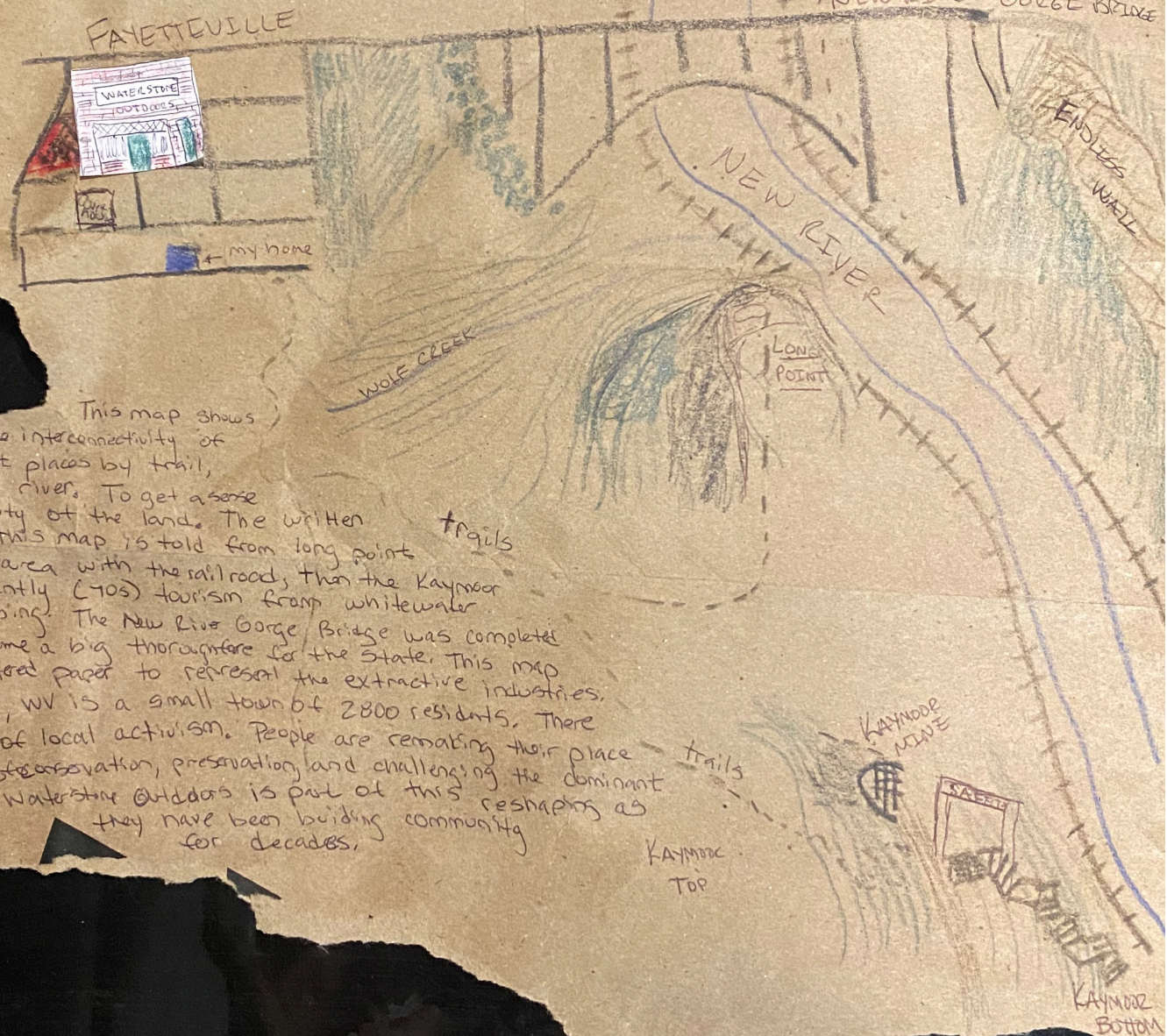


FAYETTEVILLE AND THE NEW RIVER GORGE



This map shows the interconnectivity of road, rail road, and river. To get a sense of the importance and beauty of the land. The written narrative that accompanies this map is told from long point Industry came to the area with the railroad, then the Kaymoore mine, and more recently (70s) tourism from whitewater rafting and climbing. The New River Gorge Bridge was completed in 1973 and became a big thoroughfare for the state. This map was drawn on tattered paper to represent the extractive industries. Today Fayetteville, WV is a small town of 2800 residents. There is a resurgence of local activism. People are reclaiming their place in the form of conservation, preservation, and challenging the dominant narrative. Waterstone Outdoors is part of this reshaping as they have been building community for decades.

A River Runs Through Us

The world is dark except for the light shining on my headlamp. I run through the forest on trails, parts are smooth, others are littered with roots and rocks waiting for a misstep. The air is damp and the forest smells of decomposing leaves and wet earth. As I start down a particularly technical section of trail my excitement builds. I stop at the edge of a cliff surrounded on almost all sides by emptiness. I sit quietly as daylight spreads throughout the spectacular landscape.

First to be illuminated is the New River Gorge Bridge. Its single span arching geometry is dramatic against a gorge of lush green forest. Connecting the north and south sides of the river in 1977, it revolutionized travel in the area allowing for commerce and tourism to flourish. The completion of the bridge wasn't just good for tourism," says former whitewater raft company owner, Frank Lukacs, "but it was good for everything else. It opened up Beckley to towns in the north and became a huge north south corridor from Pennsylvania and Ohio through WV."

Just south of the bridge is the town of Fayetteville. It sits at the edge of the park at the top of the gorge. No buildings can be seen from my vantage point as there are trails that buffer the short distance to town, but I still think about town and imagine seeing my house just through those trees. Fayetteville became a mecca for coal mining following the civil war as it sits on top of one of our country's richest coal seams.

In my mind I trace the trail system from town to the Kaymoor mine and down the infamous 'steps' to Kaymoor bottom, which sits next to the river and where 120 historic beehive coke ovens can still be seen today. Today the mine is behind steel bars, though the tunnel into the mountain is still visible. Sixty-five-degree air exits at all times of the year, making it cool in summer and warm in winter. A menacing sign made of large metal I-beams sits at the top of the stairs and says "Your family wants you to work safely." The not so subtle reminder of the

dangers of mining coal. The most common causes of death for this mine were due to fires, roof falls, explosions and electrocutions. The mine was staffed with European immigrant and black labor. Both Kaymoor Top and Bottom were small, segregated towns. There were houses, stores, segregated schools, a ball field, a pool hall, and a theater. The black history of the area was not part of my education, even though West Virginia history was taught in both 3rd and 8th grades.

This whitewashing of the archive in respect to the black miners in West Virginia is similar to what Delilah Beasily noticed with the first black settlers to California. She conducted interviews and wrote the book, *Negro Trailblazer*, in 1919. (Lecture February 9) In 2002 (the year I graduated from high school) the first memoir of a black coal miner was published, *Black Days, Black Dust: The Memoirs of an African American Coal Miner*. The book documents Bob Armstead's 40 years as a coal miner in West Virginia, moving from mine to mine depending on work to survive. He overcame adversity and worked up through the ranks on the timber crew, running machines, foreman over primarily white work crews, up to safety inspector. (Armstead)

I hear an early morning train rumble through the canyon. The whitewater in the gorge prevents barges from running up the river, so the railroad is used for moving coal throughout the region. I remember as a child camping along the river and putting pennies on the track for the trains to flatten at night. The tracks are still active today mostly transporting freight, including coal. Downstream of the bridge a few miles is the site of one of the worst industrial catastrophes in American History, the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster of 1931. More than 764 died, mostly African Americans, due to silicosis from working in the tunnel. So many died that they used a mass unnamed burial site in a neighboring town. (Dotson-Lewis) "The Book of the Dead" is an unforgetting of the disaster, similar to that told by Robert Lovato. The article prints a "fraction of the Hawk's Nest dead, gleaned from Union Carbide reports and vital records." (Venable-Moore)

With the ever-increasing dawn I look off to my right and see the Endless Wall, nearly 3 miles of unbroken cliff, come into view. The walls jut out from a sea of greenery below and above. Mostly single pitch, a route that can be climbed in one go with a standard rope, sandstone climbing is considered the “crown jewel of all the crags on the New River.” (Rock Climbing in Endless Wall, The New River Gorge) “Endless” as it is referred to in the local climbing community is one of many premier places in the area to climb. Making the area an “international climbing mecca” according to Kenny Parker. There are more than 60 miles of sandstone cliffs containing 3000 plus unique routes to climb. Parker, along with climbing couple Maura and Gene Kistler, came to the area to climb in the 80s, and in the 90s started the iconic Water Stone Outdoors. The shop is more than just a store that sells rad clothing and gear. It is a place designed to help people be inspired and get connected. “Because if we don’t, the planet is going to hell,” Maura Kistler said. “I strongly believe we’ve got to get more people outdoors connecting to nature, or how are we going to save the planet? If the outdoor community isn’t fully invested in saving the planet, then who the f*** is?” The founders of Water Stone also helped start the New River Alliance for Climbers, dedicated to preserving the local climbing areas. They are active participants in challenging the local conservative narrative and have been for decades. They champion the annual HomoClimbtastic, the world’s largest queer-friendly climbing convention, which takes place in Fayetteville, and do so in a way that is both fun and inclusive. Latinx artist Gio drew the market and church as a depiction of community in Napa through his counter narrative artwork. (Lecture March 18) This is analogous to Water Stone Outdoors and the community it builds within Fayetteville. The store and its owners are a support network for many who come to the area, by helping with housing, food, work, and a sense of place in the community. This is similar in some ways to the Zapotec community formation in

L.A., as they both provide a safety net for people moving to the area, community gatherings that invoke a sense of home in a foreign place, and local activism. (Cruz-Manjarrex)

Finally, from my vantage point up high the light reaches the New River, despite its name it is actually one of the oldest rivers in the world, carving a path from south to north through rugged canyons. My parents started a whitewater rafting company in 1975 in WV. By the 90s more than 20 companies existed driving tourism in the area. The New River became a national river in 1978 making the lands around it protected. Dr. Heather Lukacs, my sister, co-facilitated a regional clean water alliance for the New River as West Virginia Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association between 2009 and 2012. She obtained a PhD from Stanford in Environment and Resources with the focus of her dissertation on community-based natural resource management with and for underserved rural communities. How watershed groups are remaking places. Different parts of the community are brought together to try to address old coal mine and waste water pollution. "When restoration projects and their results are visible, people are motivated to become involved in community action. Seeing others working to clean up their stream and community motivates new volunteers." (Lukacs, H. A.)

I retrace my steps up the steep trail and then choose a different trail back to town. I see friends either biking, hiking, or heading climbing for the day. The outdoor community and tourism have grown exponentially since my parents' initial move. However, "tourism isn't in and of itself good for the environment," says Dr. Lukacs. "It can be extractive in its own way." The river and the land around it are deeply precious, and what spurred the migration of many to the area. Today there is an entire community composed of a mix of outdoor transplants and people that have lived in the area for generations. Together they work towards preservation and

conservation. There is a resurgence of local activism towards the way of West Virginia life that is with and from the land.

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