



SHOT TOWER
HISTORIC STATE PARK
AUSTINVILLE, VA

The grounds are open year round weather permitting.
Shot tower tours are scheduled periodically through the year.
Group tours can be scheduled through the park office.

New River Trail State Park
176 Orphanage Drive
Foster Falls, VA 24360
or call
276-699-6778

Austinville Lead Mines

Mining of lead began shortly after the discovery of the metal in the area by Col. John Chiswell in 1757. Daniel Boone, Gen. Andrew Lewis and other famous colonial explorers were known to have stopped at the “Lead Mines”, today named Austinville.

In 1775, the Fincastle Resolutions were drawn up at Lead Mines. The resolutions containing a list of grievances against the British government and proclaiming the willingness of the signatories to die for the liberty, are considered a historical forerunner of the Declaration of Independence.

History and Construction

Local miner and business owner Thomas Jackson took about seven years to build the Shot Tower. It was completed in 1807. Here a shot of varying size would be molded, sorted and shipped down river where it would be sold to hunters, traders, and merchants.

Standing 75 feet high, the tower looks more like a fortress than a factory. Quarried from a limestone deposit about a mile away, the stone walls are 2 1/2 feet thick. Beneath the base, is a lower shaft from the tower floor that drops 75 feet to the river level.

A restored interior winding wooden staircase leads to the tower’s top room where there was a large kettle heated by a furnace. The lead was melted and then poured through different sized sieves, producing shot of varying sizes. Historians believe that either slave labor or a pulley system was used to move the lead to the top of the stairs.

The hot lead fell 150 feet to a large kettle of water at the bottom. The long fall was thought necessary to properly mold the round shot and the kettle of water served as a cushion. The kettle was reached through an access tunnel near the river, which provided a constant supply of water for the kettle. The cooled shot would then be sorted and put on the market.

The thick stone walls of the Shot Tower provided support and insured a constant interior temperature so that the shot wouldn’t cool too quickly during its long drop.

The tower, donated to the Commonwealth of Virginia by the Leads Mines Ruritan Club, was opened to the public in 1968 after extensive renovations. It is one of the only three in the United States and may be the only one of its particular design in the world. The American Society of Mechanical Engineers designated the Shot Tower a National Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark in 1981.

Today, Shot Tower Historical State Park, is managed as a part of New River Trail State Park.

