SOMETIME BETWEEN 1863 AND 1865, at the same time Union and Confederate troops waged ferocious, faraway battles, photographer Thomas Johnson took this image of the Von Storch coal mine near Scranton, Pa. Johnson had moved from New York to northeastern Pennsylvania to document the anthracite coal boom. Anthracite was a harder, denser coal than bituminous, and it burned with more heat and less waste. Coal mines had been in the region since the 18th century, but anthracite was usually buried deep in the earth and hard to reach. It wasn’t until the 1840s that mining and transportation technology made anthracite mining more feasible. By the 1850s, canals and railroads were in place to haul the anthracite, and the Civil War caused a surge in demand for the fuel. Factories contracted by the Union Army pumped out dense clouds of black smoke as they devoured the coal and rendered vast amounts of military materiel. Between 1861 and 1865, the Von Storch mine, which sank its first shaft in 1855, produced 605,000 tons of anthracite coal at about $5.50 a ton. Johnson’s image is a reminder of the North’s industrial prowess, for while the Union sent legions to fight, legions more remained behind to provide labor for the war effort. –D.B.S.
1. Breaker houses were an essential part of anthracite mining. While soft bituminous coal burned easily, dense anthracite coal was brought out of the mineshaft directly to a breaker house, where the hard fossil fuel was broken into different sizes for industrial and residential applications so that it would ignite evenly.

2. This collection of buildings might contain the mining office or the company store. Miners were sometimes forced to purchase goods at inflated prices at such stores, which served as an instigating factor in strikes.

3. This coalyard “pufferbelly” has its steam up, consuming coal no doubt mined on the spot. The engine is ready to chug its way backward up the inclined plane, or elevated railway, to the breaker house to fill its cars with coal.

4. A few employees congregate near this shed. Most of the miners, of course, are deep in the mines. Not every miner stayed at home. In 1864, the 48th Pennsylvania, a regiment composed largely of coal miners from nearby Schuylkill County, gained fame when they dug a shaft under the Rebel earthworks at Petersburg, leading to what became known as the notorious Battle of the Crater.

5. Coal cars filled to the brim are ready to transport their cargo, a drop in the bucket of the 20 million tons of both anthracite and bituminous coal mined in Pennsylvania during the war. In the cars you can see the various sizes of coal produced by the breaker. The terms “Egg, stove, nut, and pea,” denoted various sizes of anthracite coal.

6. A great deal of shale and other material was brought up with the coal and separated out in the breaker house. Piles of the waste soon accumulated around the coal mines.

7. It’s hard to tell whether or not this mine shaft and breaker house—similar to the complex on the left labeled “1”—is in working order.