

Rehab effort stabilizes Basalt's 126-year-old charcoal kilns

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Photos courtesy of the town of Basalt One of the old charcoal kilns in Basalt. The kilns, which were built in 1884, were stabilized by work completed last week.

At first glance, seven historic charcoal kilns in the center of Basalt don't appear significantly different than they have for years, but looks are deceiving – they're ready to weather another 125 years.

A preservation and rehabilitation effort on the brick, beehive structures was completed last week by Building Restoration Specialties, a Denver firm. The \$341,000 project was designed to stabilize some of Basalt's oldest surviving structures. They were kept in their current condition rather than restored.



"They don't look much different than they did before – and that's the point," said Bernie Grauer, a Basalt resident and chair of an ad hoc citizens committee that has worked for more than four years toward the goal.

"I am sort of surprised and delighted we achieved this project as soon as we did," said Grauer while showing off the work one recent, sunny morning.

The massive kilns are at the drive-in entrance to Basalt's Arbaney Park, not far from the municipal pool. They have a 25-foot diameter and a 25-foot peak. During the course of research to apply for a grant from the Colorado Historical Fund, Brian McNellis, a senior planner with the Basalt town government, discovered an Aspen Times article from the period that said construction of the kilns was commissioned by the Aspen Silver Co. in 1884. The structures were needed to provide charcoal for mining smelters in Aspen. It had previously been believed the kilns were built in 1882, as a plaque at the site still reads.

Research also showed that four or five were built in the initial phase and two or three kilns were added later.

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Wood was burned in the kilns using a specific procedure to create the charcoal, which was then transported by wagon to Aspen. The kilns likely fell out of use a few years after coal was discovered in the Crystal River Valley and railroads came to the booming silver camp and delivered the coal, Grauer said.

The kilns sat for years in the middle of the ranching operations of various families. McNellis pointed out where a doorway was squared off and framed, and the foundation of wood dividers are still visible on the floor. Town consultants reasoned that the kiln was probably used as a barn and the dividers separated different livestock.

As Basalt started to grow and subdivisions sprouted at the former ranches, the town purchased the kiln property as part of Arbaney Park. The kilns were in public hands, but not protected. Over the years, weathering and vandalism took a toll. One way or another, holes had been punched through. In other areas, the brick and mortar were crumbling.

"I could almost see them disintegrating before my eyes," Grauer said.

Three of the most interesting kilns were the most fragile. Workers used river rock for the foundation, then added brick at the top. The other four kilns were made completely of brick. Those four are all standing.

One of the three hybrids collapsed years ago and just a few feet of the foundation remains. The top collapsed on another of the hybrid kilns and the third was in danger of collapse. "It was hanging by a thread," said Grauer.

The restoration company stabilized it by replacing bricks and mortar where it was needed for structural integrity. In many cases, bricks from the collapsed kilns were used as replacements in the survivors. McNellis estimated 20 percent of the bricks throughout the kilns were replaced. Mortar mixed in Carbondale was used on the job.

Through that process, the hybrid kiln in danger of collapsing has become the "jewel" of the stabilization project, McNellis said.

The town of Basalt supplied \$85,000, or a 25 percent contribution to the project. State historical grants totaling \$256,000 covered the bulk of the work.

McNellis and Denise Tomaskovic of the town staff prepared all the grant applications. The kiln committee included Kristen Jensen, Cil and Richard Klumper, Geno Rossetti and Joe Zuena in addition to Grauer. They have no official standing, Grauer noted. "We are cheerleaders, galvanizers and advisors to the town," he said.

Their work isn't over. Grauer said the committee will work with town staff on finding ways to provide more public access to the kilns, with supervision. They have been fenced off for the several years. The hillside above the kilns needs to be attended to because it is sloughing and putting pressure on the structure's bases. The area around the base also needs better landscaping.

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