

When a Man's a Miner

by Kendra Strubhart, Heritage Interpreter

On February 12, 1924, the *Chicago Tribune* published a short piece regarding an unusual memorial to Francis Stuyvesant Peabody, who had passed away on August 27, 1922.

PEABODY FILM SHOWS METHODS OF MINE RESCUE

Washington, D.C., Feb. 11 – [Special.] – A motion picture film which by its vivid portrayal of modern mine rescue and first aid methods advocated by the department of the interior will help to conserve lives of thousands of coal miners to whom it will be shown is to be the novel form of a memorial to the late Francis S. Peabody of Chicago, prominent coal operator and assistant director of the bureau of mines during the war.

The offer of the film was made to the bureau of mines by Mr. Peabody's son, Capt. Stuyvesant Peabody, who was connected with the chemical warfare work of the bureau of mines during the war. The entire expense of the film will be borne by Mr. Peabody.

Intrigued by the possibility of a film that not only honored the memory of the original owner of Mayslake Peabody Estate but also showed footage of working Peabody coal mines from the 1920s, researchers at Mayslake Peabody Estate went to work to track it down. The first step was learning more about the United States Bureau of Mines and Mr. Peabody's role within the organization.



The U.S. Bureau of Mines was formed on May 16, 1910, to conduct scientific research and distribute information on the extraction, processing, use, and conservation of mineral resources. As a coal mine operator, F. S. Peabody was intimately involved with the bureau and held the position of assistant to the director of the Bureau of Mines during World War I. It was during this tumultuous wartime period that Congress passed an act regulating the manufacture, distribution, sale and use of explosives “to prevent disloyal persons from procuring explosives so they cannot be used in unlawful purposes.” Additionally, “Licenses were issued only to persons known to be loyal and

responsible and recommended by reputable citizens of the community.” F. S. Peabody wrote a related 44-page booklet titled, “General Information and Rulings for the Enforcement of the Law Regulating the Manufacture, Distribution, Storage, Use, or Possession of Explosives and their Ingredients,” which was published and distributed by the Government Printing Office and was an extremely important document. A copy of this document resides in the Mayslake Peabody Estate Historic Research Archive.

With a better understanding of the Bureau of Mines, researchers next dove into the National Archives. With a little determination and luck, they were able to find several digitized safety films produced by the Peabody Coal Company for the bureau in the 1920s. Most depict basic first-aid procedures and while interesting are not very exciting.

However, the film produced in memory of F. S. Peabody and financed by his son Stuyvesant was a significantly larger production. *When a Man's a Miner* is almost 40 minutes long and not only provides safety information, but also shows underground footage of a working mine and a mining town. A fictional plot drives the film and focuses on Lucky Burns, a miner, who refuses to take a mine safety course until he is injured in an accident caused by his carelessness. After the accident, Lucky becomes a model of mine safety, saving himself and a crew of men by following the procedures recommended in safety instructions. In a romantic twist to the central plot, the town beauty, Mary Kincaid, agrees to marry Lucky because she is so impressed with his adherence to the “safety first” mindset.

The silent movie was available after June 15, 1924, and was distributed for exhibition purposes by educational, civic, commercial and similar institutions. It was promoted by the Bureau of Mines as “perhaps the most faithful and vivid coal mining scenes yet shown on the screen.” The film is a valuable discovery because of the direct ties to Peabody Coal and the Peabody family and the glimpse it offers into a working coal mine and adjacent town from the era.

This new discovery will give our volunteers a whole new avenue of topics as they research all of the visible locations, people and equipment featured in the movie. If you have interest in watching the film in its entirety, it can be accessed by visiting: [research.archives.gov/description/12427](https://www.archives.gov/description/12427).

