

OUTSTANDING GEOLOGIC FEATURE OF PENNSYLVANIA

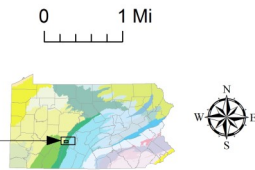
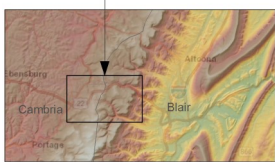
ALLEGHENY PORTAGE RAILROAD QUARRY, BLAIR COUNTY



Stuart O. Reese, 2016

Location

Allegheny Portage Railroad historical site, Blair Co., Allegheny Twp., lat: 40.4584, lon: -78.5477; Cresson 7.5-minute quadrangle



Above: Remains of the rock quarry are nearly hidden by ferns in the woods near the Visitor Center. Right: A large block of Mahoning sandstone shows drilling marks from nineteenth-century quarry masons. Photographs by Richard Campbell, Pennsylvania Geological Survey intern.

Geology

In 1831, the governor of Pennsylvania, George Wolf, signed a legislative act stimulating the development of the Allegheny Portage Railroad. It was to be the first railroad over the Allegheny Mountains. Two phases of construction were completed in 1835. The railroad covered 36.5 miles, rising and falling more than 2,500 feet in elevation. The passage contained 10 inclined planes over its course. The completion of this leg of the railroad shortened the trip between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh to less than a week. The portage railroad served travelers for over 20 years despite constant breakdowns, expensive maintenance, and safety issues.

The Allegheny Portage Railroad quarry contributed to this magnificent engineering feat by providing rock for stone sleepers (rail foundation posts carved by stonemasons), culverts, buildings, and bridges, including the well-preserved Skew Arch Bridge. On Allegheny Mountain, the quarrymen made use of a boulder field of blocky Mahoning sandstone of the Conemaugh Group, Glenshaw Formation. The Mahoning sandstone is a massive, coarse-grained rock that is occasionally conglomeratic. The quarry area is located downhill from the Visitor Center. The quarry consisted of mostly colluvium, including large boulders, and the big blocks of rock were easy pickings for the workers. Stonemasons cut the blocks into the desired pieces, and the rock made its place in the travel history of Pennsylvania.



Recommended Reading

Harper, J. A., 2011, The history and geology of the Allegheny Portage Railroad, Blair and Cambria Counties, Pennsylvania, in Ruffolo, R. M., and Ciampaglio, C. N., eds., *From the shield to the sea—Geological field trips from the 2011 Joint Meeting of the GSA Northeastern and North-Central Sections: Geological Society of America Field Guide 20*, p. 111–141.

[Allegheny Portage Railroad](#) web page of the National Park Service.