

HISTORIC NUTTALBURG | PRETTY PENNY CAFE | CENTENNIAL GOLDEN TROUT

# WONDERFUL WEST VIRGINIA

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UPC



# Hiking Historic Nuttallburg

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Unless noted,  
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**F**ifteen miles upstream from the confluence of the New and Gauley Rivers, where Keeneys and Short Creeks join the New, a little town called Nuttallburg sits in near silence. On a cool spring morning, the only sounds you'll hear are warblers singing in the leaf canopy above and paddlers playing in the rapids below.

Yet storytellers, history lovers, and former residents and their descendants will tell you of a different time, when Nuttallburg bustled with the sounds of a booming coal industry. Indeed, even now—in fact, especially now—a visit to Nuttallburg is like opening a volume filled with vivid tales of a bygone era. Today, after completion of a lengthy project by the National Park Service, many of Nuttallburg's historic structures have been stabilized, trails have been developed, and informational displays have been added, so that visitors can learn what it was like to live in the little town during the heyday of coal mining in the New River Gorge.

### Preserving a Rich History

Though many coal towns dotted the New River Gorge beginning in the late 1800s, Nuttallburg has special historical significance. Established in 1870 by Pennsylvania industrialist John Nuttall, Nuttallburg was the second town along the New River to ship smokeless coal, a commodity highly sought after for U.S. Navy ships. Then, in the 1920s, the town garnered national attention when automobile magnate Henry Ford purchased the site. At Nuttallburg, Ford attempted a revolutionary business model called *vertical integration*, whereby he controlled all stages of the coal production process. Ford also installed cutting-edge mining equipment during his eight-year involvement at Nuttallburg, including an innovative conveyor system called *button and rope*. He also built a new tippie and headhouse, the latter the place where coal was weighed and loaded onto a conveyor.

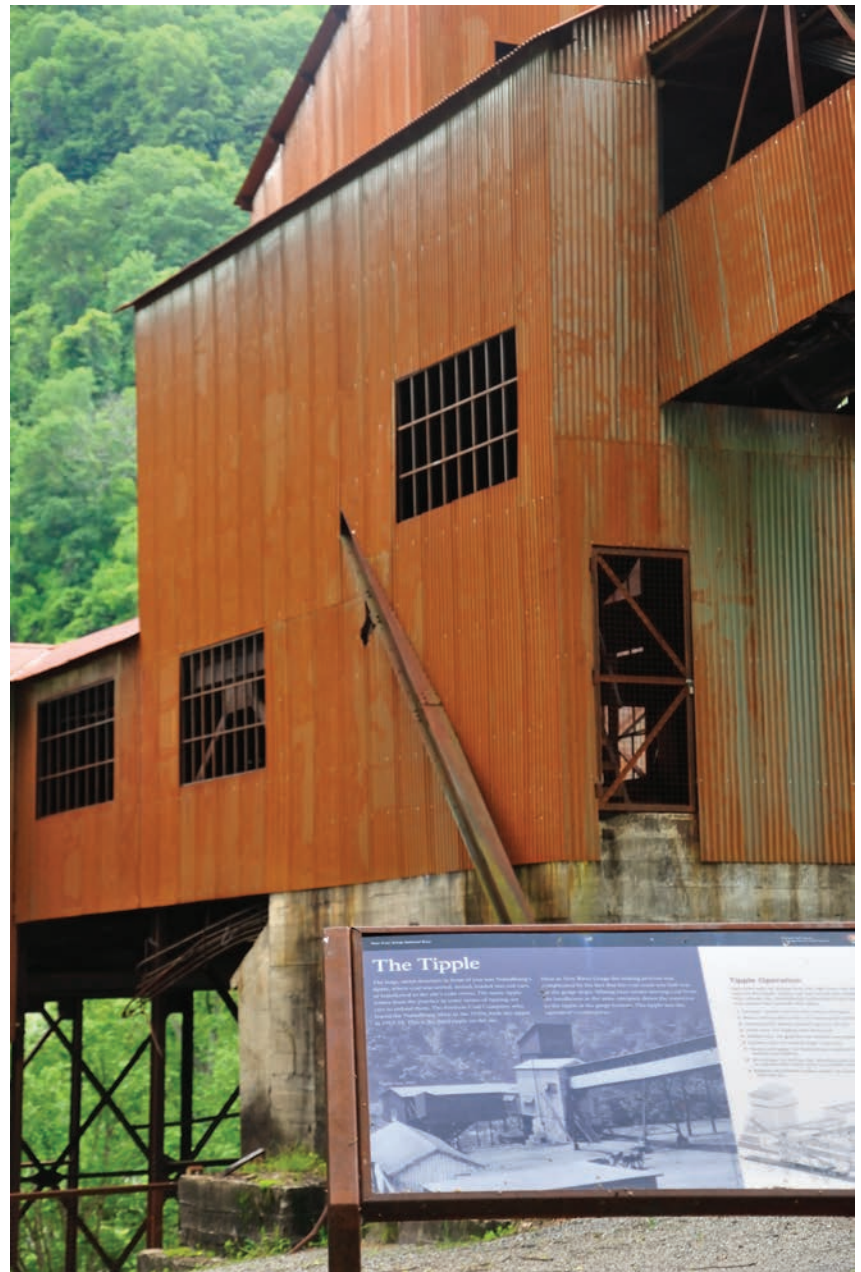
Yet even with this illustrious history, the story of Nuttallburg was almost removed from the shelf, according to National Park Service historical architect Richard Segars. Assigned to the New River

Gorge National River in 2002, Segars's first task was to orchestrate removal of Nuttallburg's historic tippie, which had been deemed unsafe by engineers.

Segars made his first trip to Nuttallburg in March of 2003, an expedition that required a mile hike in and a climb up a 15-foot embankment. He found stone foundations covered in kudzu and a tippie entangled by trees.

"I had an immediate gut response to [the tippie] from an architectural point of view," he recalls. "I thought, 'What wonderful things you could do with this structure.'"

Segars suggested that the Park Service reconsider the tippie's demolition, but the plans remained. The climate changed later that year, however, when the Park Service received \$2.35 million in federal funds for the site's preservation, thanks to Sen. Robert C. Byrd. The Park Service launched a three-phase project, beginning with a study to



◀ **Resembling a sweeping roller** coaster, the conveyor at Nuttallburg was built by auto magnate Henry Ford in the 1920s.

▶ **The National Park Service** stabilized the historic Nuttallburg tippie and added educational signage.

determine if the tippie could be saved. It was an ongoing challenge to determine how best to spend the money.

“We had continuous debates and cost estimates to determine how best to balance what turned out to be inadequate funding to stabilize the whole [area],” says Segars. The agency opted to devote resources to the main features of the mining operation: the tippie, conveyor, and headhouse.

Phase I of the project began in 2005, when the park erected temporary shoring to stabilize the tippie. This was a delicate process that involved weaving steel amongst parts that were deteriorating. Phase II concentrated on the conveyor and headhouse. While the headhouse was in relatively good condition, says Segars, there was concern that the conveyor was going to collapse like a house of cards and land on the tippie, causing it to fall onto the railroad tracks. With funding diminished, Phase II ended with the conveyor and headhouse

only partially stabilized. But then another windfall arrived via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

With ARRA funds, the Park Service was able to enter Phase III and finish the project, completing structural stabilization, clearing exotic vegetation, and removing more than 1,200 trees from around foundations and in the mining structures. Trails were established over historic roadways, fencing and interpretive displays were erected, and a stable road was constructed into the site.

### **Nuttallburg Debut**

In the fall of 2011, after nine years of work that included countless hours of meetings, negotiations, concessions, and contractor headaches, the Park Service reopened Nuttallburg to the public. Lovers of history and hiking will be glad they went to the effort. Today Nuttallburg is considered one of West Virginia’s finest examples of an early-twentieth-century coal-mining community and one of the nation’s best coal-related industrial sites.

The site is located at the end of CR 85/2 on the Keeneys Creek road, 4.1 miles out of Winona. Winding its way down the steep drainage alongside Keeneys Creek, CR 85/2 parallels the railroad bed that John Nuttall installed to access his coal mines. Roadside exhibits note the former African American section of town. Two masonry pillars mark the site where Nuttallburg residents accessed the south side of the river and the town’s sister community, South Nuttall (also called Browns), via a pedestrian suspension bridge.

Now known as the Keeneys Creek Bike Trail, Nuttallburg’s former railroad bed is wide and not too steeply graded, making it a family-friendly rail trail for bikers. A pull-off area for trailhead parking is marked on the right, just before the entrance to the main parking lot.

Three interconnected trails leave from the main parking area, and each offers insight into what it was like to live and work in a mining town along the New River from 1870, when Nuttallburg was established, to 1958, when the mines were closed.

The Tippie Trail (.6 mile) leads



**Overhead view of the** headhouse, where coal was weighed and loaded onto the conveyor

through Nuttallburg's lower business district and down along the river, where coal from the conveyor entered the tipple. There it was sorted by size and loaded into coal cars for transport via rail, or put into a separate smaller tipple for local use, or taken to coke ovens.

A short walk back up the roadway leads to the site of the train depot and the post office. Trains stopped daily to take on cars full of coal, as well as passengers bound for the local high school in Anstead, or for Charleston, or even Chicago. The trains also brought in eagerly awaited items: newspapers from New York and Chicago, fresh seafood from the coast, and mail.

Along the Tipple Trail, the pulley system lies at the base of Ford's conveyor, while just beyond, a bank of 46 coke ovens is all that's left of John Nuttall's contributions to the mining apparatus. The ovens ceased operations, it is thought, when Ford leased the mines in the 1920s.

The company store, which provided all the basics of life, was located just beyond the ovens. Its foundation is all that is left. Past the store, a ¼-mile spur path leads downriver to the "burbs" of Nuttallburg, the community of Seldom Seen, where level land provided space for additional housing.

The Town Loop Trail (1.3 miles) follows historic roadways through the town proper and past the former sites of homes, a church, and one of two schools. A product of its time, Nuttallburg was integrated below ground and segregated above. East of Short Creek was a school and homes for the families of African American miners; west of the creek was the same for whites.

While the mining structures date mostly from the Henry Ford era, the residential section was Nuttall's vision. Seventeen two-family and 80 single-family homes were built by the founding father to ready the town for the railroad's arrival. With structures long gone, having been sold for scrap or succumbed to the elements, the foundations are all that remain as testimony to his foresight.

The Conveyor Trail (3.0 miles) follows a portion of the Keeneys Creek Bike Trail and then zigzags up the steep slope alongside the conveyor to the headhouse. A mountain haul-

**Hikers can view the** entrance to the Nuttallburg mine. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service



age running alongside the conveyor moved materials and personnel from top to bottom.

While John Nuttall established the Nuttallburg mine, Henry Ford modernized the infrastructure around it. Nuttall's original conveyor, tipple, and other structures no longer exist.

An alternate access to the headhouse is the Beauty Mountain road. Take the Lansing-Edmond road off Route 19 north of Fayetteville and turn onto State Road 5/82, the Beauty Mountain road. Take the next right past the Nuttall Cemetery road to trailhead parking and hike ¼ of a mile along a former access road to the headhouse.

## Before You Go

Nuttallburg hasn't been a stop along the way to anywhere since the depot was closed in 1962. You're either trying to get there or you're lost. To avoid the latter, take a map and do not rely solely on a Global Positioning System device. A "Trails Illustrated" map generally provides the most current information and can be purchased at the Canyon Rim Visitors' Center just north of Fayetteville. A free, self-guided trail brochure is also available at the visitors' center.

The road into Nuttallburg is narrow, and it has blind curves and limited pull-offs for two-vehicle passage. A portion of the road is unpaved. Take water and plan on a full day if you are hiking all three trails. You'll find a vault toilet at the main parking lot, and handicapped parking is located just beyond at the tipple. The Tipple Trail is level and easy, the Town Loop Trail is moderately difficult, and the Conveyor Trail is steep and difficult. The Beauty Mountain access is an easier hike to the headhouse area.

*For more information about the history of the New River area, visit the National Park Service website at [www.nps.gov/neri](http://www.nps.gov/neri).* 🍷

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*Eve West of Beckley has published articles in the Ozark Mountaineer, West Virginia South, and Arkansas Game and Fish Commission magazine. This is her first article for Wonderful West Virginia.*



▼ **Along the Tipple Trail**, hikers will find the foundation of the Nuttallburg company store.



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◀ **Remains of the church** attended by black residents in the Nuttallburg area

▼ **An informative sign marks** the site of the Nuttallburg school for white children.



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