

Pennsylvania Rail Trails

A Nationwide Network of Recreation Trails from Former Rail Lines

By [Albrecht Powell](#), About.com Guide

Imagine a day when you can hop on a bike in Pittsburgh, and, depending on your legs, ride motor-free to Chicago, Harrisburg, or Washington DC. Sound far-fetched? That day is actually closer than you may think!

The nonprofit organization [Rails to Trails Conservancy](#) has been working since 1986 to create a nationwide network of public trails from former rail lines. Currently, they have helped preserve nearly 11,000 miles of abandoned rail lines, and converted them into 1,027 trails across 49 states. They are currently working to develop another 18,000 miles of trails. Pennsylvania leads the nation in rail-trail development, opening its 100th trail in June 1999, the first state to reach this remarkable plateau.

Rail-Trails are paths created from abandoned railroad corridors. Flat, or following a gentle grade (generally 1-3%), they traverse urban, suburban and rural America. They are ideal for many varied recreation uses such as bicycling, walking, running, skating, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, and wheelchair recreation.

These Rail-Trails, in addition to being excellent recreational opportunities generate significant economic benefit to communities through which the trails run. In recent studies, it was estimated that as much as \$1.25 million can be generated annually for the towns through which a trail passes.

Rail-trails bring historic structures, such as train stations, bridges, tunnels, mills, factories and canals back to life for all to enjoy. These structures preserve an important piece of history and enhance the trail experience

It is a complex process to convert a railroad corridor into a recreation trail. After all possibilities for continued rail service have been exhausted, a rail corridor may be declared abandoned. If a rail line is declared truly abandoned, the corridor will likely not be kept intact as many different people and organizations may hold claim to the land. In the late 1800's and early 1900's when the United States had the most extensive railroad transportation network in the world, over 300,000 miles of track spanned the nation – a network six times larger than today's interstate highway system! To accomplish this, land was either purchased or leased from individuals, states, communities, and the federal government. As the railroads continue to diminish, more than 2,000 miles of track every year are no longer used by the railroad industry, and, if abandoned, are 'up for grabs' by these former landowners.

Based on a law passed in 1983, rails that are being abandoned can be 'railbanked' or set aside for future use while being used as trails in the interim. This law essentially preempts rail corridor abandonment, keeping the corridors intact for trail use.

Once a trail has been 'railbanked,' the process of conversion to trails can begin. This usually involves the railroad pulling up the old track and ties for salvage, the old rail bed is re-graded, and then a surface covering of crushed limestone, gravel, woodchips, or asphalt is applied. Bridges and tunnels are renovated to ensure safety. In many cases new bridges have to be constructed as the old railroad bridges no longer exist, or are too unsafe. The cost to convert a trail (mostly in resurfacing) can run between \$10,000-\$40,000 per mile, which is significantly cheaper than other forms of recreation (e.g. playgrounds). These trails are then managed by local organizations, usually staffed by volunteers, and are being used by over 100 million people each year!

In Pennsylvania alone, there are 105 existing trails covering 867 miles, with another 102 trails covering 1112 miles under development. Western Pennsylvania has an unbelievable 200+ miles of operating trails. Some of the most popular are those managed by the Allegheny Trail Alliance, which is developing a continuous trail 206 miles long (of which 116 miles is completed) to connect Pittsburgh to Cumberland MD. The trail then will connect to the C&O Canal Towpath which winds another 185 miles into Washington DC. In another year or two, it will be possible to ride about 370 miles traffic-free from Pittsburgh to Washington DC. Today, the trip can be done with only about 60 miles of detours on roadways.

The trails around Pittsburgh are mostly surfaced with crushed limestone. This makes it a bit bumpy for a road bike (skinny tires), but very do-able. The most prevalent bike seen is a 'hybrid' or a typical mountain bike. The trails are clean, wide open and safe. They are also very peaceful and wind through some very rural stretches where one can often go for miles without seeing another living person. Other times, a trail may pass through small towns, where the remnants of an old train station is all that is left of a town's once prosperous days.

One of the biggest benefits of these trails to recreational users comes from a scientific law of train travel – trains, for some scientific reason that I shall not explain here, do not like hills. As such, none of these rails have very large hills, other than gradual slight grades. This makes for very enjoyable bike riding.

Montour Trail

The Montour Railroad was built in 1877 and eventually linked the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad with over 30 area coal mines. Forming a 23 mile semi-circle around the western and southern suburbs of Pittsburgh, the Montour also connected with other railroads, including the Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh and West Virginia, the Baltimore and Ohio, and the Union. When completed, the Montour Trail's 55 miles will connect the Ohio and Monongahela Rivers, crossing numerous highways and creeks on a variety of bridges, including one almost 1,000 feet long, and three tunnels.

Steel Heritage Trail

This trail, currently under construction, will connect the Montour Trail, the Three Rivers Heritage Trail and the Youghiogheny River Trail, running along the Monongahela River from Sandcastle Park, through Homestead, past Kennywood Amusement Park, across the Monongahela and then south through McKeesport and Glassport to Clairton, PA. The Steel Heritage Trail forms a crucial link in the 325 mile trail network from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C.

Three Rivers Heritage Trail

This trail links some of the most dynamic, geographic, and historical features of the City of Pittsburgh. It begins at Washington's Landing, a 42 acre island in the Allegheny River. It then travels down the Allegheny to the Ohio River, past Roberto Clemente Park and the Carnegie Science Center. From there it crosses the Ohio and proceeds up the Monongahela River past Station Square and Southside Riverfront Park. There are presently three sections of this downtown trail completed, covering approximately 5.5 miles.

Youghiogheny River Trail - North

Built in 1883, the Pittsburgh, McKeesport, and Youghiogheny hauled coal and coke from the rich Connellsville District to the steel mills of Pittsburgh. This trail winds for 40 miles from the mouth of the Yough River southward to Connellsville and is especially suited to long-distance leisure trips, since the rise in elevation is no more than 100 feet for the entire trail.

Youghiogheny River Trail - South

This 28 mile segment of the Youghiogheny River Trail follows the abandoned Western Maryland Railroad, which was built in 1912. The trail meanders from Confluence to Connellsville along the scenic Yough river and through Ohiopyle State Park.

No more excuses - get out and enjoy one of the Pittsburgh area's great rail trails today!

http://pittsburgh.about.com/od/biking/a/rail_trails.htm

