

## Chapter Preview

**Terms:** surface mining, region, urban, spa, immigrant, plateau, treason, capital

**Places:** Potomac Section, Berkeley Springs, Allegheny Highlands, Spruce Knob, Beckley, Helvetia, Allegheny Plateau, New River, New River Gorge, Ohio River Valley, Blennerhassett Island



# Human/Environmental Interaction

The theme of human/environmental interaction describes how humans use, affect, and are affected by their environment. The elimination of animals like the American bison, wolf, and elk from West Virginia is an example of geographic conditions being suitable for the animals' inhabitation, but human intervention causing their extinction.

Over the years, geography has dictated where people live as well as how they make a living. Three major industries in West Virginia can serve as examples of how geography affects development while detailing how industrial growth and success brought change to the very environment that supported their birth.

The central and southern regions of West Virginia contain valuable supplies of coal, sometimes referred to as “black diamonds.” Geographic conditions caused the coal to develop where it did. Humans, however, had to alter the natural surroundings somewhat in order to make mining the mineral profitable. Although there were some settlements in the area before coal became important, the lack of roads and navigable streams delayed the region's development. It was not until the coming of the railroad in the mid- to late 1800s that the area began to grow and become economically successful. Building the roads and railroads changed the look of the region. What was once fertile, unspoiled land was soon covered with houses, churches, schools, and stores to accommodate the needs of the many people who came to work in the mines or on the railroad.

As mining became more and more profitable, some companies began to look for an easier way to extract the coal that was near the surface. The result was **surface mining**, or strip mining as it was commonly called. This type of mining actually did strip the land. Trees were uprooted, land was destroyed, and streams were polluted, increasing the potential for erosion and flooding. Today, companies engaged in surface mining must restore the land when they are finished. In some instances, the area is actually left in better condition.

West Virginia was a natural site for the expansion of the chemical industry. The state contained almost limitless quantities of five of the six elements needed for the production of chemicals. These elements are: carbon from coal, hydrogen from water, oxygen and nitrogen from the air, and chlorine from salt brines. Sulfur, the sixth element, was easily obtained from surrounding states. The availability of these elements as well as an abundance of natural gas were major factors in Union Carbide's decision to locate in the state. Other chemical companies followed Union Carbide's lead, and soon the Kanawha Valley became known as “the Chemical Valley of the World.”