

Past Tracker Project
Illinois History Primary Documents and Lesson Plans

Discussion Questions
Labor and Industry

Virden documents: Coal in Illinois, "Aiding the Virden Miners," "Battle to the Death at Virden"

1. How had mining changed, according to the 1898 report on Coal in Illinois? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p. 1-5*)
2. Why were the miners and the Chicago-Virden Coal Company in conflict? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p. 5-7, 7-8; an "Aiding the Virden Miners"*)

(Note: The Chicago-Virden Coal Company, like all other bituminous coal mining firms in the country, had taken part in a binding arbitration with the United Mine Workers which specified that miners would be paid an industry-wide fixed rate of 40 cents per ton of coal rather than making individual agreements with locals, which resulted in the 25 cents per ton previously paid by the Chicago-Virden Coal Company. However, the Company refused to recognize the authority of the convention or comply with the rate. The miners would have been willing to work had they been paid at the agreed-upon rate. However, as they would not be paid the rate, the company locked them out and searched for other, cheaper labor, which they found in African-American miners from Alabama.)

3. Were the miners justified in taking up arms against the Chicago-Virden Coal Company and the strikebreakers? Why or why not? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p. 7-10, 17 and "Aiding the Virden Miners"*)
4. Why was Governor Tanner's action especially historic? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p. 6*)
5. Is Tanner's claim that the African-American strikebreakers were brought to Virden as slaves at all legitimate? Why or why not? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p. 10; Wanted! 175 Colored Miners!*)

(They did choose to come. However, they may not have, if they had had all the information about the situation. The flier did not say there was a strike going on. In addition, they would have been paid very little, less than what the Illinois miners felt was a decent wage. Also, they were brought into a dangerous situation without any warning about their personal safety.)

6. What role might race have played in the Virden incident? According to Gov. Tanner, what was race's role in the incident? Do you believe him? Why or why not? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p. 9-10*)
7. Governor Tanner says he values public justice even more than public peace. What is the difference between the two? In reference to the Virden incident, what would upholding public peace have looked like? What would upholding public justice have looked like? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p. 9-11*)
8. Which newspapers were supportive of Gov. Tanner's actions at Virden? Which weren't? What do you think their motives might have been? Are there any newspapers who didn't act as you might have expected them to? (*see Coal Report Illinois, p 13-15; "Aiding the Virden Miners;" and "Battle to the Death at Virden"*)
(Peoria Journal was supportive; this was surprising because the paper was generally critical of Tanner. Coal Trade Journal of New York was supportive; this was also surprising because the journal was primarily represented the interests of employers. New York Times's opinion is not totally clear, but they did give quite a bit of ink to express the opinions of Lukens. Chicago Tribune gives quotations from both Lukens and Tanner, but tells bloody stories only of non-miners' deaths.)