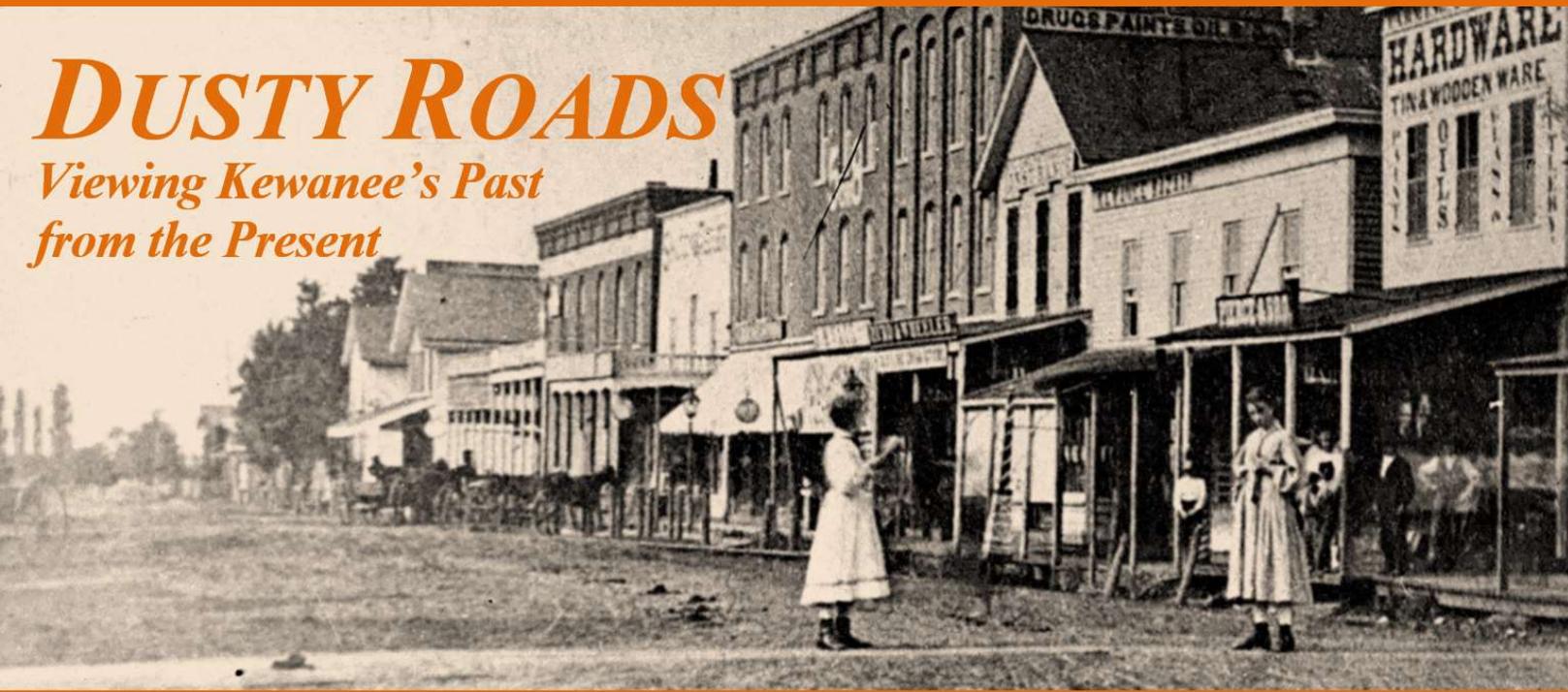


DUSTY ROADS

Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present



by Dean Karau

January 2020

The First Coal Mine in Henry County – in Wethersfield?

The Early Colonists Mined Coal to Power The Steam Engine for Their Mills

In 1673, Father Jacques Marquette and fur trader Louis Joliet were the first to discover coal in the United States. It was in Illinois, near today's Utica.

Less than two centuries later, coal mining became the first major industry and an important engine for Kewanee's burgeoning economy.

In between, however, coal was first mined in Wethersfield Township, and the coal served a vital role in shaping life in the new colony.

When the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield, Connecticut, first conceived of what became Wethersfield, Illinois, it knew the importance of saw and grist mills for the colony. The instructions given to the first committee charged with buying the col-



Copy of Joliet's map made in 1674 showing location of coal near today's Utica.

ony's land included a mandate to "ascertain . . . whether there is in the vicinity any stream that will carry a mill."

But the lack of a strong enough current in what is today's Mill Creek forced the colonists to turn to steam to power their mills.

In 1838, the materials for the mill were shipped from Cincinnati to Hennepin and then drawn by ox teams to Wethersfield. There, William Howard, the first engineer, with the help of other villagers, assembled the saw mill and steam engine for operation.

What did the colony decide to use as a fuel to power the engine to generate the needed steam?

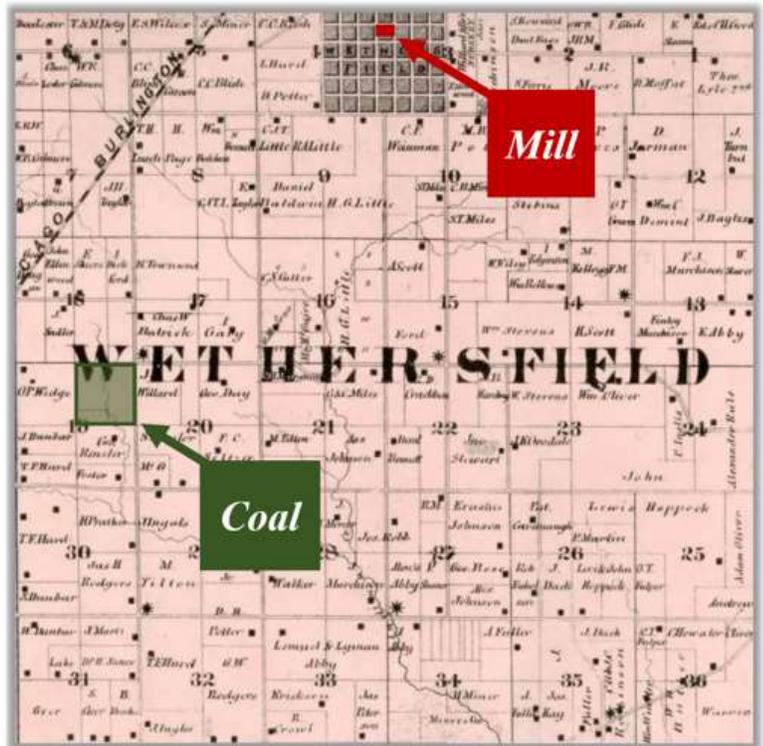
There certainly was a plentiful supply of firewood in the Big Barren Grove just to the

north. However, even hardwoods such as oak only produce around 3,000 BTUs per pound of wood (assuming the wood is reasonably dry). But bituminous coal produces between 10,000 and 14,000 BTU per pound. As a result, coal in the 1830s and 1840s was becoming a go-to source of efficient heat for steam engines.

And there was coal in and around Wethersfield.

The colony was aware of coal in their neighborhood almost from the beginning. An 1837 circular soliciting buyers for shares in the Association touted that “[o]ne quarter section has been purchased . . . because it contained an extensive bed of coal. There is one other rich bed of coal, and indications of it in various places in the township.”

As it turned out, the additional quarter section did not produce coal, but coal was found in the northeast corner of Section 19 in the township, and the Association later noted that “considerable coal



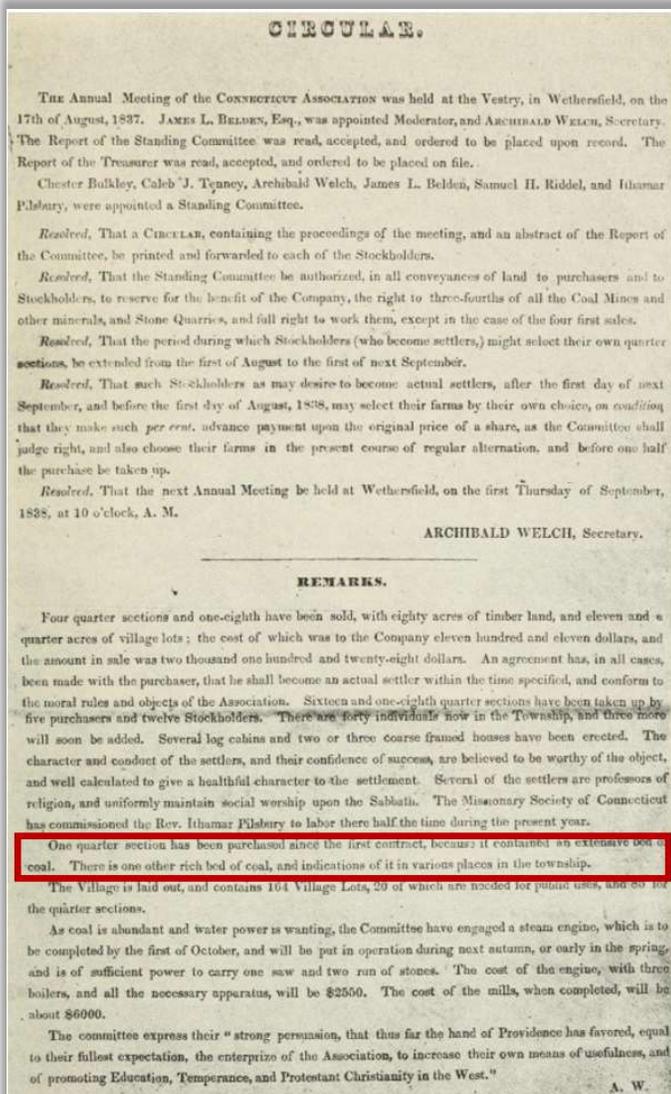
1860 map of Wethersfield Township
has been taken from [Section 19].”

A July 6, 1839, PEORIA REGISTER AND NORTH-WESTERN GAZETTEER story about Wethersfield reported that “[c]oal is used for fuel [for the mills], which is obtained in abundance within two miles, and a contract was made in April for a year’s supply, delivered at the mill, at seven cents per bushel. The consumption is 30 bushels a day.”

According to the United States Census Report for 1840, bituminous coal was mined in Henry County. However, only two men mined and they produced 2,250 bushels of coal.

Other research makes it likely that other mills operating in Henry County at that time were using water power. So it seems probable that most, if not all, of the coal being mined in Henry County was from Wethersfield Township, and that coal was used for Wethersfield’s mills.

Coal mining in that time period consisted of surface mining of outcroppings of coal seams along the bluffs of rivers, streams, or sloughs. In 1978, Dean L. Bates wrote a paper for the Kewanee Historical Society on the history of coal mining in Kewanee from 1854 to the middle 20th century. While he didn’t specifically discuss mining in Wethersfield, what he had to say about the early mining in Kewanee would be applicable to how it was done in Wethersfield. Here’s an excerpt from

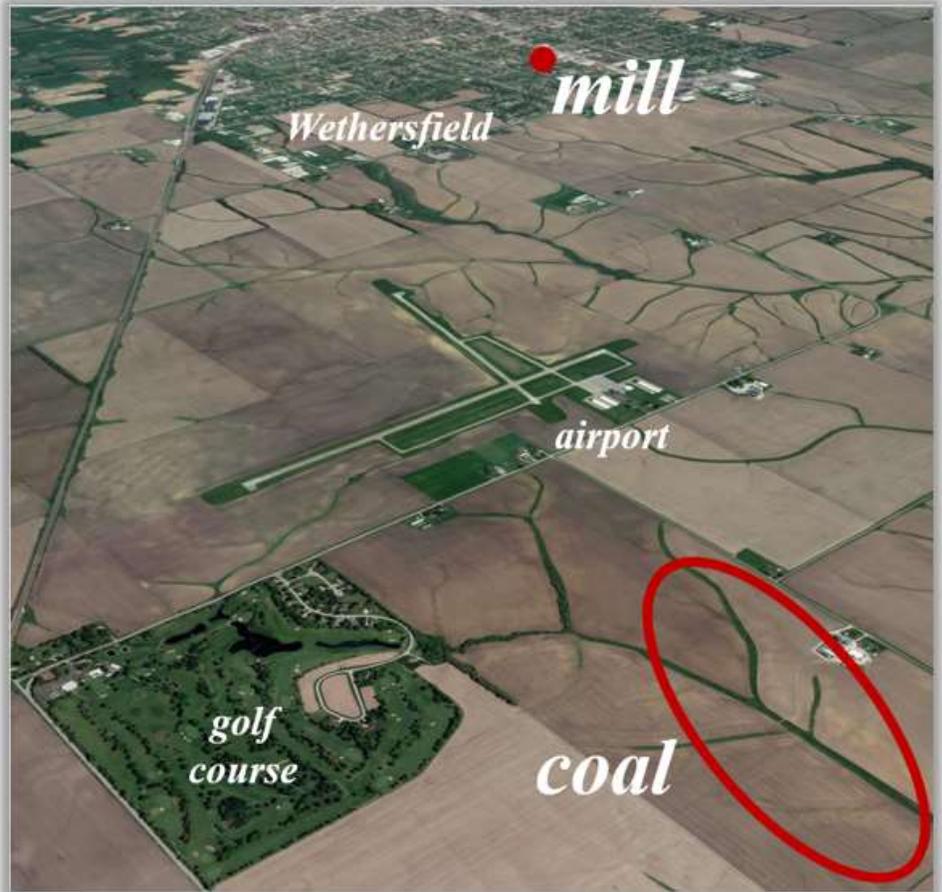


Dean's paper:

"Most of the [early] mines were 'slopes' or 'drifts,' indicating a tunnel-like opening dug into the hillside. If the opening started on the hillside at a level higher than the level of the vein of coal, it was called a 'slope,' since it pitched downward until it reached the level of the coal. Where the ravine was cut deeper than the vein of coal, it permitted starting the opening on a level with the coal, thus approaching the vein horizontally. This type of mine was known as a 'drift' and was much preferred to a 'slope,' where mine water disposal and the wheeling out of the mined coal created more of a problem."

The Peoria paper reported that from the start, the mills *"proved a losing concern . . ."* And we know from later sources the mills continued to lose money until they were sold and dismantled in 1846. Absent any other business requiring large amounts of coal, it's likely that mining did not continue for long in Section 19.

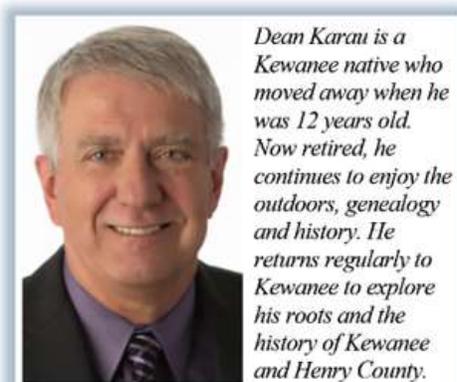
By the time the railroad came through and Kewanee was born, significant amounts of coal had been discovered north of Kewanee. According to Dean Bates, the first mine there was likely along a ravine which *"starts at the entrance to Baker Park*



Google Earth view of likely location of coal on NW quarter of Section 19

at the southwest corner of the Franklin School yard. This ravine follows a westerly course, then turns northward to cross the golf course in front of No. 6 tee end across No. 8 fairway."

Once again, the quirks of nature favored Kewanee over Wethersfield, and led to the growth of coal mining in Kewanee, not Wethersfield.



Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.

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