

Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor

Fact Sheet: History of the Corridor

Much of the history of the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor follows the story of anthracite coal and its role in the development of the American Industrial Revolution. But the Corridor's history also is intertwined with the birth and development of the United States.

The Corridor was occupied first by the Lenni Lenape, the "Original People" who were primarily hunter/gatherers but also practiced agriculture in small settlements along the Delaware and Lehigh rivers.

Swedish settlers established themselves in the Corridor in the mid-1600's. An English Quaker, William Penn, founded the colony of Pennsylvania in 1681 and promoted it as a refuge of religious freedom and economic opportunity, themes that attracted waves of Europeans from Penn's time well into the 20th century.

The Corridor's natural resources played a major role in the birth of America's Industrial Revolution. A wealth of anthracite coal and iron ore spurred the growth of the country's first iron and steel industries in the 19th century. Immigrants from Europe mined the coal and also built canals and railroads that carried it to industrial and domestic markets. Limestone and slate mined in the Lehigh Valley gave birth to America's largest cement and slate industries.



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WALKING PURCHASE 1737

The Walking Purchase, negotiated between the Lenni Lenape and William Penn's heirs, opened a large tract of present-day Northampton, Lehigh and Carbon counties to settlement. The Lenape signed an agreement that would give the Penns all of the land that could be walked by a man in a day and a half. The Penns hired three professional walkers who started in Bucks County and ended 60 miles north. The enraged Lenape began moving west.

1776 REVOLUTIONARY WAR

George Washington's daring crossing of the Delaware River in Bucks County on Christmas night, 1776, was a pivotal point in the American Revolution. Washington crossed the river under darkness with 2,500 troops and marched to Trenton where he defeated 1,500 Hessians. General John Sullivan's march from Easton to the Wyoming Valley in 1779 struck a major blow to the Iroquois and British loyalists and made the region safer for settlers.



DISCOVERY OF COAL 1791

It can be argued that America's Industrial Revolution began in 1791 when a miller named Philip Ginder discovered a commercially exploitable outcrop of anthracite coal near Summit Hill, in present-day Carbon County. Ginder's discovery started a "coal rush" that provided cheap, plentiful fuel for homes and industries and led to the building of the Heritage Corridor's canal and railroad systems. Coal remains an important source of energy today.

1829-1837 CANAL BUILDING ERA

Canals replaced rafts and arks that floated coal to market on the Lehigh and Delaware rivers. In 1829, the 46-mile Lehigh Navigation ascending and descending lift-lock canal system opened between Easton and Mauch Chunk (Jim Thorpe). In 1830, the Delaware Division Canal opened from Easton to Bristol, and in 1837, 26 miles known as the Upper Grand Section were added to the Lehigh Navigation, extending the system to White Haven.



RAILROAD CONSTRUCTION 1828-1890

Railroads were initially built to deliver coal from the fields to the canals. First there were gravity and inclined plane railroads in the late 1820s, then steam railroads in the 1830s. Businessmen quickly realized that rail lines to carry coal could be built anywhere, not only along rivers. In 1855, a Lehigh Valley Railroad line opened between Easton and Mauch Chunk, carrying coal that once traveled by canal barge.

1840-2000 IRON AND STEEL

A wealth of natural resources and the explosion of transportation bode well for the growth of the iron and steel industries. Charcoal-fired iron furnaces dotted Bucks County in the 1700s, but it was the continent's first anthracite hot air blast furnace in Catasauqua that catapulted iron making to full-scale proportions in 1840. Many iron companies sprouted soon thereafter, including the Bethlehem Iron Company, which later became Bethlehem Steel Company.

