

A Miner's Angel in the Georges Creek Valley

ALLEGANY COUNTY, MARYLAND

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The influx of millions of European immigrants in the mid-1800s and the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in America initiated the transformation of a generally rural agrarian society into one that was much more urban and competitive. For decades, a contentious relationship between labor and management festered, often resulting in deadly violence. In the effort to find a peaceful balance between competing interests of company owners and employees, several historically notable figures emerged on each side of the bureaucratic struggle. One of the most memorable advocates of labor reform was Irish-born Mary Harris Jones, better known as “Mother Jones.”

Mary G. Harris was born on May 1, 1830, in County Cork, Ireland. Her parents were impoverished Roman Catholic tenant farmers. In 1835, Mary's father Richard Harris immigrated to America and found work as a railroad laborer. After establishing himself as an American citizen, he sent for the rest of his family.

Richard's work in railroad construction soon led him to Toronto, Canada.

Mary Harris was educated in the Toronto school system and was eventually able to land a teaching job at a convent in Monroe, Michigan.

She later moved to Chicago, where she worked as a seamstress. According to her autobiography, she “preferred sewing to bossing little children.” Mary relocated

again, this time to Memphis, Tennessee, where in 1861 she married George Jones, an iron worker and staunch unionist. In 1867, Mary's husband and all four of her children succumbed to the Yellow Fever epidemic that ravaged the Memphis area.



Mary G. Harris Jones

Mary returned to Chicago and after taking on a business partner, went to work as a seamstress and dressmaker.

While working for the wealthy elite who lived on Lake Shore Drive, she remembered looking out of the plate glass windows at the poor jobless wretches who walked along the lake front. She wrote in her autobiography that “The contrast of their condition with that of the tropical comfort of the people for whom I sewed was painful to me. My employers seemed neither to notice or care.”



After her sewing establishment was destroyed in The Great Chicago Fire of 1871, Mary became more engrossed in the labor struggle, leading her to become a member of the Knights of Labor, a predecessor of the United Mine Workers of America.

She was later elevated to the role of traveling labor organizer in the United Mine Workers Union, which was formed in 1890. The diminutive 5-foot-tall Mary Harris Jones projected a striking image with her customary black dress with white lace collar and black hat. She became a polarizing, nationally recognized figure, called “the miner’s angel” by her supporters and “the most dangerous woman in America” by a former U. S. District Attorney. She became accustomed to referring to the miners as “her boys,” and they responded in kind by calling her “Mother.” Her passionately eloquent speaking skills and her unwavering defiance struck fear into the hearts of those whom she opposed.

In May 1900, Mother Jones was summoned by the United Mine Workers to rally the striking Georges Creek coal miners in Western Maryland. Union organizer Thomas Brehany, a resident of Pekin, met Mother Jones at the train station in Cumberland and introduced her to the crowd. The association with Mother Jones ended up costing Brehany his job.

On Thursday, May 31, Mother Jones led a parade of more than 300 miners from Frostburg, Eckhart, and Vale Summit on a march to a union rally in Knapp’s Meadow. The marching miners stepped to the beat of a fife and drum band while 70-year-old Mother Jones rode in a carriage at the head of the procession. Most of the Georges Creek coal miners supported continuing the strike, but the miners from Lonaconing, most of who were employees of the New Central Coal Company, the American Coal Company or the Georges Creek Coal & Iron Company, were largely in favor of returning to work.

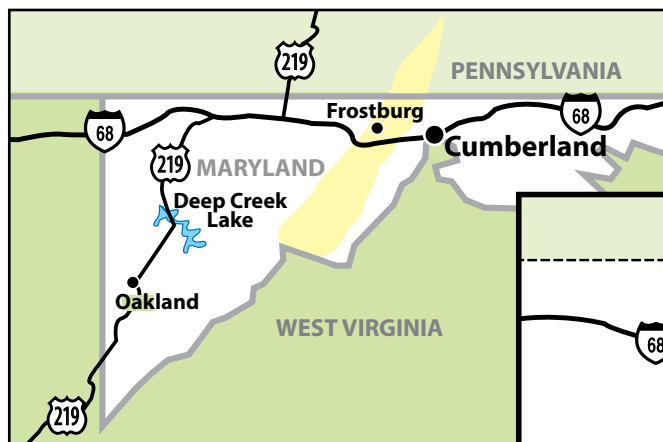
On the evening of the same day, Mother Jones addressed 1,500 people from the porch of the Brady Hotel in Lonaconing. Daniel Young, President of the District 16 United Mine Workers Local, presided at the gathering. On the following afternoon Mother Jones addressed an estimated 4,000 people for more than an hour. Nearly every woman in the region turned out. According to a story in the *New York Sun*, Mother Jones “set the miners wild, and even the



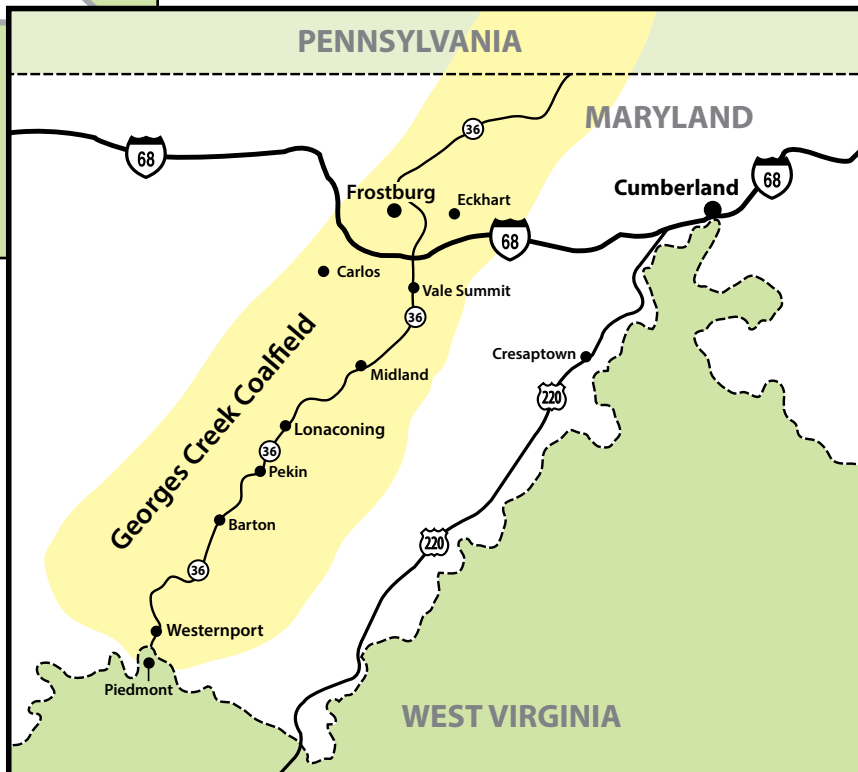
Top: Mother Jones, known as “the grandmother of all agitators,” leading a parade of protesters in Illinois.

Middle: Mother Jones speaks to a large crowd of men and women in Montgomery, West Virginia, in 1912, ahead of the Paint Creek Miner’s Strike.

Bottom: Labor activist Mother Jones speaks in Seattle, Washington, May 1914.



Map of the Georges Creek area and some of the towns Mother Jones visited in May and June 1900.



miners' wives and daughters, who were pleading for the men to return to work, were won over to her side. Before she went into the region last Thursday, it was estimated that 70 percent of the miners (the Lonaconing miners) wanted to return to work. Now, they are all determined to hold out."

Mother Jones held rallies in other Georges Creek Valley towns in the following days. On June 4, she spoke in Carlos; on June 5, in Midland; on June 6, in Barton; and on June 16, in Piedmont, West Virginia. The United Mine Worker's Union was holding out for an increase in the per ton rate from 45 cents to 60 cents. Shortly after Mother Jones' visit to the Georges Creek coal region, a compromise was reached. The mine owners and the union agreed to a 55 cents per ton rate, with no blacklisting of the striking miners.

Her duties as a union organizer took her many places from coast to coast. In 1902, Mother Jones and several other organizers were arrested by United States Marshals in Clarksburg, West Virginia, during a rally of union miners. The detainees were taken to Parkersburg, West Virginia, where they were to be incarcerated. Upon reaching Parkersburg, the men were taken in one direction, while a nephew of one of the marshals took Mother Jones in another direction. When she inquired about why they were separated, she was told that the miners were going to jail, and she would be held under guard in a motel room. Mother Jones protested and demanded to go to jail with "her boys." Her wish was granted, and she was taken to the same jail as the miners.

While rallying miners in Colorado in 1903, Mother Jones was awakened at night by a loud knock on her door. A man in a military uniform told her that she was to come with him. She was taken to a train station, to be evicted from the state, by order of the Governor. While on the train, her persuasive manner elicited sympathy for the miners from the engineer. She told him that she did not want to cause him to lose his job but would be grateful if he would take her to Denver instead. The engineer was won over and complied with her request. When she arrived in Denver, she wrote a note to the governor, stating that "The civil courts are open. If I break a law of state or nation, it is the duty of the civil courts to deal with me. That is why my forefathers established these courts, to keep dictators and tyrants such as you from interfering with civilians." She challenged the governor to evict her. Fearing the legal ramifications and the negative publicity that picking on a little old woman would bring, the governor declined to pursue the matter further.

In her autobiography, Mother Jones described a chance encounter with a little trapper boy while she was touring the

Mary "Mother" Jones' granite monument at Union Miners Cemetery in Mount Olive, IL.

coal mines between Pittsburgh and Brownsville, Pennsylvania. When she asked his age, he claimed that he was 12. After learning who she was, the trapper boy felt more comfortable about being honest with her. She asked the boy "I know you told the mine foreman you were twelve, but what did you tell the union?" The boy responded by saying "Oh, the union is different. I'm ten come Christmas." When she asked the boy why he wasn't in school, he said because "I ain't lost no leg."

Mother Jones would often visit Mount Olive, Illinois, during her travels. Mount Olive was the site of the Battle of Virden. On October 11, 1898, a gun battle broke out between union and non-union miners, resulting in seven miners being killed and 40 wounded.

On October 12, 1923, one day after speaking at Mount Olive during the 25th anniversary of the Battle of Virden, Mother Jones announced that, when she died, she wished to be buried at Union Miners Cemetery in Mount Olive, with the martyrs of Virden.

Her incendiary passion finally flickered and died out on November 30, 1930, when Mother Jones passed away in Silver Spring, Maryland, at the age of 100. In accordance with her wishes, she was laid to rest at Union Miners Cemetery. Even death could not sever the ties to her beloved miners.

In 1936, the Progressive Miners of America and the organization's women's auxiliary raised \$16,000 to erect a granite monument in memory of Mother Jones. An estimated 50,000 people attended the dedication of the Mother Jones Memorial on October 11, 1936, the 38th anniversary of the Battle of Virden. The monument features a 22-foot-tall central pillar with a Bas-relief of Mother Jones, flanked by two bronze statues of coal miners.



Mary Harris Jones, who was once mocked in the U. S. Senate for being "the grandmother of all agitators," was banished from more places and imprisoned more times than any other

labor leader of her era. From the coal mines of Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Virginia, to the iron ore mines of Colorado, the copper mines of Arizona, and the textile mills of Pennsylvania, Mother Jones could be found anywhere there was a fight for workers' rights. Her now famous motto was "pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living." When asked by a congressman in 1910 where she lived, she replied "in the United States, but I do not know where. My address is wherever there is a fight against oppression. Sometimes I am in Washington, then in Pennsylvania, Arizona, Texas, Minnesota, or Colorado. My address is like my shoes; it travels with me."