Gauley Bridge, West Virginia Encyclopedia Article

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Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, was the scene of a landmark case of environmental racism—one involving a conflict between the powerful and the powerless, between African-Americans and whites in 1930 to 1931. A contracting company, Rinehart and Dennis, recruited nonunion workers from the Deep South to drill the three-mile Hawk's Nest Tunnel through Gauley Mountain. The tunnel diverts the New River through giant turbines owned by Union Carbide to power Electro-Metallurgical Company, a producer of ferrosilicon.

Gauley Mountain consists of sandstone rich in silica. African-American migrants constituted 75 percent of the fifteen hundred workers employed to drill the tunnel. Supervised by armed white foremen, workers tunneled without the protection of respirators, dust suppressors, or mine ventilators. The workers—in six-day, ten-hour shifts—lived in a life-threatening environment.

By 1933 the contractor and Union Carbide faced over five hundred lawsuits. The plaintiffs claimed exposure to the risk of acute silicosis leading to lung damage, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. Because of worker transience, the number of deaths and disabilities occurring at Gauley Bridge remains unknown. An out-of-court settlement included the dispossession of plaintiffs' evidence. In *The Hawk's Nest Incident,* Martin Cherniak writes, "The death rate of black males nineteen and older in Fayette County from 1930 to 1935 exceeded the rate [for three similar mining counties] by 51 percent, although it was almost identical from 1928 to 1930" (p. 100). An estimated 764 workers died from silicosis.

The tragic Gauley Bridge episode led all but two states to amend worker compensation laws to include silica as a hazard that could be compensated. The struggle by people of color to avoid exposure to toxic materials, however, continues. Police arrested Washington D.C.–congressional delegate Walter Fauntroy, leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and four hundred others in 1982. They protested North Carolina's decision to use Afton, an African-American community, as the final resting place for 3,200 cubic yards of soil contaminated by polychlorinated biphynels (PCBs). For the protestors, the decision to put the PCBs in Afton was a racially discriminatory action that they suspected to be common nationwide.

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