

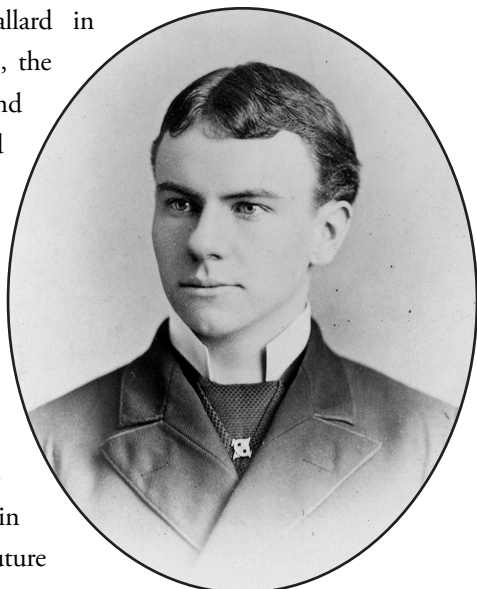
Collection Essay

The Shifting Landscape of Appalachia

*The Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston Mountain
Photograph Collection, 1882–1905*

Of the numerous photograph collections housed at The Filson Historical Society, The Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston Photograph Collection is by far the largest and most significant, including over twenty thousand items dating from the 1880s through the 1940s. Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston was a Louisville businessman, land speculator, traveler, historian, and photographer who made his fortune in Appalachia between 1882 and 1909. The Filson houses photographs and records from Thruston's time in Appalachia. Together, these works provide a rich source of information on the changing society and landscape of Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia during the Second Industrial Revolution. Thruston purchased one of the first Kodak cameras and for more than sixty years used his photography as a documentary tool, capturing images of Louisville, Kentucky, the United States, and the world, with his "Kodaking," as he called it. While some may consider Thruston an amateur, his photos reveal his artistic eye and passion to document the world around him.¹

Thruston was born Rogers Clark Ballard in Louisville, Kentucky on November 6, 1858, the youngest son of Andrew Jackson Ballard and Frances Ann Thruston Ballard. He changed his name when he reached adulthood, adding Thruston out of his deep respect for his mother. He attended Louisville public schools and then entered the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University in 1876, when he was seventeen years old. His education was interrupted the next year, when he accompanied his father on an inspection of family-owned mining properties in Colorado. This trip would prepare him for a future that would be inextricably tied to mining. Thruston graduated Yale in 1880 and after a brief stint in a railway auditor's office in Louisville, he met Harvard



Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston
(1858-1946), 1880.
FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF APPALACHIA

geologist and past director of the Kentucky Geological Survey, Nathaniel Shaler, whose “infectious enthusiasm” persuaded Thruston to join the state’s geological survey. In July 1882, Thruston was officially hired onto the Kentucky Geological Survey under Assistant Geologist Albert Rogers Crandall (1840–1926).²

Governor Preston H. Leslie started the survey in 1873, and John Robert Procter was the state geologist and director of the survey while Thruston was involved. Between 1882 and 1887, Albert Rogers Crandall, Thruston, and the rest of the survey team were dispatched from Lexington to explore every nook and cranny of Kentucky’s Appalachian region, spending eight months of the year in the eastern Kentucky mountains and the other four months in Lexington. The teams surveyed, drafted maps, took detailed notes, and gathered data for publication in volume 4 of the *Geological Survey of Kentucky: Reports of Progress*. They also had many adventures and some fun. They hiked for miles over rough terrain, climbed mountains and explored caves, and took advantage of the hospitality of the mountaineers when they could and roughed it outside when they could not.³



Group of men reading a wagon review map in Big Stone Gap, Virginia (1887).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Two unidentified men next to a large black walnut tree in Harlan County, Kentucky (1884).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Another element of the project was a photographic survey of the region. While Thruston participated in the project’s geological and metallurgical work, he and Crandall also took photographs throughout the survey documenting the land, the people, and the culture of the region. It was here in the heart of Appalachia that Thruston began taking photographs and fell in love with the medium. While they only constitute a small subset of his overall collection, the 342 mounted

photographs Thruston and Crandall took when they worked for the Kentucky Geological Survey in the early 1880s are some of its most captivating. Many of the photos Crandall and Thruston took during the survey were displayed at the Louisville Exposition of 1883–84 and the New Orleans Exposition of 1884–85. Thruston was in charge of the display of several thousand photographs on glass showing Kentucky scenes. According to him, “They created a tremendous sensation and attracted thousands upon thousands of people to see them.”⁴



View from Procter Coal Company tip house in Red Ash, Kentucky (c. 1882).
FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

It was during his time with the Kentucky Geological Survey that Thruston entered the Appalachian real estate market, buying up mineral and lumber rights to lands he found promising. In 1887, Thruston and his elder brother Charles Ballard organized the Inter-State Investment Company for the purpose of speculating in mineral and timber lands in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia. Thruston spent the years 1887–1909 locating, surveying, and purchasing land—and registering and litigating land deeds—in Harlan County, Kentucky, and Lee County, Virginia. He dabbled in other ventures as well, including the Thruston Big Stone Gap Improvement Company and Consulting Geologist during the 1880s and the Big Stone Gap Iron Company in 1895. He also worked



Thruston demonstrating the height of a coal seam in Harlan County, Kentucky (1903). His right hand is at the top of the seam, while his right foot rests on the underclay.
FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF APPALACHIA

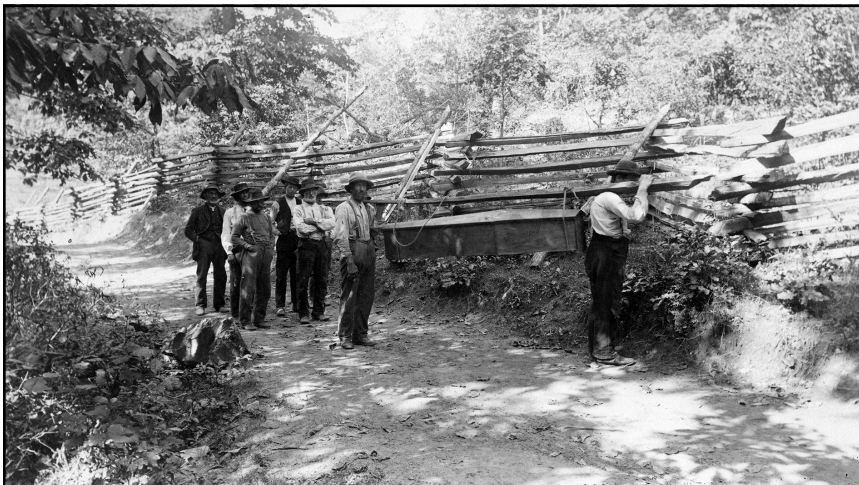
as the superintendent of the Land Bureau of the Kentucky Union Land Company. The Inter-State Investment Company did very well, and by 1927, forty years after the company was created, Thurston had sold the last company asset at a profit and, as he put it, the company “went out of existence.”⁵

Thurston was in Appalachia to study and later to invest in the land, but he was also very interested in the people of Appalachia and studied them as much as he did the land on which they lived. He describes in a letter, “I had many other experiences in that country with people who were totally different from anyone I had ever known before, but I made friends and got along all right.” He captured their life with his camera, both the everyday and the extraordinary, whenever he could.⁶



Family of Adonijah Fox outside their home above Goldens Creek near Jellico, Tennessee (1887).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Funeral procession near Browney's Creek in Harlan County, Kentucky (1886).

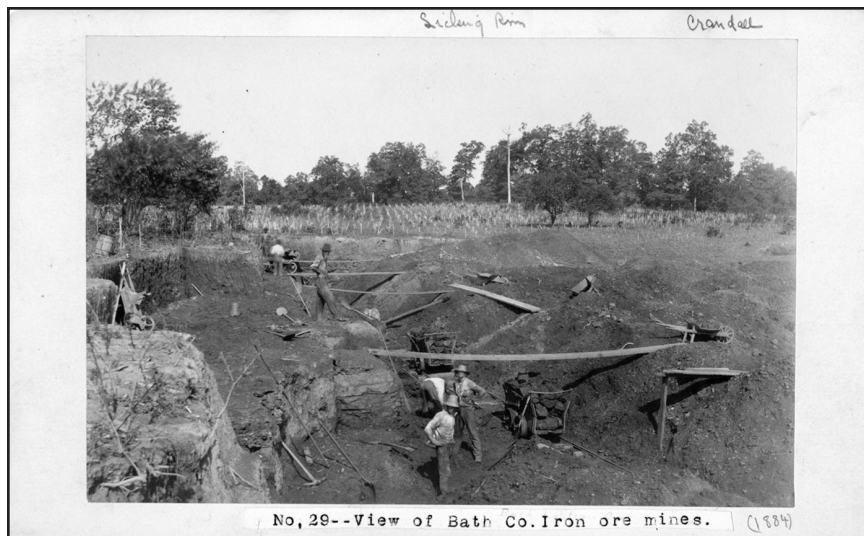
FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Thruston applied science and a meticulous eye to his photography. He spent time recording date, location, subject, and typed descriptions on almost every single image. One can see the changing landscape in the rolling hills and agricultural scenes complete with images of old-growth timber before it was cut down juxtaposed with views of coal companies cutting through the land, and railroad lines being laid through the mountains. In his mountain collection, Thruston has left behind photographic evidence of the shifting landscape of Appalachia caused by the Second Industrial Revolution.



Northward view of Bath County, Kentucky from the iron ore knob (1884).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Men working in Bath County iron ore mines (1884).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Thruston's image descriptions demonstrate that he was also interested in photography's changing technology. He notes on the verso of one image, "This is one of the first attempts at taking such views with artificial light. It was a 3 minute exposure, burning magnesium ribbon." Thruston's desire to record the region's people and way of life and his photographic methods, alongside documenting the natural resources, are what make the collection such a rich resource for historians.⁷



Interior of log cabin in Bell County, Kentucky, with unidentified woman (1886).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

After his retirement, Thruston devoted his life to charitable work and travel, making sure to photograph his trips around the world. Throughout his life, however, he became increasingly interested in Kentucky history and his own genealogy. In 1892 he joined the Filson Club (now The Filson Historical Society), becoming one of its youngest members. He loved history and The Filson so much that he served as president from 1923 until the time of his death. For his leadership, financial support, and vision, which helped The Filson transform from a private club to the scholarly and professional historical society it is today, he is considered one of the organization's founders. Much of what is in The Filson's collection is the result of Thruston's efforts. He saved the society during the tumultuous time following the death of original founder Colonel Ruben T. Durrett, and it is thanks to Thruston's leadership and generosity that The Filson acquired its first building and fireproof archive.⁸

Thruston donated more than time and money; he gave The Filson his vast collections, including his Appalachian materials. What adds to the complexity and richness of Thruston's Mountain Photograph Collection is that Thruston bequeathed his entire personal and business collection as well: all the company records for the Inter-State Investment Company; thirteen large folio volumes of abstracts and copies of Virginia and Kentucky land titles; hand drawn maps and plats showing the location

of streams, ridges, and all other identifying landmarks; and other business records and correspondence from throughout the course of his life and career. These records are an exceptional resource for the study of Appalachian social, legal, and environmental history. Together, the photographs and manuscripts touch upon a wide array of topics, including family histories, the institution of marriage, inheritance rights, mountaineers' division and subdivision of property, the blight of illiteracy on the region, local politics, and the changing environment caused by the Second Industrial Revolution. Thruston came on the scene at a crossroads of Appalachian society, and his photographs and detailed descriptions capture a society in the throes of change.⁹



Procter Coal Company mining village, with office, store,
and boarding houses in Red Ash, Kentucky (c. 1882).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The rich metadata accompanying the Mountain Photograph Collection, its historical significance, and its previous obscurity made it a prime candidate for a digitization project. Over the course of 2016, Filson volunteer Chip Arbegust worked on reprocessing the images to make the entire collection available online for researchers. There were two major stages of the project: updating catalog descriptions to improve searchability, then scanning every individual image for the online images database. Arbegust worked on transcribing and improving image descriptions using the detailed notes Thruston included on most images. He also conducted more in-depth research to help verify and standardize geographic names, accurately identify individuals, and specify railroad company and mining equipment names when possible. This added information improves the searchability of the collection for future researchers. In addition to describing the photographs, Arbegust also scanned the entire collection, a very time-consuming process. The Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston Mountain Photograph digitization project was completed in December 2016 and is now fully accessible to

researchers on The Filson's Online Image Database (<http://bit.ly/2hFLomO>). A portion of the collection is also currently on exhibit in The Filson's new Owsley Brown II History Center in the grand stairwell.



J.D. Caudill (papers in hand) and others outside his store and post office in Rockhouse, Kentucky (1884).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston's photographs, correspondence, and business records provide researchers with a startlingly clear view of Appalachia's past during a pivotal time. He was on the scene to witness the coal booms, the first coal towns, and the early Appalachian railroads, but he also saw the traditional agrarian life still present in the hills and valleys before the industrial revolution arrived. The digitization of Thruston's Mountain Photograph Collection allows these visual materials to reach a wider audience and be available to more researchers than ever before as scholars continue to wrestle with Appalachia's conflicted past.

Heather Potter, Laura Kerr Wiley

-
- 1 Thomas D. Clark, "Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston, Engineer, Historian, and Benevolent Kentuckian," *Filson Club Quarterly* 58 (1984): 427.
 - 2 *Ibid.*, 408–12; C. K. S., "Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 57 (1947): 10–12.
 - 3 Clark, "Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston," 411–12.
 - 4 Hambleton Tapp, "Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston: Good Kentuckian," *Filson Club Quarterly* 21 (1947): 10; R. C. Ballard Thruston to Minnie C. Fox, Oct. 15, 1943, Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston Miscellaneous Papers, Mss. C T, The Filson Historical Society (hereafter FHS).
 - 5 R. C. Ballard Thruston, "Inter-State Investment Company History," Nov. 1, 1945, Inter-State Investment Company Records, Mss. BB I61, vol. 1, FHS.
 - 6 R. C. Ballard Thruston to Minnie C. Fox, Oct. 15, 1943.
 - 7 R. C. Ballard Thruston, *Interior of Robert Wilson's Log Cabin*, 1866, Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston Mountain Photograph Collection, box 2, RCBT-MT-025, FHS.
 - 8 Tapp, "Rogers Clark Ballard Thruston," 124–27
 - 9 Gustave A. Breaux to R. C. Ballard Thruston, 1888, Gustave A. Breaux Miscellaneous Papers (Mss. C B), FHS. Gustave A. Breaux was Thruston's business manager in Harlan County, Kentucky. His letters to Thruston reveal the nature of business deals and life in Appalachia. Breaux records information about local politics, providing context for several of Thruston's photos from elections in the region. In the letters, he complains a lot about broken typewriters, lame horses, broken wagons, and the difficulty of getting anyone to work for him.