

U. S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Virginia City Church
Wise County, VA

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	buildings
<u> 0 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	sites
<u> 0 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	structures
<u> 0 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	objects
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

 N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:

 Religious facility Sub: church

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: vacant Sub: not in use

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

no style

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation block
roof metal
walls wood

other _____

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Religion

Education

Period of Significance 1895-1955

Significant Dates 1895

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

n/a

Cultural Affiliation n/a

Architect/Builder unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

previously listed in the National Register

previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository: VA Department of Historic Resources

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property approx. one-tenth of an acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing

1 17 380101 4086643

3 _____

Zone Easting Northing

2 _____

4 _____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Michael J. Pulice, Architectural Historian

Organization: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Roanoke Regional Office

date May, 2005

street & number: 1030 Penmar Ave. SE

telephone 540-857-7586

city or town Roanoke

state VA

zip code 24013

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Mary Martin Memorial Presbyterian Church

contact: Ernest Kennedy

street & number P.O. Box 202

telephone 540-721-8507

city or town Castlewood

state VA

zip code 24224

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Summary Description

The Virginia City Church is a small, rectangular, nave-plan, one-room edifice with a front gable roof. The weatherboarded, light frame structure is whitewashed. Its footprint measures 20 feet by 32 feet. Constructed c.1895 by local craftsmen, the church took a traditional vernacular, largely unembellished form. The building has been moved at least twice to make way for mining operations and road improvements--not an unusual circumstance in the coal fields, but has never been moved more than 200-300 yards from its original location.

The church is prominently situated on a hillside on the north side of U.S. Highway 58 Alternate, two miles west of St. Paul and two miles up Dry Fork from the Clinch River, in the heart of what used to be the mining town of Virginia City, in Wise County, Virginia. The community once extended four miles north from Burton's Ford to Jimmy Wright Hollow and two miles west from the top of Whetstone to the top of Bull Hill.

The church sits alone on the hillside with no other associated buildings. It is rectangular in plan, measuring 20 feet by 32 feet. The single-bay front elevation faces south. There are two symmetrically spaced windows on each side elevation, but none on the rear elevation. The single entrance is centered on the front elevation, enclosed by folding doors with two raised panels per leaf. The door hardware appears to be original and is in good condition. With the exception of the doors and shutters, all exterior woodwork is painted white. The church has a small, fixed sash, diamond-shaped window centered on each gable end. The north gable window has a Christian cross in the center. On the south end of the roof is a square, frame and weatherboard bell-tower with a pyramidal roof and diamond-shaped louvered vents on each elevation. The small, one-story, single-bay gable-roofed entrance portico is supported by two round poles that replaced the original columns.

The church's structural system is composed of a new concrete block foundation and walls of light framing lumber. The cladding consists of the original weatherboards fastened with cut nails. The steeply-pitched roof of the structure is now covered with 2-V sheet metal.

The interior sanctuary has flush-board paneling on the walls and ceiling, and exposed tongue-and-groove pine floors. A small raised platform across the north end of the room serves as a dais for the pulpit. The pews are certainly antique, well made, and nicely finished. Two old pianos still remain at the front of the church.

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8. Statement of Significance

The Virginia City Church, erected c.1895 by coal camp residents on land donated by the Russell Creek Coal Company, is the only surviving structure from the once bustling mining community of Virginia City. The structure also served as the first schoolhouse for Virginia City. Although maintained by the Presbyterian Church, anyone was welcomed to preach in the church, and so it was used by many different denominations.

Justification of Criteria

The Virginia City Church is eligible under Criterion A in the area of Religion because of its history as a house of worship built to be shared by multiple denominations, whose members came to work in the coalfields during the height of coal mining in far southwestern Virginia. It is also eligible under Criterion A in the area of Education, having served the community as its first schoolhouse. Its period of significance is from 1895 to 1955.

Acknowledgements

Mr. Ernest Kennedy was the catalyst in seeking National Register status. He also provided information and assistance in completing this nomination.

Historical Background

Virginia City formed during the last decade of the nineteenth century but vanished by the mid-twentieth century. The area was settled in the early –mid-nineteenth century by mostly Scots-Irish families such as the Wrights, Trents, Hales, and McReynolds. Germans, such as the Hilemans, were also represented in smaller numbers. By 1860 there were approximately 35 families living in the Virginia City area. By 1880 there were about 55 families in the area.¹

The Norfolk and Western Railroad had much to do with the beginnings of Virginia City and the subsequent exploitation of major coal seams in the region. The N&W built a line into the rich Pocahontas coalfields in Tazewell County, Virginia, about 1880. The railroad profited handsomely from transporting vast amounts of high quality coal from Pocahontas and nearby mines, and soon began laying track into to the west, into Wise County. The new line was completed to the town of Norton about 1890, passing through the fledgling, future Virginia City. Speculation that huge amounts of coal would be encountered throughout the Virginia City area fostered optimism and

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fueled growth of the little community and it was soon named Virginia City. The Virginia City Post Office was established on June 1891, with William G. Harrison as its first postmaster. The Russell Creek Coal Company opened a mine and a company store. This was one of the first, if not the first coal mine in Wise County.² The first load of coal was removed from Wise County in 1892, the first load of coke in 1895. The subsequent coal boom brought a 500% population increase to Wise County between 1890 and 1920.³

Before the Virginia City Church was built, preachers held services in the homes of community members. The preacher's denomination was not an issue as long as he preached from the bible. In 1895 the Russell Creek Coal Company donated the land for the church and helped raise money for building materials. Community members came forward to provide the labor. Between 1895 and 1922 the church had no pastor or single preacher. It was open to all. Some of the preachers who visited the church during the period were Orbin Wells, Tommy Porter, and Cyrus Stallard.⁴ Later ministers included Jim Smith from Big Stone Gap who served for ten years or more, and Charles Ruff, who came as a student minister and returned after finishing at the seminary. Most of the population was Baptist or Methodist. The next largest group was Presbyterian, but in the early mining days in Wise County there were many Catholic immigrants working locally.⁵

The Russell Creek Coal Company was one of several coming into the area simultaneously and competing for workers. The natives were reluctant to work in the mines at first, especially for poor wages. After some experienced miners were brought in from Pennsylvania, young local men were more easily recruited; but the companies had their own interests in mind when sponsoring the construction of churches and other amenities for the workers. An overall labor shortage during the early years meant necessary steps to attract and retain workers. Moreover, contented employees would be more stable and productive.⁶

The miners of the 1905-1916 period earned as little as 15 cents an hour, working 10-hour days. Thereafter, the pay began to increase and the normal working day reduced to 8 hours. In the 1920s the N&W Railroad ran four passenger trains each day between Norton and Bluefield, Virginia.⁷ The first coal tipple at Virginia City was located about one-half mile north of the Virginia City Church. It was a large wooden structure with metal shakers originally operated by a steam engine and later by electricity from the local power station. The power station, located near the coal tipple and powered by steam, was built around 1915 by George Lambert. It produced electricity for the mines and company store, as well as the homes of a privileged few.⁸

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As it turned out, the quality of the coal beneath Virginia City was not comparable to the better grades of coal being discovered in other parts of Wise County, such as Toms Creek. Therefore after only a few years the Russell Creek Coal Company abandoned the mine and moved on, leasing it for ninety-nine years to a father-son partnership by the name of Rhodymire. A few years later the Rhodymires sold their lease to George Lambert, who for a period of time operated two mines in Virginia City, called Number 1 and Number 2. Lambert in turn sold his leases to the Virginia Iron, Coal and Coke Company (VICC), which operated the mines until 1921. The mines were closed from 1921 to around 1927, when Number 2 was reopened for only about a year. The company then sold all the mining equipment including the tippie and the power station to junk dealers who came and disassembled everything and hauled it away.⁹

Mrs. Mary S. Martin, a native of nearby Washington County, Virginia, started work as a missionary in the Dry Fork section (including Virginia City) of Wise County, in May 1922. She was 57 years old when she began. She rescued the Virginia City Church from neglect and disrepair, and made it her home base, expanding her mission work into nearby coal camps. After several years she was able to raise funds to build three more Presbyterian chapels: Bethany (1929), Mt. Olivet (1931) and Bull Run (1932). She is said to have personally taught Sunday school classes at each church herself. Reverend James M. Smith kept a busy schedule preaching at each church. Mrs. Martin also organized a Christian Endeavor [charitable] organization and carried on a "flourishing auxiliary." An attractive little house was provided for her by the VICC. In 1932 the Abingdon Presbytery established the Mary Martin Memorial Church, consisting of the four chapels she had built, with 50 members, three elders and three deacons. In 1937, a beautiful brick Gothic Revival edifice was erected in her name with donations totaling some four thousand dollars. In about 1941, Mrs. Martin made a tour "in the interest of the Assembly's Home Missions" to churches in Washington DC, Norfolk, Harrisonburg, and Charleston, West Virginia. In Washington she found willing supporters of her work, writing later that "Nearly every man who shook hands with me left me money in my hand. . . Central Church gave me a piano for the Virginia City Chapel." The piano may be one of the two that can still be found inside the chapel. Mrs. Martin remained in Virginia City for the rest of her life. She died in at a hospital in Norton in 1942. Today, in 2005, the Mary Martin Memorial Church holds the deed to the Virginia City Church, and is working to maintain it with historic character fully intact.¹⁰

The population of Virginia City peaked in the 1920s, at which time there were about 175 houses, two stores, a stable, a post office, a church and a school. In the 1940s several small mining operations leased lands from the Virginia Iron, Coal and Coke Company and began operations in and around Virginia City that collectively employed some 435 individuals. After decades of inactivity, VICC leased the Number 2 to the Jones Coal Company in 1966. Jones later sold its lease to the Virginia

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City Number 2 Jawbone Coal Company, from whom it transferred to the Eastover Mining Company. The "Jawbone Seam" was known as an inferior grade of coal. Because of the low demand placed on poor quality coal, Virginia City never recovered as a community. The Virginia City Post Office finally closed its doors for good in 1956, marking the end of the Virginia City era. Before long, even the topography of the former Virginia City was leveled. In the words of former Virginia City coal miner, Theodore A. Wright (b.1905), "Now Virginia City is no more. The strip miners came and the steel of the bulldozers swept it away."¹¹

Notes

1. *Gone But Not Forgotten*.
2. Ibid; Theodore A. Wright "Old Virginia City Coal Mine."
3. Shifflett, 32.
4. *Gone But Not Forgotten*
5. Shifflett, 191-2.
6. Shifflett, 190.
7. Wright "Old Virginia City Coal Mine."
8. *Gone But Not Forgotten*
9. Ibid.
10. Smith, Georgia A. "The Virginia City Presbyterian Church." Walthall, D. B. "God and One Woman..."
11. *Gone But Not Forgotten*; Wright "Old Virginia City Coal Mine."

Bibliographical References

Gone— but not Forgotten. Coeburn, Va.: [1979?] Compiled by the adult education class of St. Paul, Virginia.

Kennedy, Ernest. Personal communication. May 3, 2005.

Shifflett, Crandall A. *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991.

Smith, Georgia A. "The Virginia City Presbyterian Church." Unpublished personal recollections.

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Walthall, D. B. "God and One Woman: The Work of Mrs. Mary S. Martin in Wise County, VA." Clipping from Unknown Norton Newspaper, Spring 1942.

Wright, Theodore A. "Old Virginia City Coal Mine." *Heritage of Wise County and the City of Norton, 1856-2001, Vol. 2*, Wise County Highschool, 2001.

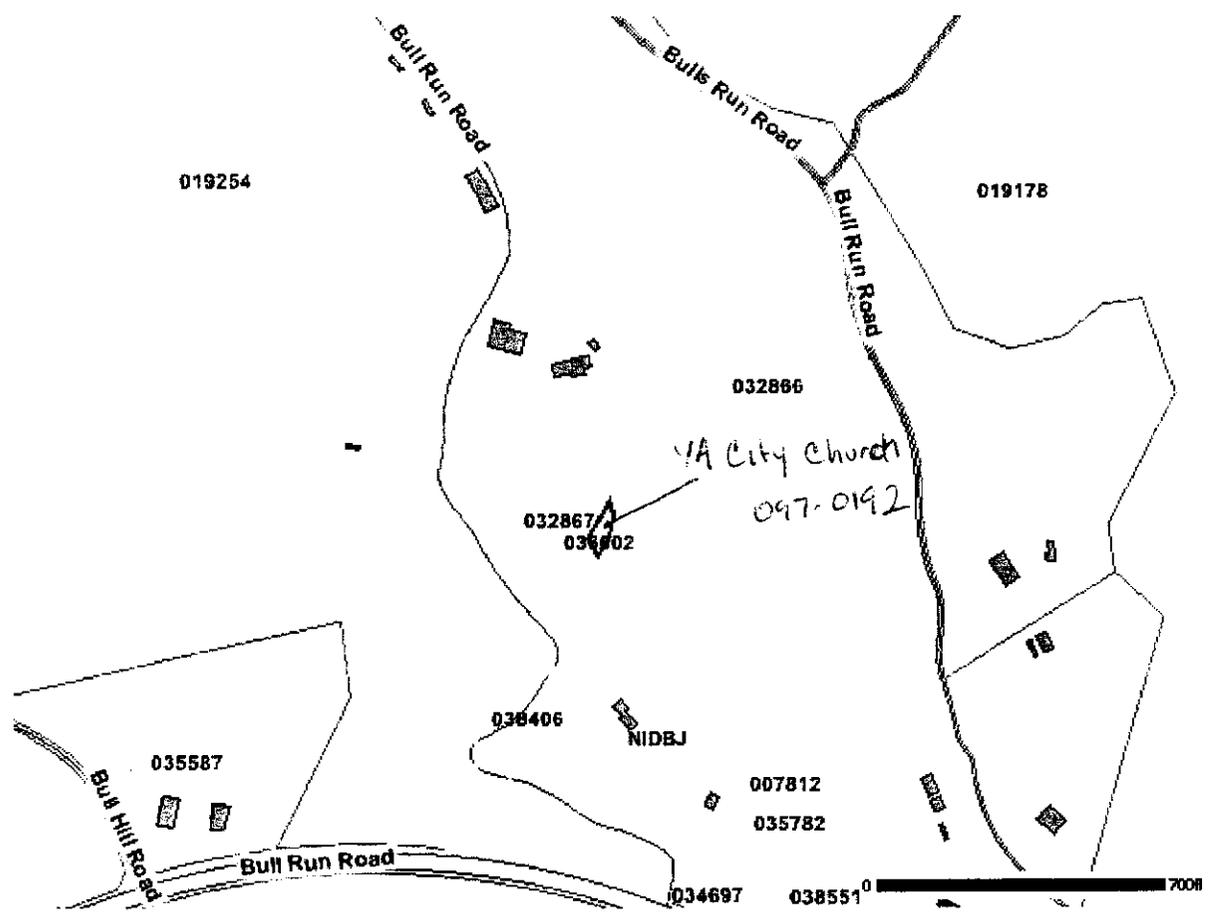
10. Geographical Data

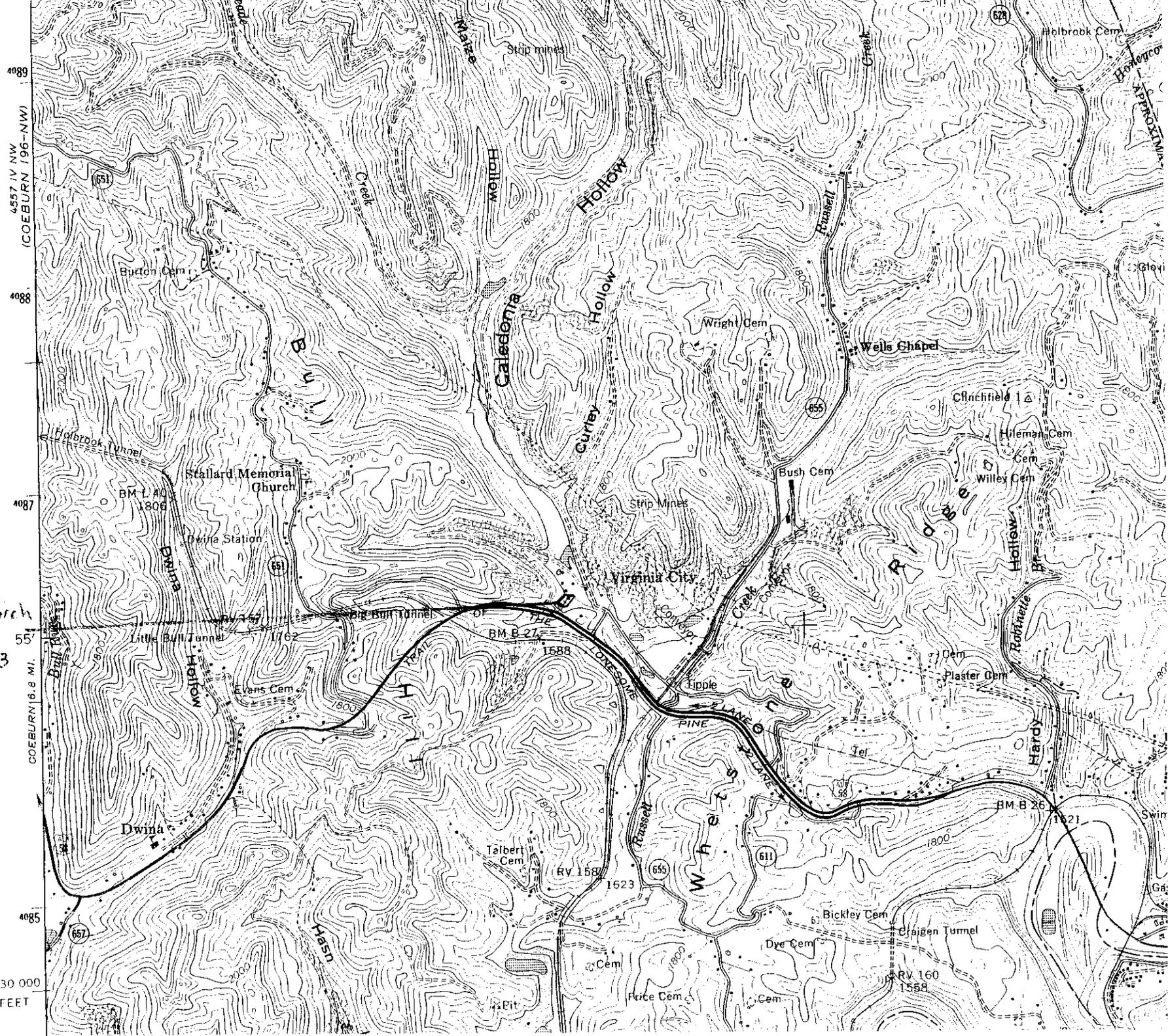
Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated parcel is identified as #036602 on Wise County real estate tax map# 057 052A2A. The parcel boundary encompasses about one-tenth of an acre.

Boundary Justification

The nominated parcel boundary consists of the church footprint and a narrow buffer around the building. The parcel is surrounded on all sides by C&K coal company land.





ST. PAUL
QUAD
Virginia City Church
1/1380101/107643

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FEET

4557 IV NW
(COEURNBURN 196-NW)
COEURNBURN 6.8 MI.