

“Coal in Our Blood”: Memory and Mining Towns

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There is a generally favourable memory associated with the early company town of Albion Mines, now Stellarton. The General Mining Association (GMA) shaped the physical and social landscape of the town, bringing in jobs, stores, and schools amongst a growing population. A strong sense of community emerged from the area, creating a tight-knit family.

After receiving mining rights from the Duke of York in 1826, the GMA began to set up operations in Stellarton. Their mines brought hundreds of industrial workers to the area, as evident in directories from the time – the GMA employed nearly 80% of Stellarton’s work force. By creating a vast network of workers connected to the mines, the company effectively shaped a community through common interests. Their social lives intertwined as sports teams formed, including baseball and cricket, and events such as picnics and dances filled their free time.

The closeness of the community led to a lasting positive legacy of the GMA. Over a century after the GMA sold off its last mine in 1872, Stellarton writers still held the company in high esteem. They described life in the community as harmonious, where miners supported one another. Mining formed a connection that tied them all together and made them feel like they belonged to an exclusive group.

At the same time, the rosy memory does not necessarily reflect reality. Coal mining towns in Nova Scotia saw companies that controlled every aspect of the miners’ lives, including food and rent. In Cape Breton, their company ensured miners stayed by manipulating prices and wages to force families into continuous cycles of debt and poverty.

In Stellarton, the GMA’s control was not as dire as Cape Breton. One major factor was the proximity of New Glasgow and its businesses, which brought competitive pricing, along with the introduction of the co-op Union Store in 1861. Stellarton also enjoyed higher wages than any other Nova Scotian mine during the GMA’s reign, adding to a strong economy.

There are signs, however, that living under the GMA was not as harmonious as memory serves. The dissatisfaction felt by William Davies, who leased their foundry, is evident in his constant pursuit to leave town. Although an initial deal to build a foundry fell through with Primrose & Son of Pictou, it did not deter Davies. A few years later, Davies bought property along Front Street, and by 1855 he built a house and foundry of his own. The persistence to *own* his foundry, along with proximity to shipyards, likely factored into his decision to leave Stellarton.

While Davies’ story does not dispute the sense of community in Stellarton, it does disturb the perfect memory of the GMA. The good memories tie directly into a better economy, an abundance of competition, and a tight-knit community. Although aspects of the company town was not as favourable as some remembered it, the memory of the company town remains positive amongst a sea of negative experiences elsewhere in Nova Scotia.