southeast Kentucky Community and
Technical College and the Appalachian Archives.

SELECTED

Exhibition Gallery



Camp Number Four in Lynch, Kentucky.
Courtesy of Southeast Kentucky Community and
Technical College and the Appalachian Archives.

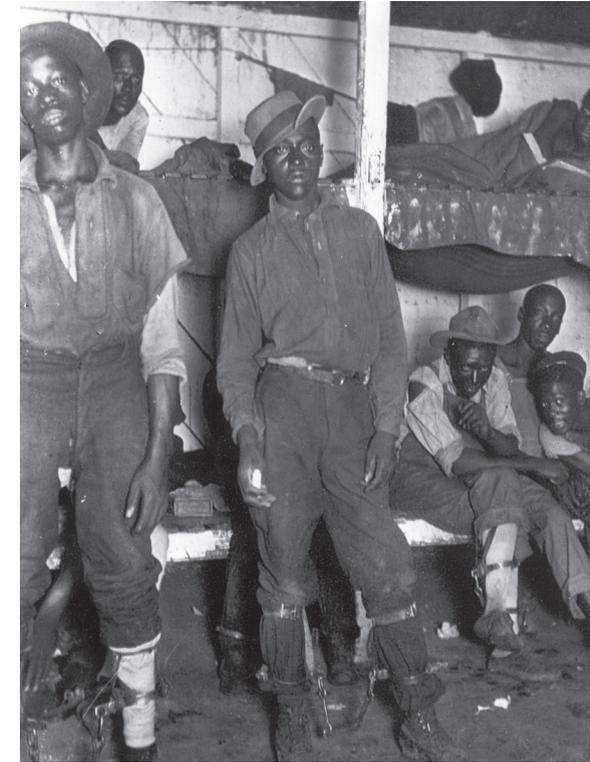
Sentenced

JEFFERSON COUNTY, ALABAMA 1875-1928

...and the funny thing is my dad never went back to Alabama after he left. He never went back, and he never talked about nothing concerning Alabama.

—WILLIAM SCHAFFER, JR., born 1926 in Lynch, Kentucky

Following the abolition of slavery, the formerly enslaved were coerced into a system of prison labor known as the convict leasing system. Under this system, companies and individuals paid fees to state and county governments in exchange for the labor of prisoners on farms, at lumberyards, and in coal mines. For decades, the state of Alabama profited immensely from the convict leasing system. By the 1880s, nearly all of the several thousand state and county prisoners working under the convict leasing system labored in coal mines located around the city of Birmingham, Alabama. Typically convicted of misdemeanors, such as vagrancy and petty theft, these county convicts often served long periods of hard labor in inhumane conditions. Alabama was the last state in the United States to abolish the practice, and by 1900 convict leasing accounted for over seventy percent of the state's revenue. American companies such as United States Steel Corporation relied heavily on the convict leasing system to supply labor for the then booming coal mining industry in Alabama.



Birmingham City convicts sleeping in shackles after ten hours labor on streets. Birmingham, AL. Thomas Dukes Parke Papers, 1900-1914.

Courtesy of the Birmingham Public Library
Department of Archives and Manuscripts,
File number 214.21c.



The convict leasing system created a way for industries to exploit the labor of black bodies with impunity. What was once made possible through chattel racial slavery became possible through mass incarceration. Convict leasing essentially called for the re-enslavement of people of African descent. In his writings on the subject in 1893, black abolitionist Frederick Douglass asserted “every Negro so sentenced not only means able-bodied men to swell the state’s number of slaves, but every Negro so convicted is thereby *disfranchised*.” The two images on this page show the inhumane living conditions in which black convicts were made to endure. Laboring for ten to twelve hours during the day, shackled to their cell beds during the night. Can you see the resemblance between these two images and that of the inside of a slave ship?

Convicts inside prison. Birmingham, AL.
Thomas Dukes Parke Papers, 1900–1914.
Courtesy of the Birmingham Public Library
Department of Archives and Manuscripts,
File number 21.4.16.



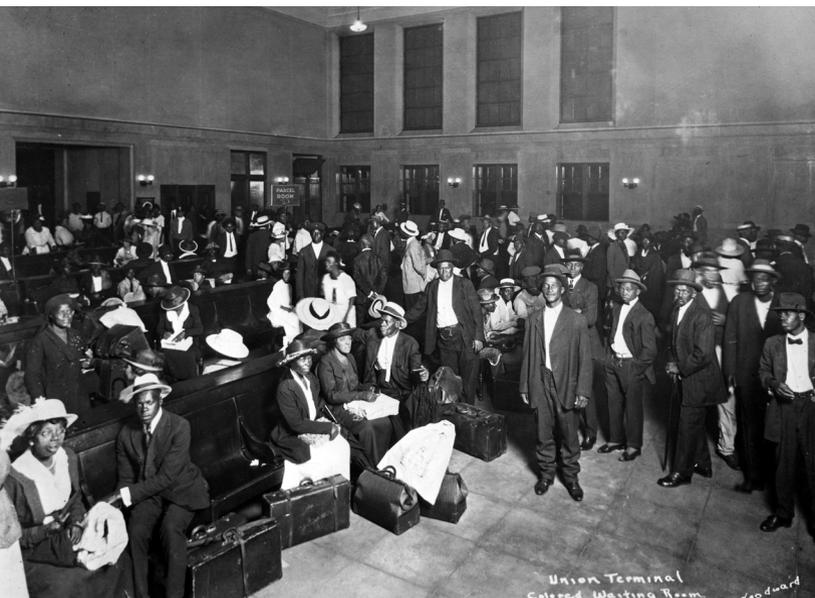
Lt. Francis Meynell, Royal Navy, artist.
Slave Deck of the Albatroz, watercolor, 1845.
Courtesy of the National Maritime Museum,
Greenwich, London.

Migrated

...Lafayette, Alabama. My father came like other fathers, looking for an opportunity to find wholesome employment; and the coal mines afforded him that opportunity. There were coal miner opportunities as I understand in the Birmingham area, so that was a natural transition for a lot of residents of Alabama.

—JEROME RATCHFORD, born 1942 in Lynch, Kentucky

A segregated railroad depot waiting room in Jacksonville, Florida. 1921.
Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida



By 1900, ninety percent of this country's black population still resided in the U.S. South. Between 1910 and 1970, an estimated six million African Americans left the South and migrated to cities and communities throughout the country. The proliferation of the railway, industrial booms in the urban centers of the North and Midwest, two World Wars, and extreme racial oppression in the South are all factors that played into this mass out-migration of blacks from the South to the North throughout the 20th century.

During the post-Reconstruction era, life in the South for African Americans was characterized by racial terror; oppressive structures such as sharecropping, Jim Crow codes, convict leasing, and lynching were normal occurrences. African Americans' decades long escape from the South during this period came to be known as the "African American Great Migration," and was a social, political, economic, and spiritual movement for blacks in America.



They Were Very Poor, The Migration Series, Panel No. 10, 1940–41
Jacob Lawrence
Tempera on gesso on composition board.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2016
The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Jacob Lawrence tells the story of the African American Great Migration in his 60 panel narrative series, *The Migration of the Negro*. The great mass movement of blacks from the rural South to urban Northern cities like Chicago, New York and St. Louis was a phenomenon of its time and is still remembered as one to this day. Through his images and captions Lawrence records African Americans in



And The Migrants Kept Coming, The Migration Series, Panel No. 60, 1940–41
Jacob Lawrence
Tempera on gesso on composition board.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2016
The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

history telling a more comprehensive history of this country. *The Black Shackle* continues the work of sharing the African American experience and weaving it into our national narrative. Lawrence too was a child of a coal miner. He spent a portion of his youth in resettlement camps in the coal mining town of Easton, Pennsylvania.

Rooted

Lynch will always be my home. I don't care where I go, Kentucky is my home. I mean, you can't take that away; that is where I got my beginning, and that is where I learned to love people.

—BARBARA HAURY, born 1942 in Lynch, Kentucky – resides in Chicago, Illinois



Thornton Davis (coal miner, father) in his garden in Lynch, Kentucky, year unknown.

Image selected from the Thornton and Mamie Davis Collection in the Eastern Kentucky African American Migration Project at UNC Chapel Hill.

While the majority of African Americans migrated to urban metropolises in the North, Midwest, Northeast, and later on in the West, there were tens of thousands of African Americans who first migrated to Appalachia. One example is the migration stream from the mineral district of Alabama to the coalfields of eastern Kentucky. Large corporations such as United States Steel Corporation and International Harvester Company recruited black labor from Alabama to the coalfields of eastern Kentucky. During this migration, many black families established new roots in places like Lynch, Benham, and Cumberland—three small company-owned coal towns in Harlan County, Kentucky.

Women were the backbone of the community. In these single-industry communities, there were no opportunities for women in the formal labor economy. However they were the wives, mothers, family accountants, cooks, disciplinarians, household managers, and the ones who maintained stability in the community. The men in these communities were all coal miners. However, they were more than that. They were also fathers, friends, deacons and community



leaders. In addition to their role as miners, black men in Harlan County, Kentucky were gardeners. A skill they brought with them from the plantations of Alabama, raising crops, hogs, and chickens was a common practice they adopted to feed their families. Known for its large families—some of which had as many as seventeen children—the black community was *rooted* in family, well-defined social roles, and love.



ABOVE LEFT
Our mother's quilt.

Courtesy of Michael Davis of Lynch, Kentucky.

ABOVE RIGHT

Coal miners' wives gathered in the kitchen in Lynch, Kentucky, circa. 1968.

Image selected from the Thornton and Mamie Davis Collection in the Eastern Kentucky African American Migration Project at UNC Chapel Hill.

Kindred



Selected images of the Lynch Colored Public School, Lynch, Kentucky. circa 1940.

Images selected from the Lynch Colored High School Alumni Association Collection in the Eastern Kentucky African American Migration Project at UNC Chapel Hill.

...growing up, everybody was like family...it was big families everywhere...and so it was a fun time, it really was, some people say “oh coal mining camp?”, yes it was a coal mining camp, but it was a loving camp and everybody shared.

—ARLETTA ANDREWS, born 1941 in Lynch, Kentucky – resides in Detroit, Michigan

Although Kentucky was a border state, African Americans were subject to the laws of de jure segregation, known as Jim Crow codes. Schools, communities, and various commercial spaces were racially segregated by law and tradition. However, these coal mining towns were far more than a place of work to the African American families who took root there. They were thriving black communities where families, neighbors, teachers and other community members created a social world that was full of life and activity. The bond that the black coal miners and their families experience to this day are rooted in their shared historical experience with migration and segregation, and also with culture, family, and community in the coal towns of eastern Kentucky.



Teacher with students outside of the Lynch Colored Public School. Circa 1940. William Schaffer, Jr. of Lynch, Kentucky papers.

Courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, UNC Chapel Hill; EKAAMP collection.



...mama would always pack an extra sandwich in daddy's lunch bucket. And it was such a treat for him to come back from work and get that sandwich. And it'd be smelling like the mines—you know, be all musky smelling. I doubt if I would eat one now, but boy that was the biggest thing in the world.

—LESLIE LEE, born 1948 in Lynch, Kentucky – resides in Harlan, Kentucky



TOP
His father's lunch pail.
Courtesy of Roger Stewart of Lynch, Kentucky.

RIGHT
Lump of bituminous coal from mine portal 31 in Lynch, Kentucky.
Courtesy of Rev. Edgar James Moss of Benham, Kentucky.

LEFT
Coal miners changing shifts at Portal no. 31 in Lynch, KY. Circa 1940. William Schaffer, Jr. of Lynch, Kentucky papers.
Courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, UNC Chapel Hill; EKAAMP collection.



Owned

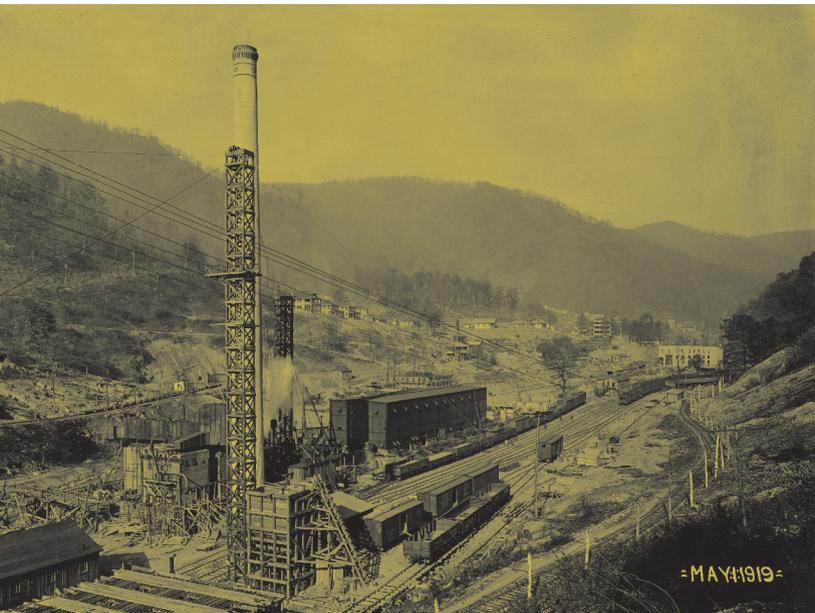
They owned everything...you could not live in housing without abiding with the standards that United States Steel established. And if by chance a husband was killed in the mines, the wife could no longer live in those houses...they owned the houses, they owned the mineral rights under the houses, they owned the commercial outlets. And the same thing was also true of Benham, Kentucky, it was owned by International Harvester, which was also a major top five hundred company at the time...

—JEROME RATCHFORD, born 1940 in Lynch, Kentucky – resides in Atlanta, Georgia

Racial oppression was not the only social force that weighed on the African American community at the time. During the period of industrial boom, between 1915 and 1963, the coal companies in Harlan County, Kentucky owned the towns in which they operated. In exchange for the opportunity to enter the rungs of the working class, miners and their families forfeited many freedoms, as the company controlled all aspects of social and economic life within the company owned town.



Colored section bath house Lynch, Kentucky.



The Black Shackle is not a one-sided story. It is an exhibition that reveals the tensions, dualities, and contradictions inherent within the veil, that W.E.B. Dubois speaks about. It is a veil in which African Americans live their lives in the face of anti-black racism. It is a tale that lies at the heart of the story of the twentieth century African American Great Migration; a tale of striving and oppression, dehumanization and life-affirmation, and one that complicates the narrative of freedom and bondage. The African Americans that escaped the oppressive structure of the Deep South by migrating to the coal towns of eastern Kentucky did find some form of freedom and a new life, but they also encountered new forms of oppression and bondage. By sharing the stories of the people who experienced this migration and created new lives for themselves and their families in Appalachia, we can begin to better understand our collective American past and present.



Archival photos provided by Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College and the Appalachian Archives.

These photos are part of the U.S. Coal & Coke and International Harvester Image Collection. For more information about this collection visit <http://www.appalachianarchive.com/>. All images circa 1915–1940.

OPPOSITE PAGE: TOP LEFT
Coal tippie at Big Looney Creek in Lynch, Kentucky.

OPPOSITE PAGE: BOTTOM
United States Steel officials of Lynch, Kentucky. (from left to right: E.V. Albert, superintendent; L.A. Billips, division engineer; J.D. Jennings, construction; W.N. Clagett and R.J. Bondorant, assistants; F.J. Dooley, chief clerk; W.E. Riley, M.D.)

TOP
Employee physical exam Lynch, Kentucky.

RIGHT
Camp Number Four in Lynch, Kentucky





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Renée Elizabeth Neely, MLIS, Project Archivist

Shana Weinberg, Assistant Director, Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice

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