Charleston

Today, Charleston is only a spot on a map near the San Pedro River, but at one time it was one of the most important mill towns supporting the Tombstone mines.

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In 1878 the Tombstone Mining District was founded and at the same time, a ten-stamp and fifteen-stamp mill was financed to process the mined ore. The smaller mill was for the Tombstone Mill and Mining Company (Toughnut, Goodenough, Lucky Cuss, Westside, and Defense mines), and the larger was for the Corbin Mill and Mining Company (Owl’s Nest, Owl’s Last Hoot, Eastside, and Tribute mines). Both mills were at a site that came to be known as Millville on the east bank of the San Pedro River, about nine miles west of Tombstone. Also in 1878, Amos Stowe, a furniture merchant from Tombstone, recorded a claim across the San Pedro River from the ten-stamp mill; then he laid out a townsite that he named Charleston. While the San Pedro River is dry much of the year today, it yielded a daily supply of 13 million gallons of water in February 1879 and during monsoon season was often flooded and impassable, so a bridge was built between Millville and Charleston. Within a year, Charleston was a small town of about 400 and included five stores, four restaurants, four saloons, a hotel, a physician, and several other businesses. In general, men worked at the mills in Millville and lived across the river in Charleston.

As Charleston grew, it became the center of activity in that part of the county. The US Deputy Collector of Customs was stationed there, and the Army made Charleston its headquarters for the telegraph with couriers between there and Camp Huachuca. The Charleston Post Office opened on April 17, 1879, and a stagecoach with mail ran between Tombstone and Charleston several times a week. Charleston never had a bank or newspaper, but they did have a school located just west of the center of town, so families with children lived there. There is little mention of churches, but there is a story of Curly Bill Brocius and his gang dropping into the Baptist Church. After his men were seated, the regular attendees slowly departed until only the minister was left. After the service, Curly Bill took up a collection from his men then they all quietly walked out.

Several mines in Tombstone closed in the mid-1880s and others relocated their milling operation to Tombstone to save on transportation costs, so the mills in Millville closed and Charleston fell into decline. The Post office transferred to Fairbank on Oct 24, 1888. By 1890, the buildings in Charleston were vacant and the people were gone. Over the years, the Charleston site was destroyed by erosion, weather, and military exercises that used the old townsite for training during World War Two. Today, there is nothing left of the original townsite; it is covered by a dense growth of mesquite, cottonwood, and brush.

Following are a few of the important dates in Charleston’s history.

October 28, 1878 Claim that would eventually become Charleston recorded.

February 1, 1879 Charleston townsite was laid out.

April 17, 1879 Charleston post office opened.

June 1, 1879 The Tombstone Mill and Mining Company put a ten-stamp mill in operation.

May 1886 Milling activity had moved to Tombstone and the Mills at Charleston were closed.

May 3, 1887 An earthquake jarred Charleston and a few buildings sustained damage.

October 24, 1888 Postal service was transferred to Fairbank.

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The Epitaph ran an occasional article about Charleston, like these two.

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Yesterday we paid Charleston a short visit, and were agreeably surprised by the size and apparent prosperity of the place. It possesses excellent hotel accommodations, superior liquor establishments, drugstore, livery stables and all the accommodations of a prosperous frontier town. The buildings are all substantial, and some of them are very credible structures. What surprises us most is the amount of stock carried by the merchants. We had been led to believe that Charleston derived its existence entirely from the employees of the mill, but in fact it has a very extensive trade with the surrounding country and Sonora. The Mexican business is daily becoming more important, and will continue to increase until it reaches very large proportions. The town is well regulated and free from turmoil. In fact it is one of the most peaceful places we were ever in. In the early future the Epitaph will give an extended local account of Charleston, embodying a full description of the principal business and public houses. We were treated with much courtesy during our visit and hereby express gratitude.

The Tombstone epitaph. [volume] (Tombstone, Pima County, Ariz.), 06 May 1882. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84021939/1882-05-06/ed-1/seq-3/>

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Below we give a short sketch of Charleston as a place of business:

The stranger coming to this town is rather poorly impressed with the capital city of the San Pedro, and as a rule they have a common wish to get out of it as fast as they got into it, as at first glance there is apparently nothing worthwhile staying for. The reason for this is plain; our men are all at work in the mills and smelter, but at night a livelier camp cannot be found; but a stranger with a stock of energy and patience looks over the town and its resources and find that their first impressions were wrong and go into business and succeed in their avocations. Every one of our businessmen have come here with not enough money to build themselves a cabin, but through pluck and perseverance they have all been successful and stand high in mercantile circles, and all carry a stock of merchandise, such as is not found in any store of double the population of Charleston, and in this connection it will not be out of place to mention a few of our businessmen, stating how they arrived and how they could depart if they so desired at the present time.

Waffle & Garlock, the former taught school, and the latter worked in the Corbin mill. Both resigned their situations and started into the butchering business and are now doing all the business of this town, having no opposition. They also recently purchased the okay corral with its horses, rolling stock and buildings from Mr. Shearer, and are doing a profitable business.

Six years ago Herrera & McClure came to this town, the former worked as a mill hand for short time, and was then employed by Herman Welitach, where he had a splendid opportunity to become educated in the merchandising business. Mr. McClure was at that time employed by the Government as a deputy customhouse collector. After Herrera had sufficient knowledge of the merchandise business, he and McClure started in that business and have been doing a paying business ever since, and today are well fixed and stand A No 1 in this place and also with the wholesale houses both east and west.

Herman Wellisch, one of the prominent merchants of this place, arrived in Charleston in March, 1879, with a capital of $400, which he had saved from his salary as a salesman, and at once built a small adobe house and commenced business and by strict attention to business he succeeded in making a small fortune as can be seen, for 11 months after he started in business here he took a trip to London and thence to Paris, and from there traveled through all the principal cities of Europe, also visiting his aged parents where he had a very enjoyable time. Four years ago he returned and built himself another large Adobe store and commenced business again and is now doing a good business.

We ought to mention several other businessmen here but as we do not like to trespass upon the Charleston column, we will wait until next Saturday when we will resume our businessmen and so continue until every businessman in Charleston has been noticed.

The Tombstone. (Tombstone, Ariz.), 22 Aug. 1885. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn96060683/1885-08-22/ed-1/seq-3/>