Reading Company Housing

The Keweenaw Peninsula’s landscape is both natural and cultural. While we are somewhat attuned to reading the natural landscape—birds in the spring, ravages of winter, and the effects of rocky soil—we are usually less adept at reading the cultural landscape. One of the most obvious signs of the cultural landscape is its architecture. Buildings are all around us, telling us about our past.

From prominent buildings in our villages and towns we know that there was wealth here at one time; from industrial buildings we know that the copper mining industry was responsible for that prosperity; and from the multitude of modest dwellings we know that there was a large working class that carried that industry. By examining these houses, we can gain insight into the lives of the people who lived in them and their relationship to other facets of life in the Keweenaw.

Company houses—houses built by a company for its employees—are a readily identifiable subset of worker housing. By 1913 there were more than 3,000 company houses in the Copper Country, sheltering about half of the workforce. Generally, mining companies built houses in locations, dedicated areas on company property that had few services. They laid the foundations on company property. In the houses that they built, company houses are apparent one time, so that even after many alterations company houses are apparent because of their similar forms. Company houses reveal the status of the worker within the company. Some houses were built for management employees; these had more rooms and more ornament than houses for lower-level employees. Company houses for workers were simple, small, and cheap. They were also desirable, being cheaper than housing off company property. In the houses that they built, companies declared their preference for certain workers: they wanted married men, believing them to be more stable workforce. Because there were fewer houses than employees, companies also selected tenants in order to favor skilled workers and English-speaking ethnic groups. If a worker lost his job, he would of course lose his housing too.

Company houses are less instructive as to differences between companies. Over time, each of the larger companies built a variety of houses: saltboxes and front gables, double houses and single, log and wood frame. Only one housing form can be identified with just one company: the distinctive gambrel-roofed houses that Calumet & Hecla built around 1900. Generally, houses got bigger as time went on, with small low log buildings replaced by upright wood-frame ones. Initially, the saltbox, with its two-story front and one-story rear, developed naturally as rooms were added onto a simple rectangle. Later, circa 1900, the saltbox was built as a whole, possibly representing a revival of interest in American Colonial style. In the first few decades of the 20th century, front-gable houses became more complex, with halls and pantries and three or four bedrooms.

Despite the mix of housing forms that comprises company housing, the houses are recognizable because of their repetition. These modest houses have a lot to tell us about the workers of the Copper Country and their relationships to their companies, to their families, and to each other.

While the company houses that exist today are privately owned, feel free to explore neighborhoods and look for other evidence of the copper industry story. These explorations may lead to new questions begging for answers, not only of the Keweenaw Peninsula, but of your own neighborhood and local community.

NOTE: The Keweenaw Heritage Center at St. Anne’s will present an exhibit called Minor Houses/Miner Houses: Copper Country Company Housing this summer. Open every day from July 1 to September 1. Call (906) 337-4579 for more information.

National Park Preserves Copper Mining History

The reasons for this familiarity run deeper than the mildly amusing linguistic nuances or the famous (infamous?) pasty, the popular meat-and-vegetable-dinner-wrapped-in-a-pastry-crust introduced by Cornish miners more than a century ago. Passing through Ellis Island, thirty-eight different ethnic groups paused only long enough to earn passage before heading for the hallowed mines of the Copper Country. The Keweenaw was the site of the first major influx of European immigrants to a non-metropolitan destination. As these immigrant populations ultimately spread throughout the country, so spread Copper Country heritage.

The 93rd Congress of the United States of America enacted legislation that became law on October 27, 1992, which created a national park to preserve and interpret the rich history of hardrock (underground) copper mining on the Keweenaw Peninsula. Under the direction of the American people, they found that the cultural and geological resources of the Keweenaw Peninsula’s mining heritage were of national significance. Congress, however, envisioned a national park unlike any before it, a park that would operate on a partnership premise.

An underground copper miner drills to prepare for blasting. Keweenaw NHP Archives.
Cooperating Sites Locations, Hours

A.E. Seaman Mineral Museum
(906) 487-2572
One of the finest mineral collections in the country is housed on the fifth floor of the Electrical Resources Center (ERC) on the campus of Michigan Technological University in Houghton. Open year-round, Monday through Thursday 8-4, Friday 8-8, Saturday 9-4, Sunday 12-4. Donation requested. Accessible. Gift shop with minerals, mining books, and mineral identification service by appointment. www.gsci.mtu.edu/museum

Calumet Theatre
337-3260
The oldest municipally built opera house in the country is on Sixth Street in the village of Calumet. A variety of theatrical and musical events are scheduled throughout the year in this beautiful turn-of-the-century theater. Guided tours are offered mid-May to mid-October, Tuesday through Sunday, 11 am to 3 pm. www.calumettheatre.com

Copper Range Historical Museum
(906) 482-6128
The museum is located in the village of South Range on M-36, and relates the story of the Copper Range Mining Company, its workers, and the community life associated with this historic company town. The nearby community of Pineville is one of the best preserved company towns in the Copper Country. Open June through mid-October, Monday through Saturday, 11 am to 4 pm.

Coppertown USA
(906) 337-4584
The exhibits at Coppertown provide a glimpse of the operations at the copper mining plant, Copper & Houghton (C&H). The building housed the former C&H Pattern Shop, a key historic element in the Calumet industrial landscape. Open June through mid-October, Monday through Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm. Sunday, 12:30 pm to 4 pm. Adults: $5; children 6 and under free.

Hanka Homestead
(906) 353-7116
While mining provided a decent living, the Hanka’s farm was a place of family and community. Hanka is a fine example of this element of Finnish farming heritage in the Copper Country. Volunteer tour guides. Flexible hours. pency.co/rv-camps/hanka.html

Houghton County Historical Museum
(906) 394-6121
Located in the former C&H mill office in Lake Linden, the museum offers visitors numerous artifacts and photographs covering 100 years of mining history. Open June through September, Monday through Saturday, 10 am to 4 pm; Sunday, noon to 4 pm. Adults: $5; seniors (65+) and students (12-18): $3; youth (6-12): $1; under 6: free. Visit houghton.org/houghton

Keweenaw County Historical Society
(906) 396-2561
This society operates five sites throughout Keweenaw County, including the Eagle Harbor Lighthouse, Central Mine & Village, Phoenix Church, Rattlesnake School, and the Battery Blacksmith Shop. Open mid-June to early October, 8 am to dusk. Motor vehicle permit required. www.keweenawhistory.org

Keweenaw Heritage Center at St. Anne’s
(906) 337-4579
This majestic Jacobsville sandstone structure, with magnificent stained glass windows, is situated at the entrance to the downtown Calumet Historic Landmark District. It provides a fitting setting for interpreting the heritage of the Keweenaw. A special exhibit examining the life of miners’ families living in company houses will be offered this summer. Access is on an “Open House” basis as volunteers are available. Normally, it will be open every day, July 1 through September 1. pency.co/heritage

Laurium Manor Inn
(906) 397-2549
Built by a wealthy mining captain in the village of Laurium at 320 Tamack Street, this 4-room inn offers lodging year-round and guided tours during the summer months. Nominal fee for tours. Self-guided tours are available during the winter by calling ahead to make arrangements. www.lauriummanorinn.com

F.J. McLean State Park
(906) 482-5278
A sandy stretch of Lake Superior beach provides the setting for camping and family recreation. The park is situated at the north end of the Keweenaw Waterway. The canal, dug in the mid-19th century along a Native American portage route, provides water passage through the Keweenaw Peninsula. 105 modern sites, 6 cabins. Reservations: 1-800-447-2757. www.michigan.gov/dnr

Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park
(906) 885-5275
Michigan’s largest state park, Porcupine Mountains contains numerous historic mining sites. The 59,000-acre park offers day-hiking, backpacking, camping, remote cabins, canoeing, kayaking, biking, and winter sports. Wilderness Visitor Center is open mid-May through mid-October, daily from 10 am to 6 pm. www.michigan.gov/dnr

Old Victoria
(906) 886-2617
The site, with ongoing restoration, preserves a group of rural log houses that provided lodging for early miners. One of the earliest mining sites, its setting will bring a new appreciation for the rigor and solitude of mid-19th century mining life. On Victoria Road, five miles southwest of Rockland. Open by volunteers, summer only, daily from noon to 5 pm.

Quincy Mine Hoist & Underground Tours
(906) 482-3101
The Quincy No. 2 Shafthouse is the most prominent feature on the Quincy’s historic mining landscape. Visitors ride a cog-wheel tram down the hillside to tour the underground mine workings, and enjoy a tour of the surface workshops. Quins is enjoyed by a diverse group of visitors. Tours are available during the summer, and limited during the winter. It is recommended that tickets be purchased early in the morning to guarantee your place. Quincy Mine gift shop, gift shop 17” tall copper boulder. Quincy Mine Hoist & Underground Tours. Open summers, Monday through Saturday from 9:30 am to 5 pm. Sunday from 11 am to 5 pm. Closed on holidays and December. www.quincyminetours.com

U.P. Firefighters Memorial Museum
(906) 337-4579
Housed in the former Red Jacket Fire Station, this historic Jacobsville sandstone structure was completed around the turn of the century. Exhibit dedicated to the history of firefighting are on the second floor. 327 Sixth Street, Calumet (across from Calumet Theatre). Open mid-May through September, Tuesday through Sunday, noon to 4 pm.
Keweenaw National Historical Park is located north of Houghton-Hancock along US-41 on the Keweenaw Peninsula. The park consists of two units: the Quincy Unit to the south and the Calumet Unit to the north, approximately 8 miles apart. Refer to the center section for Cooperating Site locations, or contact the Keweenaw Tourism Council at 482-5240, 337-4579, or call toll-free at 1-800-338-7982.

Private Property
Only a small portion of the property within the park’s boundaries is owned and operated by the National Park Service; therefore, visitors are asked to respect private property rights. Many important industrial buildings of the Quincy Mining Company and the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company are in declining physical condition. Entry into these buildings without the consent of the owners is illegal and may result in serious injury.

Transportation
Daily Air Service is provided to the Houghton County Memorial Airport (CMX) by Northwest Airlines, 800-225-2525. Bus service is provided by Greyhound Bus Lines, 800-231-2222. Charter bus service is available through Superior Coaches & Delivery of Houghton, 906-487-6511. Car service is available in the Calumet, Hancock, and Houghton areas. Rental cars are available at the airport and from local car dealers. Excursion boats operate on the Keweenaw Waterway during the summer.

 Lodging & Camping
A full range of hotels, motels, bed and breakfast inns, and public and privately owned cabins and campgrounds are found throughout the Keweenaw Peninsula. Contact the Keweenaw Tourism Council for further details: 1-800-338-7982; 482-5240; 337-4579, www.keweenaw.org.

Trails & Roads
Walking tour guide brochures for the Calumet Historic Business District, the Calumet & Hecla Iron Smelting Industry, and the Lautream Historic Residential Area are available at the Keweenaw Tourism Council office on US-41 in Calumet. Hiking and cross-country ski trails are available at Fort Wilkins, McLain, and Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Parks. Extensive ski trails in the Porcupine Mountains are served by chairlifts for downhill skiing. The Swedetown Ski Trails, adjacent to the Calumet Unit of Keweenaw National Historical Park, provide a section of lighted cross-country ski trails.

Hundreds of miles of groomed snowmobile trails run through the Keweenaw Peninsula. During the summer, a number of these trails, and lightly traveled rural roads, provide an excellent network for mountain and road bikes. A water trail for paddlers and small power craft is under development along Torch Lake, the Keweenaw Waterway, and circumnavigating the peninsula. Good highways connect the Cooperating Sites, and provide a scenic overview of the natural and human history of the area. Brockway Mountain Drive, near Copper Harbor, is consistently ranked as one of the top scenic drives in the United States.

Recommended Stay
Three days should be allowed to visit all of Keweenaw National Historical Park’s Cooperating Sites. You may wish to add a few more days to fully enjoy the beauty of the Copper Country as well as the rest of the western Upper Peninsula.

Reservations & Permits
Advance reservations are recommended for performances at the Calumet Theatre, although tickets may be available at the door. Tickets for the Quincy Mine often sell out during July and August. It is recommended that visitors obtain tickets early in the morning from the Quincy Mine Hoist Visitor Center and Gift Shop.

Reservations for modern campgrounds at Fort Wilkins, McLain, and Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Parks may be made through the state travel information: 800-447-2757. Cabin rentals are available at McLain and Porcupine Mountains State Parks. Permits may be obtained for backcountry camping in the Porcupine Mountains.

National Parks Nearby
Isle Royale National Park: Wilderness island located about 50 miles north by water. Ferries leave from Houghton and Copper Harbor. (906) 482-0984 www.nps.gov/isro

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore: Three hours east, 42 miles of Lake Superior shoreline. (906) 387-2607 www.nps.gov/piro

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore: Three hours west, kayak/hike off-shore Superior islands. (715) 779-3397 www.nps.gov/apts

Visit your National Parks online! Information, tours, and Junior Rangers. www.nps.gov

Weather Conditions
Summer: Early summer can be cool, especially near Lake Superior. By mid-summer, temperatures are usually mild, with daytime highs in the mid-to-upper-70s (°F) with cool nights. Two weeks of daytime heat, humid weather are not unusual in early August.

Fall: September and October are normally quite mild. Autumn foliage colors peak from the last week of September through the first week of October. Brief light snows may occur, but the temperature quickly rises, moderated by the waters of Lake Superior, which are at their warmest annual level during autumn. Reminder: Lake Superior always controls the Keweenaw Peninsula’s weather!

Winter: True winter snows begin in mid-to-late-November; the ground is normally snow-covered from mid-November to mid-April. Lake Superior’s gradually cooling waters create an average annual snowfall which ranges from about 180 inches to 250 inches in different parts of the peninsula. While creating abundant snowfall, the relatively warm lake waters keep temperatures much milder than inland surrounding areas of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ontario.

Spring: A beautiful although quick season on the Keweenaw Peninsula, spring may offer sunny, warm days and cool nights as easily as persistent cold rain. Best practice: dress in layers to accommodate rapidly changing weather. This is good advice throughout the Upper Peninsula.

Healthcare
Keweenaw Memorial Medical Center (906) 337-6500 Emergency, primary care physicians, urgent care, acute care.

Portage Health System (906) 483-1000 Emergency, primary care physicians, urgent care, acute care.

Western Upper Peninsula Dialysis Center (906) 483-1720

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The Ingot is published with support from Isle Royale Natural History Association.

Visit our website and online store at www.irnha.org for products related to Keweenaw NHP, including this commemorative, solid copper medallion for $9.95!

If you would like to work in partnership with the National Park Service to promote the public’s understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of Isle Royale National Park and Keweenaw National Historical Park, become an IRNHA member today!

Isle Royale Natural History Association (906) 482-7860 or 1-800-678-6925

Visit our gift shop at the Isle Royale National Park Visitor Center in Houghton.