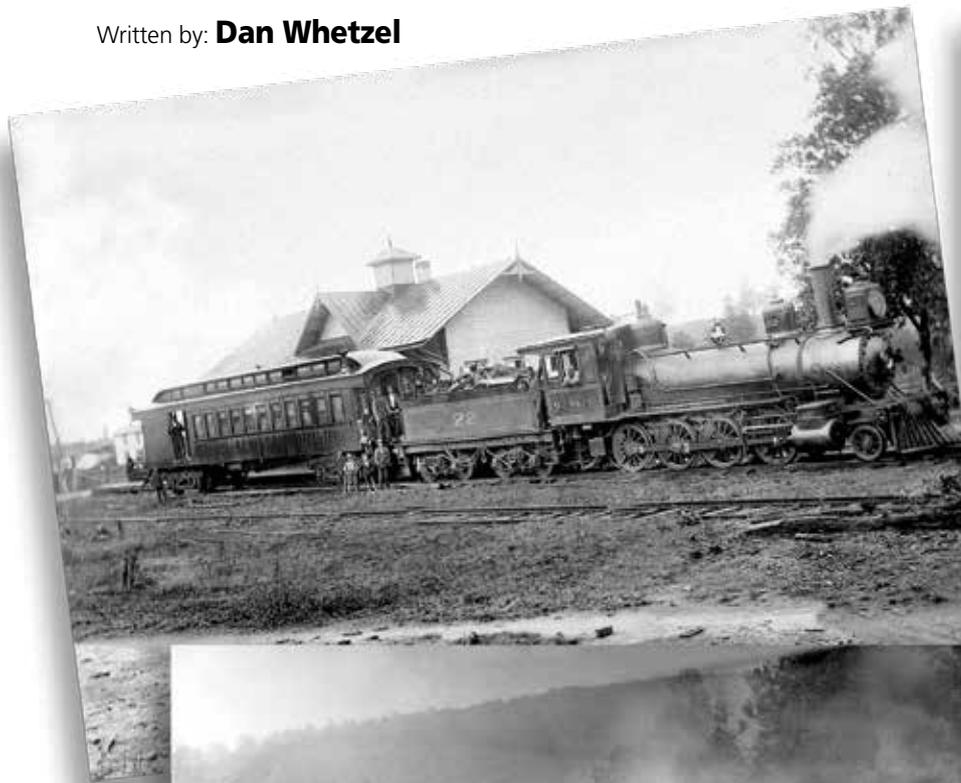


# Elk Garden — *Liveliest Little Mining Town in West Virginia*

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**



One Mineral County, WV, town can take pride in past events that few larger communities can match. Powerful politicians and financiers gathered there on more than one occasion, and hundreds of coal miners' wages depended on engaging the largest soft coal seam in the United States. More than 400 additional laborers blazed a railroad at the site that created an economic boom in the region. The bustling scene created news stories, as railroads shipped the black gold throughout the region and to Baltimore, MD.

Leading the economic charge at the town was West Virginia's best known politician and entrepreneur of the



**Shown at left are selected photographs of recently discovered glass negatives from the Elk Garden, WV, area. The collection includes hundreds of photographs dating from the 1897-1898 time period. Approximately 25 of the photographs and related information on Elk Garden history will be available for viewing at Elk Garden Town Hall beginning July 2, 2022.**

time period — Henry Gassaway Davis. His vision of developing the upper Potomac River valley brought about a need for services a town could offer. And it was Davis and associates who were responsible for developing Elk Garden, WV, a village that highlights the heyday of Mineral County coal mining. Through a chance discovery of glass negatives, a unique look into Elk Garden's past is now possible. The 1897-1898 photographs captured hundreds of images that remained untouched until recent times. Selected images from the collection will now be made available to the public.

What the photographic images and historical record reflects is a time period of growth and optimism. Mr. Davis, a former Baltimore & Ohio Railroad employee, ventured out on his own with a vision that few entrepreneurs could have equaled. While serving in the West Virginia state legislature and later the United States Senate, Davis made powerful friends and gained valuable knowledge about the workings of government — experiences that blended perfectly with his ambition.

Mr. Davis entered the railroad business as a means to bring the immense coal fields of the upper Potomac River valley within reach of markets. The state of West Virginia facilitated his plan by granting generous charters that conferred the rights to buy and sell real-estate, mine coal, extract iron ore, and harvest timber.

Davis' view of progress through nearly unbridled exploitation of natural resources has been challenged and condemned by critics in more recent times, but he was in keeping with the times.

Davis' railroad became known as the West Virginia Central and Pittsburg (no "h"), a small railroad that proved it "could." Starting near Piedmont and a connection with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, Davis projected his railroad would wind upstream along the North Branch of the Potomac River over the most rugged territory in the region. In 1880, Davis put his plans into effect on the first segment of railway that extended from Piedmont to Elk Garden.

Davis faced a decision prior to the WVC&P reaching Elk Garden — how to access the "Big Vein" seam of coal at what was to become the town of Elk Garden. In 1871, Davis had the foresight to purchase 33½ acres from John Nethken for 46 dollars an acre — a down payment that began paying off handsomely in 1881. To capitalize on the investment, a discussion was necessary about the right-of-way for a locomotive to serve Mine #1 at Elk Garden.

Davis considered three options before deciding on the shortest route, a 2½ mile cut along a stream called Deep Run. At that point, the railroad faced a steep incline that halted construction on standard gauge rail. To surmount the obstacle, J. Wilson Humbird's company from Cumberland, MD, built a 1,500 foot inclined plane that reached the summit where a tram road completed service to the mine opening. Wages for the backbreaking task amounted to \$1.25 for an eleven hour work day.

A small community known as Mineville developed around the bottom of the plane where transfers of coal and



**Left to right: Brandi Paugh, Town Clerk; Marian Droppleman, Mayor; Jody Paugh, Councilman, preview the photograph collection located at Elk Garden Town Hall.**

passengers took place. Mineville was listed as a stop on the WVC&P and hosted a school, church and dwellings by the 1890s.

Residents reported events in the Elk Garden newspaper. The first shipment of coal from the Elk Garden Branch by way of the inclined plane occurred in October 1881. A formal celebration took place in Elk Garden on November 2, 1881, and highlighted the importance of Davis, his businesses and the powerful associates within his circle of influence.

Davis' written notes on the "fine Fall day" included a list of invited guests: Senator Bayard (D-DE), Stephen Elkins (lawyer, politician, later Secretary of War), J.A. Hambleton (capitalist from Baltimore), Richard Kerens (contractor from Missouri), Major Alexander Shaw (railroad executive and early business partner), and two reporters from Baltimore.

Stockholders and associates not present, but embedded in the WVC&P enterprise were United States Senators Chaffee, Blaine, Camden, and Barnum. Tammany Hall member and lawyer Augustus Schell added to the list of those involved. One author summarized the group this way: "It is doubt that any railroad in the country at any time had so many men prominent in public life and finances...as had the West Virginia Central Railway." The local railroad certainly earned the unofficial title: "Senatorial Railroad."

Upon completion of the Elk Garden Branch, the town experienced boom conditions with 480 coal miners on payroll (*Cumberland Daily Times*), saw mill operators working the river valley, and hundreds of railroad employees. The November 18, 1889, *Elk Garden Times* reported the town, "Now has a population of 2,000." This likely

included the surrounding area. Reports regularly appeared in regional newspapers about employment opportunities and coal shipments.

A remarkable account of a WVC&P train ride from Piedmont to Elk Garden appeared October 30, 1888, in the *Cumberland Daily News*. Through the author's description and news stories from the *Elk Garden Times*, the town's progress is known.

Surveyed lots were rented from the coal company at 12 dollars per year, upon which houses were built by miners. (*Colliery Engineering* identifies the housing terms as a 99 year lease). As of October, 1888, 20 dwellings were under construction, as well as an Odd Fellows Hall (seating 500 people), clothing store, and newspaper building. Fourteen stores were already in service, while three hotels and three churches

served the public. Social, fraternal, religious, and sporting events regularly occurred, providing vibrancy to the fledgling village. The November 15, 1889, *Elk Garden News* reported that the local school had increased its staff to seven teachers to serve student enrollment. According to the September 19, 1890, *Elk Garden News*, a nearby school house at Nethken neared completion in September 1890. *Elk Garden News* articles added to the list of buildings by identifying two millinery stores, two tin shops, two furniture stores, and a co-op store that paid dividends. The town's vitality became well known and was reported in the October 1888 issue of *Colliery Engineering* as "one of the liveliest little mining villages in West Virginia."

Prosperity occurred with a mark of distinction after a coal trade journal reported Elk Garden's "Big Vein" to be the thickest (14½ feet) soft coal seam in the United States at that time — certainly bragging rights for local miners.

An important transportation change focused on the Mineville incline when a company official complained that it was costing an additional 10 cents per ton to handle coal during the tram-to-incline-to-standard rail process (*Cumberland Daily News* June 25, 1888). Work was completed in December 1888 on an alternative route from Harrison, WV, a location named in honor of George Harrison who



served as supervisor of the shipping department. The new branch line avoided the more than 40% grade inclined plane service, but became a seven mile ride to Elk Garden. To gain elevation for locomotive use, the civil engineers included a switchback through Oakmont to Emoryville. From Emoryville the rail line ascended to the Elk Garden depot. This route served the town with regular passenger train service until 1934.

The WVC&P continued its trek to Elkins, WV, and beyond before being sold in 1902; it was later integrated with the Western Maryland Railway in 1905. All is not lost, however, as sections are still in use by CSX and the West Virginia State Rail Authority.

Elk Garden has been influenced by the drop in coal production and decreasing population since the boom years. But unlike many nearby towns that have disappeared, Elk Garden remains intact and hosts a school, churches, and public events.

The selected group of photographs developed from the glass negative collection provides a unique window into the town and surrounding areas along the Potomac River. Only a few are inscribed with names and locations, but they provide clues that confirm the photographer's territorial range.

The photographer's name remains a mystery, but it could be speculated that he lived in the area due to the length of time spent and negatives accumulated. Selected photographs will be available at the Elk Garden Town Hall where they will be integrated into the coal mining museum artifacts.

Also to be displayed are photographs of unidentified local school buildings. The public is invited to examine and possibly identify the locations and names of the buildings.

The photographs, coal mining museum, and related information will be available for visitors starting July 2, 2022, at the Town Hall. Visitors are welcome during regular meeting hours, Saturdays 10-2, Tuesdays 3-7, and by appointment 304-813-3450 through August 2022.



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