

# INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL GUIDE

TO COKE OVENS



In the Five Mile Creek Watershed and  
Jefferson County

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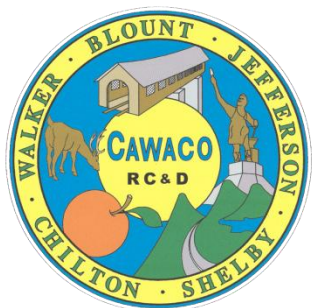
## **About the Project**

While exploring Jefferson County, Alabama to locate a connecting trail system for the Five Mile Creek Greenway, I discovered a land rich in history and natural beauty. From the bubbling springs of the Center Point spring house, Five Mile Creek begins its perennial run westward through Tarrant, Fultondale, Coalburg, Republic, Brookside, Cardiff, and Graysville. Darryl Aldrich, the Building Inspector in Fultondale, became enchanted with a row of coke ovens on Five Mile Creek near the old Mary Lee Railroad Line. Then Roger McCondichie, Mayor of Brookside showed Dr. Jack Bergstresser and me the terraced coke ovens above Five Mile Creek in Brookside and the ‘water mine’ that he explored as a child. These enchanting industrial ruins, once hellishly hot, now rest covered in privet and kudzu, waiting for someone to tell their story. In the summer of 2009, Lacey Genard, an intern from Birmingham-Southern College wrote the first draft of this Coke Ovens Guide. *Francesca E. Gross*

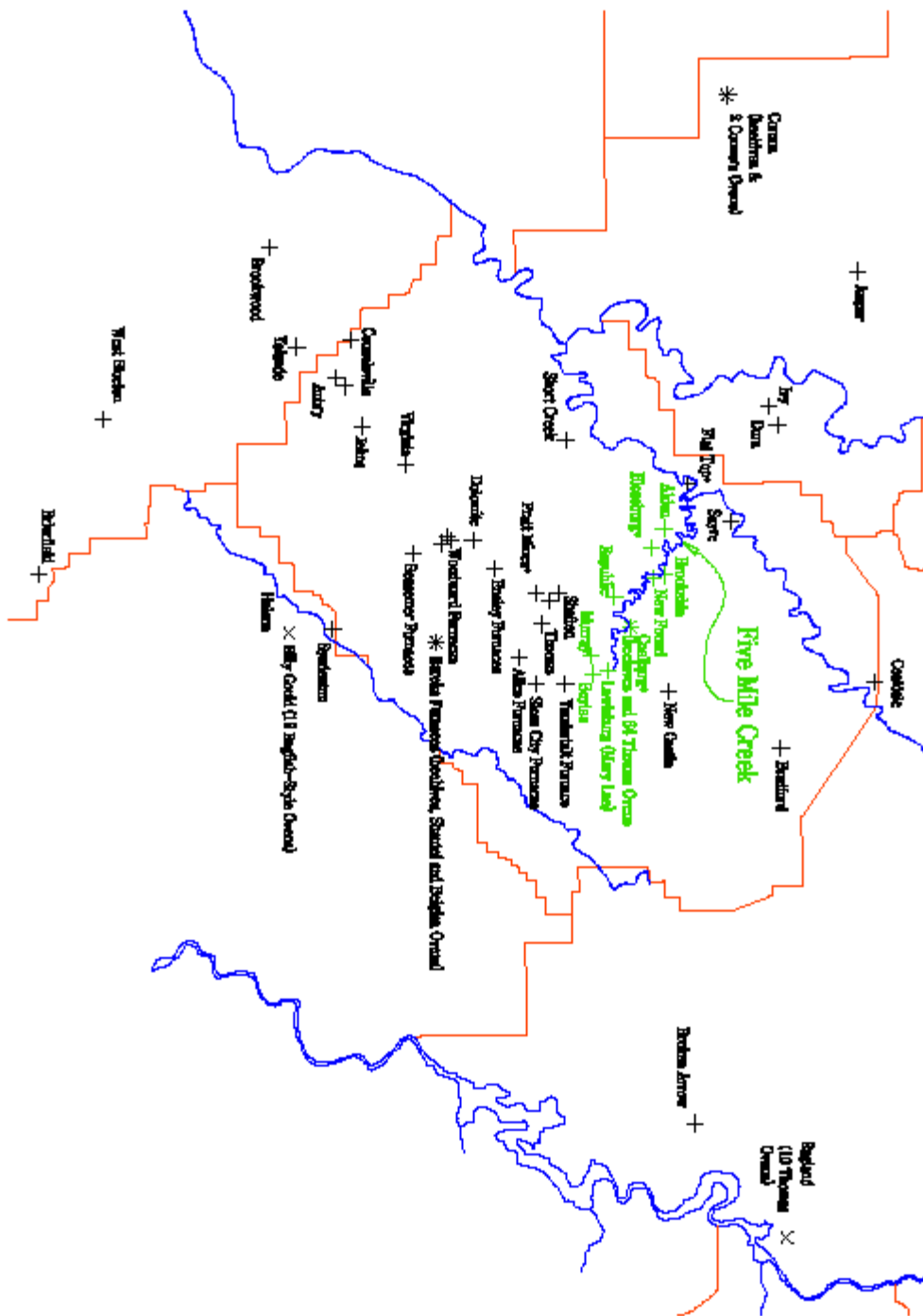
## **Acknowledgements**

Dr. Jack R. Bergstresser, Sr. is the principle researcher and author of the text. Francesca E. Gross, Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership Coordinator, contributed additional material and editing.

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Cover photo: Fig 1. Hillary Aten, Cawaco R C & D Council



Map of coal mines, coke ovens and mining town in Jefferson County, Alabama. Bergstresser, 2012.

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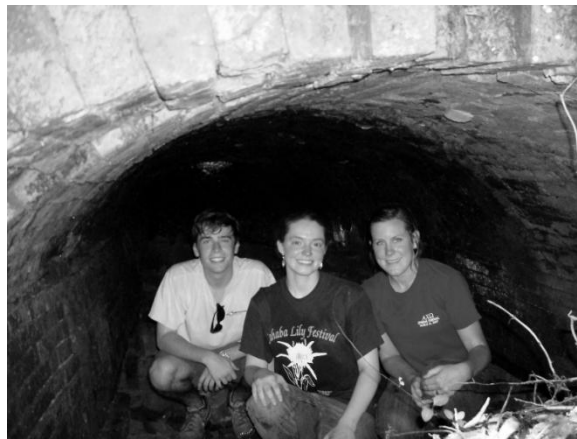
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## What Remains of Our Labor

Today, hiking the quiet tree lined trail along Five Mile Creek, it's hard to imagine that a century ago this was a major industrial railroad. Powerful locomotives pulling trains heavily laden with coal and coke traveled the rails daily to the blast furnaces, foundries and steel mills of Jones Valley a few miles to the southeast. Just as regularly they returned empty cars ready for reloading at more than fifteen coal mines along the creek and up the hollows of its tributary streams.

Thousands of men worked here in the Jones Valley. Beginning in the late 1870s, they dug ton after ton of coal each day. From deep underground, they sent it to the surface where other workers crushed it, cleaned it and fed it into beehive ovens. Named for the old-fashioned beehives their internal chambers resembled, hundreds of these ovens billowed smoke twenty-four hours a day, superheating tons of coal to make coke, the fuel that fired blast furnaces of the Birmingham Industrial District, driving it to prominence as the largest industrial center in the South.

Awaiting the curious hiker, Five Mile Creek preserves the industrial archaeological treasures of the beehive coke oven era. Hidden in the vegetation masking the hollows and hill sides along the old railroad grade that is now a peaceful hiking trail are hundreds of beehive ovens, numerous mine openings, coal washer foundations, rail sidings and other ruins ready for rediscovery.



**Young Explorers in Coalburg Coke Ovens**

Patrick, Kelly and Lacey, 2009