

Maryland's Coal Heritage Trail

Part I — Allegany County

written by: Dan Whetzel and Mike Lewis



This photo, taken in 1926 at the Eckhart #10 Mine shows mostly Italian immigrant miners. The mine has since closed and been reclaimed. Courtesy of Moose Arnone — his grandfather is in the photo.

The Coal Heritage Trail is a State of Maryland Scenic Byway. The Trail begins where Maryland and Route 36 meets alternate U.S. 40, in the Cumberland Narrows, and it travels 54 miles through a region rich in history. Immigrant laborers from Ireland, Scotland, Wales and other European nations, settled here as coal mines, railroads, brickyards, and commercial ventures thrived during the 19th Century. African-American miners also worked the deep mines of the George's Creek region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Following Route 36 north, the Coal Heritage trail includes the early industrial town of Mt. Savage, where the Cumberland and Pennsylvania Railroad (incorporated 1850) located its locomotive roundhouse and shops. Steam locomotives, passenger cars, and rolling stock were manufactured and repaired at the shops. The short line railroad provided daily passenger service to Cumberland and George's Creek residents, but its primary cargo was coal that was transported to the C&O Canal in Cumberland.

C&P railroading may be viewed at the Westernport Heritage Museum and at the Mt. Savage Museum along Old Row.

Mt. Savage also has the distinction of being the location of the first "U" shaped iron rail rolled in the United States (1844). 500 tons of U rail were laid in 1844 from Mt. Savage to Cumberland.

The next stop along the Trail is the town of Frostburg, home to Frostburg State University. Frostburg was the commercial center of the George's Creek mining region. The town's past is well documented at the Frostburg Museum, located in the former Hill Street Elementary School. A featured display is the coal mine exhibit, complete with a mine opening, tools and artifacts. Frostburg also serves as terminus of the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad, where the restored C&P Depot and turntable may be viewed.

Continuing south along Route 936 (old Route 36) one passes along numerous 19th and 20th century mining towns. Borden, Shaft, National, Carlos, Woodland, Klondike and Ocean mark the 5-mile distance between Frostburg and Midland. Hundreds of miners worked the "Big Vein" and "Small Vein" coal deposits in those communities. The Big Vein was a 14-foot seam of quality semi-bituminous coal that ran through the region. Interestingly, Ocean Mine #7, a Consolidation Coal Company

operation in the community of Klondike, was identified as the largest semi-bituminous coal mine in the world in 1908 as over 1,000 miners worked the Big Vein deposits located there.

The next town along the Trail is Midland, home to nearly 2,000 residents at the end of the 19th Century. Many Irish workers found work here and the town today reflects its Irish heritage. Several historic buildings, including the First National Bank (1900), remain in the town on Route 936, next to present day Route 36. The Town Museum, located above City Hall, contains numerous photographs and town memorabilia.

Lonaconing is about half way between Frostburg and Westernport. Its name was derived from an Indian word “Lonacona” meaning where many waters meet. Coal mines surrounded the town and supplied work for the Scotch-Irish residents. Mining prosperity brought schools, churches, banks, a commercial district and various entertainment establishments including the San Toy Theatre building that can still be viewed along Main Street. Family owned businesses remain vibrant as Love’s Grocery on Main Street enjoys its fourth generation of service and Ternent’s, located on Union Street, enters its 117th year of continuous operation.

The only remaining intact silk mill in the United States is located adjacent to George’s Creek in Lonaconing. The mill is an industrial time capsule as all machinery, company records and workers personal effects remain as they were when the factory closed in 1957.

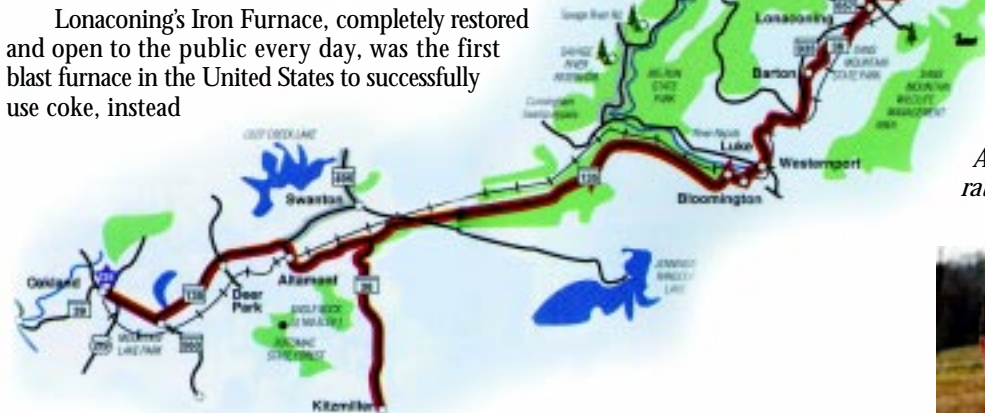
Lonaconing was also home to the greatest left-handed pitcher in baseball history, Robert Moses “Lefty” Grove (300 major league victories, lifetime winning percentage .680) A memorial to Lefty Grove is located in the Town Park at the Iron Furnace. Lefty’s 1931 Most Valuable Player Trophy may be viewed in the George’s Creek Public Library. The Library also hosts a display of Lonaconing memorabilia.

Lonaconing’s Iron Furnace, completely restored and open to the public every day, was the first blast furnace in the United States to successfully use coke, instead



Photo by Phil See

of flat boats, built in Westernport, gave rise to a small trading community in the area. With the discovery of coal, the C&P and B&O Railroads made entry into the Westernport area. Westernport’s railroading heritage is evident in the restored Western Maryland Railway Station that serves as the Heritage Society Museum. The Western Maryland caboose, adjacent to the Museum, also houses local railroadiana. ✨



Map courtesy of Maryland State Highway Administration.

Photo above: The Lonaconing Iron Furnace, built in 1837, was the first in America to successfully use coal and coke rather than charcoal to produce pig iron.

of charcoal, to smelt iron. Iron smelted here found its way to the C&O Canal and other local industries.

Traveling southwest along Route 36 one passes near Barton. Two mines operated along the north side of the town, one directly behind the American Legion. Near the town’s athletic field is a coal mining car that may be viewed. The car is typical of those used in the nearby mines. Surface mines operate above the north and south sides of the town, supplying a major power plant near Cumberland.

At the confluence of George’s Creek and the Potomac River is the town of Westernport, so named because it was the western most spot on the Potomac River where commercial navigation was possible. Transportation of goods down the Potomac River



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Mike Lewis and Dan Whetzel are life-long residents of Allegany County, Maryland and are active in promoting overall quality of life in Mountain Maryland. As social studies teachers and researchers, they are passionate about developing sound principles and processes for recreating seamless sustainable communities of change. Presently, Mike and Dan are project directors for the Coal Heritage Trail — a Maryland Scenic Byway. They are supported by the Maryland Historical Trust, the Mountain Maryland Delegation and the Allegany County Board of Education. Elaine Eff, of the Cultural Conservation Program, serves as coordinator of the cultural survey.