Coal’s Story Began Long Ago

Three hundred and twenty million years ago, Pennsylvania was part of a supercontinent called **Pangea**, made of tectonic plates that had collided and merged with one another over millions of years. Pennsylvania’s location in Pangea was near the equator, where the climate was conducive to the growth of great swamps and lush fern and tree forests. Dead vegetation collected in the swamps in thick masses. Because it was submerged, the vegetation was not exposed to oxidation and, as a result, did not rot, but accumulated into layers of wood debris called **peat**.

From time to time, the swamps were covered by great rivers and seas. Sediments carried in the water settled in thick layers on top of the peat and compressed it, squeezing out moisture and volatile compounds. As the peat layers sank even deeper under more layers of sediment, additional pressure and heat changed the peat’s chemical nature and hardness. This process concentrated the carbon in the peat and eventually turned it into coal. The greater the pressure from the sediments, the more the amount of volatile compounds that were forced out, making the coal richer in carbon, the chief element in coal that burns.

**Anthracite in the Corridor**

Anthracite is the hardest type of coal, and the cleanest-burning. It is found near the surface and in seams deep underground, mixed with layers of shale, sandstone and limestone to depths of 4,000 feet in some locations. Estimates of the amount of anthracite remaining in Pennsylvania range from 12 to 23 billion tons.

There are four large anthracite deposits in eastern Pennsylvania that cover parts of Carbon, Luzerne, Lackawanna, Schuylkill, Columbia, Northumberland and Dauphin counties. Coal from the No.9 Mine in Lansford is part of the 60-mile long Southern Field that ends just west of the Dauphin County border. The canoe-shaped Northern Field runs the length of the Wyoming Valley. Hazelton is in the center of the Eastern Field that straddles Carbon and Luzerne counties. The Western Middle field is outside the Corridor’s boundaries.