Union Building History

Welcome to the Calumet Visitor Center in historic downtown Calumet.

If you walked through these same doors 100 years ago, you might have been a miner, maid, or member of a fraternal organization.

Since this building opened in 1889, it has witnessed harmony and hardship, boom and bust. It still stands today, linking Calumet's downtown with the historic mining landscape, thanks to equal measures of resilience and endurance.

Tour the exhibits on the first and second floors to learn more about daily life in a copper mining community.

First Floor
Discover more about the natural and cultural resources that made "Calumet, USA" an immigrant destination and a national treasure.

Plan your visit to the Copper Country today by exploring a map of the area.

Second Floor
Find out what it takes to immigrate in search of work, raise a family in a foreign land, and make your way in a community dependent upon a single company.

Third Floor
Explore spaces seen by few people other than members of the Calumet Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons.

Ask at the information desk about a self-guiding tour pamphlet of this historic building.

Crossroads of Commerce and Culture
Built on land leased for a nominal fee by the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company (C&H), this building is called the Union Building because of the partnership between the two fraternal orders that built it: the Free and Accepted Masons and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. This building marks the boundary between Calumet's industrial core and commercial district.

The Union Building has witnessed Calumet's history from being the "Queen City of the Keweenaw" in he 1800s to becoming part of Keweenaw National Historical Park.

PLACEHOLDER BACKGROUND
WILL REPLACE WITH FILE FROM JOHN ROSEMURGY
(TYPICAL)

GL-1.0-100
60" x 48"
1/8 FULL SIZE

Coming to the Keweenaw

Keweenaw copper companies actively recruited immigrant workers and thousands more came on their own.

"My long journey had ended," recalled Slovenian immigrant Ivan Molek. "On May 2, 1903, I arrived in my new community."

As Molek explored Calumet, he discovered a lively, noisy town. "A strange, rumbling noise echoed among these sounds," he wrote. He later learned "that it was the clanking of the iron ropes in the rollers in the sloping shafts."

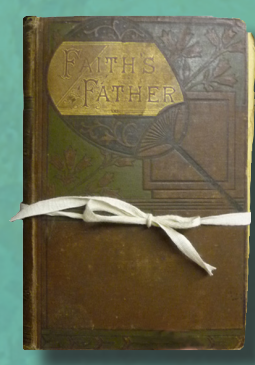
At the time, Calumet's residents lived above some of the deepest mine shafts in the world.

Explore nearby!

Follow an immigrant's footsteps by walking up Oak Street from the Mineral Range Depot (*seen above*) to Sixth Street.

High Hopes and Hard Work

New arrivals did not always intend or want to stay forever in the United States. Some came here temporarily hoping to work hard, save money, and return home quickly. Yet one foreign immigration commissioner warned the newcomer "not [to] expect that in his first year that he can bring his American dream to fruition…He must look at least ten years into the future."



Home Country Connections

Echoing successive waves of immigration, this Cornish book, Italian meerschaum pipe, and Croatian instrument provided tangible connections to the worlds their owners left behind.

"Faith's Father: A Story of Child-Life in London Bye-Ways" accompanied its owner from Ponsanooth, a thriving industrial and mining region in Cornwall.

The pipe belonged to Giovanni Ghiardi, an Italian immigrant who worked as a laborer for C&H, raised his family in Calumet, and helped other family members immigrate by taking them in as boarders. Charles Slivac followed his father to the Copper Country in 1929, later buying this *tamburitza* as an expression of his Croatian heritage.

GL-21.1 -100
55"X31.5"
1/4 FULL SIZE

Welcome to the Keweenaw

As newcomers from the East Coast, Europe, and Canada transformed the Copper Country, its earlier occupants, the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), experienced displacement and loss.

Immigrants came in successive waves, the first arriving from Cornwall's copper mining region in the 1840s. Subsequent groups came from Canada, Germany, and Ireland. By about 1900, most recent arrivals originated in Finland, Sweden, Croatia, Russia, or Italy.

What Would You Bring?

In 1869 Mr. Allardt, a German commissioner of immigration for the State of Michigan, published a handbook for prospective immigrants. He recommended they "take…very few heavy pieces of luggage."

Above all, he urged them to bring cash. "Money—if possible, lots of money—in America, as everywhere else, is the most agreeable and useful item to take with you."

North Atlantic, 1903

When Ivan Molek came to Calumet, he called himself Austrian, since his native Slovenia then belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this 1903 map, Poland is split between Germany and Russia. Austria-Hungary encompasses countries that later became separate, including Slovenia, Croatia. Herzogovina and Bosnia.

21.2 -100 IMMIGRANT TRUNK TOP
15.5"X 32.25"
1/4 FULL SIZE

C&H in the Community

C&H watched closely over its workers—mind, body, and soul.

More than most mining companies, C&H went to great lengths to maintain a stable work force. In addition to schools, it provided a bathhouse, hospital, and well-stocked public library.

As the single largest taxpayer in the county, C&H justified its participation in local politics. It dominated the local school board, kept an eye on village governance, and endorsed preferred candidates seeking federal offices.

Exploring the Park

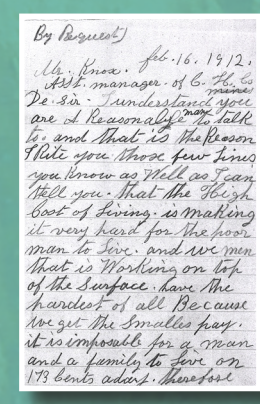
The C&H library and main office buildings are now part of Keweenaw National Historical Park. Ask at the information desk for more information.

Like the Lincoln Penny
Many recipients of the C&H medal were immigrants. So was its designer, Victor David Brenner. More than a century later, his design for the face of the 1909 Lincoln penny is still in use. His medal proof for C&H features portraits of President Alexander Agassiz and Quincy A. Shaw.

Celebrating C&H's Anniversaries
To mark its 50th anniversary in 1916, C&H distributed commemorative medals to 1,350 members of its loyal workforce. Employees who had worked for C&H for 20–29 years received bronze medals; for 30–39 years, silver; and for 40 or more years, gold. A few of the "Gold Medal Men" are pictured above. One woman who worked in the Boston office, clerk Minnie Pindar, received a bronze medal.

Fifty years later, to celebrate its 100th Anniversary, C&H gave away free tokens such as these. Recipients could redeem them at local shops and restaurants.

Miners received medals at the Semi-Centennial ceremony in July 1916 as shown above right.


By Request

Mr. Knox. Feb. 16. 1912.
Ass't. manager. of C. & H. Co
Dear Sir. I understand you are a Reasonably man to talk to, and that is the Reason I write you those few lines you know as well as I can tell you. that the High Cost of Living. is making it very hard for the poor man to live. and we men that is Working on top of the Surface. have the hardest of all Because we get the Smallest pay. it is impossible for a man and a family to live on 1.73 cents a day. therefore

"Hard for the Poor Man"
While C&H offered tokens of appreciation, it also received anonymous complaints. One year before the 1913 strike, this man informed C&H that "the high cost of living is making it very hard for the poor man to live."

1907 Miners' Picnic
Employment for the Keweenaw's copper mining companies peaked in 1907 at 21,014, including 5,630 who worked for C&H. Many turned out for a day-long picnic (*left*). By 1917, when overall employment decreased to about 17,000, C&H employed over 6,000, an all-time high for the company.

Unveiling of Agassiz Statue, 1923

GL-23.1 -100
55"X 31.5"
1/4 FULL SIZE

On the C&H Payroll

While Keweenaw companies generally offered lower wages than Western mines, C&H enticed workers with attractive benefits.

If you were on the C&H payroll in the early 1900s, you might be an electrician or engineer, brakeman or blacksmith. As an employee of the region's—and, at times, the nation's—foremost copper producer, you could enjoy the companies amenities while your children attended quality schools, but you could not belong to a union.

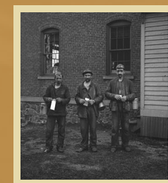
From the 1870s to the 1940s, C&H resisted unionization, preferring not to negotiate with workers organized about wages, benefits, or working conditions.

AV monitor

Silent video

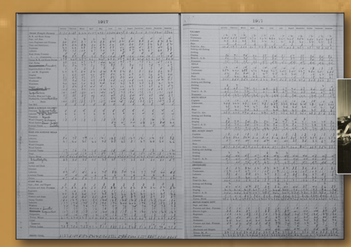
General Manager James MacNaughton
During James MacNaughton's tenure as general manager, C&H bought substantial shares in nearby mines, consolidating its empire and diversifying income for stockholders. This expansion coincided with decreased productivity of its original mines during the early 1900s.

Company Club House
In 1903 C&H opened a private club for company managers. The Mineralogy Club still operates today, and its guest book includes signatures by Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and other captains of industry.



A Day's Wage
If you worked for a local mining company in 1909, your wage for a 10-hour day would be about $2.30. In Arizona or Montana copper mines, your day would shorten to eight hours, and your wage would increase by a dollar or so.

Cornish Contract System
As the first group of skilled miners in the Copper Country, Cornish miners brought with them a contract payment system in which teams of men—often sons, brothers, and close friends—earned a fixed amount for work completed. As the Copper Country's mines expanded and became more technologically advanced, their management became increasingly American, and less influenced by Cornish traditions. By the early 1900s, hourly wages had largely replaced the contract system.



Local Labor, Distant Dividends
Telegraph and telephone lines connected C&H managers in Calumet to the company's headquarters in Boston. Most shares of the company's stock belonged to two Boston families related by marriage.

Captains, Clerks, and Carpenters
In addition to revealing the array of trades that C&H needs to operate, this ledger also shows the company's peak employment in June 1917 during World War I.

Personal Productivity
During World War II, a miner working for C&H helped extract more than 45,000 pounds of copper. By contrast, a C&H worker of the 1870s helped produce about 12,000 pounds of copper each year.

C&H issued identification badges such as these as security measures.

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51"X72"
1/8 FULL SIZE