

**THE ARCHAEOLOGY
OF
AMERICAN MINING**

PAUL J. WHITE

★ **The American Experience In Archaeological Perspective**

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"Outstanding. Focuses on the material aspects of mining's past to understand the American experience in this economic culture."—**DONALD L. HARDESTY**, author of *Mining Archaeology in the American West: A View from the Silver State*

"Artfully synthesizes the complexities of American mining heritage using archaeology's broad, temporal scale to generate a baseline for documenting, interpreting, and sustainably managing mining sites and landscapes. This book is a revelatory tool for archaeologists, historians, resource managers, and students."—**KELLY J. DIXON**, author of *Boomtown Saloons: Archaeology and History in Virginia City*

"Offers a rarely seen synthesis of industrial archaeology, labor archaeology, and mining heritage."—**MICHAEL ROLLER**, archaeologist, National Park Service



THE MINING INDUSTRY in North America has a rich and conflicted history. It is associated with the opening of the frontier and the rise of the United States as an industrial power but also with social upheaval, the dispossession of indigenous lands, and extensive environmental impacts.

Synthesizing fifty years of research on American mining sites that date from colonial times to the present, Paul White provides an ideal overview of the field for both students and professionals. *The Archaeology of American Mining* offers a multifaceted look at mining, incorporating findings from an array of subfields, including historical archaeology, industrial archaeology, and maritime archaeology. Case studies are taken from a wide range of contexts, from eastern coal mines to Alaskan gold fields, with special attention paid to the domestic and working lives of miners. Exploring what material artifacts can tell us about the lives of people who left few records, White demonstrates how archaeologists contribute to our understanding of the legacies left by miners and the mining industry.

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Front: Ore car at the Granite Mine, south-central Alaska. Photo by author.

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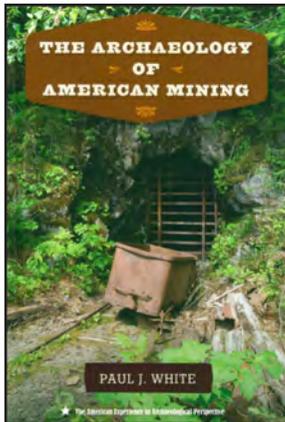
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The Archaeology of American Mining

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Reviewed by Philip G. Millhouse, Red Gates Archaeology, Stoughton, Wisconsin.

In this work, author Paul J. White provides a fitting follow up to Frankaviglia's seminal 1991 work, *Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts*. The new work focuses almost exclusively on post-contact American mining with only passing reference to the many millennia of Native American mining activity throughout North Amer-

ica. The *Introduction* describes the coming contents of the work and provides a synthetic overview of the major themes to be discussed with a particular focus on the material culture of mining and how its variable context provides insights into miners lives as well as underlying issues of class, gender, and ethnicity that structured the diverse mining communities. In addition, readers are alerted that although the wider work is a survey, it focuses heavily on the western mining districts of the United States.

The first chapter, *American Mining in Three Acts*, gives a broad overview of the centuries of post-contact mining in North America through discussion of technological histories during the colonial period, the late nineteenth century, and post-World War II. These three discussions avoid a tedious chronological narrative in favor of details concerning work site and community infrastructure, economic connections, environmental implications, and other specifics related to the three periods. The structure of this chapter allows the reader to grasp the long-term trends in mining traditions through these specific blocks of time. The second chapter, *Historical Archaeologists and American Mining*, provides a history of archaeological investigations into American mining. The discussions frames these investigations into three chronological blocks that roughly parallel the process of opening a mine district: prospecting (1920–1960), development (1960–1980s) and extraction (1990 to the present). The prospecting decades saw the first limited investigations on single sites of national importance with very narrow field of interpretation. The following development period witnessed research that expanded its scope to regions and mining districts at a time that correlated with the implementation of federal preservation laws, the explosion of CRM archaeology, and creation of societies dedicated to industrial archaeology. The final extraction phase has witnessed the establishment of more sophisticated research programs and a more nuanced approach to issues of class, gender, and ethnicity that crosscut mining work places and communities.

The third chapter, *Roaring Camp and Company Town*, examines the complex social configuration of mining work places, camps, boom communities, and paternalistic (if exploitative) company towns. The discussion emphasizes how similar structures of demand, capitol, and corporate hierarchy stamped an outwardly similar looking structure on later mining areas, but local geography, ethnic diversity, and labor relations gave a distinctly local character to different mining districts. The fourth chapter, *Meeting the Miners*, is a selective look at the

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aforementioned complexities of mining communities and how class, gender, ethnicity, safety issues, and especially labor/owner conflicts could bring divisions to the forefront of seemingly uniform company towns. In this environment of diversity and tension, the author sees these communities as being ideal places for the study of identity development. These identities (and their archaeological remnants) are what give many mining areas their unique character as mentioned in the previous chapter.

The fifth chapter, *Into the Mines*, looks at the actual work of miners and how cultural preferences (and past mining traditions) influenced management, labor organization, and chosen technological practices. These choices in turn contributed to the diversity of archaeological signatures at actual mine sites throughout different districts. An additional factor favoring diversity was the cyclical boom and bust economic cycles of mining regions and lode specific changes in ore extraction that led to a bewildering (and localized) diversity of milling and other technological infrastructure. The author also argues that in many cases archaeological landscapes or even districts are an important scale of analysis as it allows researchers to look at data from multiple networks tying the area to its broader political and economic entanglements. The sixth and final chapter, *In Memorium*, explores how the mining past is presented to a modern audience through monuments, films, and environmental legacies. These presentations can bring out conflicting histories related to owner/labor conflict, romanticizing the past for tourist consumption, and conflicts over mining immediate benefits (employment and resources we all use) versus long term environmental and health impacts. The conclusion of the work entitled *Scaling up and Down* reiterates prior themes and the role archaeologist play in interpreting the complicated past of subsurface resource extraction. Critical to the archaeologist's endeavor is the perpetual question of what constitutes an important resource worth saving. This becomes an even more thorny question at mining sites where places of unarguable historic importance are often environmental disasters in need of significant remediation (and thus site alteration or destruction). The author concludes by noting the interconnected power of the global mining industry and how understanding its past, and most importantly those who lived this past, can equip us to confront the challenges that mining's current trajectory brings to our world.

In conclusion, this work is a well-written and thought provoking summary of the current state of mining archaeology in the United States. Some sections could have been strengthened with acknowledgement of substantial post-contact Native American mining efforts in places like the Upper Mississippi Valley, additional maps, and more details on how an archaeological study and tally of material culture drastically altered a previous, textual derived story line. This being said, the author was up front about the time frame, national focus, and use of predominately western examples in the work. Mining history (and its archaeological remains) is a vast and complicated subject. Any attempt to narrow this massive topic down to a readable synthesis is a daunting mission and one the author did with excellent clarity.

Reference

Frankaviglia, Richard V. (1991) *Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts*. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa.