

A Valley Reborn: A Brief Environmental History of the Blacklick Valley



Coal picker, Nanty Glo, 1937.

Photo: Ben Shahn

“The history of my country, like many other American districts, and perhaps that of the nation as a whole, had been the slow exhausting of resources. The men in their coonskin caps, the fierce Scotch-Irish of the frontier, had driven away the larger game. Their sons, who cleared the frontier, had cut the virgin forest, and the next two generations had worn out the arable soil. My country was fed with minerals, but the coal in time would be exhausted, and then?”

- Malcolm Cowley, My Countryside, Then and Now (Harper’s Weekly, January 1929)

Native Americans

The Native American presence in the Blacklick Valley was limited primarily to members of the Shawnee and Delaware tribes. The area was used for hunting, fishing and trading on nearby Indian paths. The Catawba Trail, a major trading path, crossed Blacklick Creek just outside of the present-day community of Black Lick.

Archeological evidence indicates that small native settlements once existed here. Settlements existed at the site of today’s Blacklick Valley Natural Area, on a farm outside of Dilltown and at the juncture of Two Lick and Blacklick Creek (known as Naeskahoni Town).

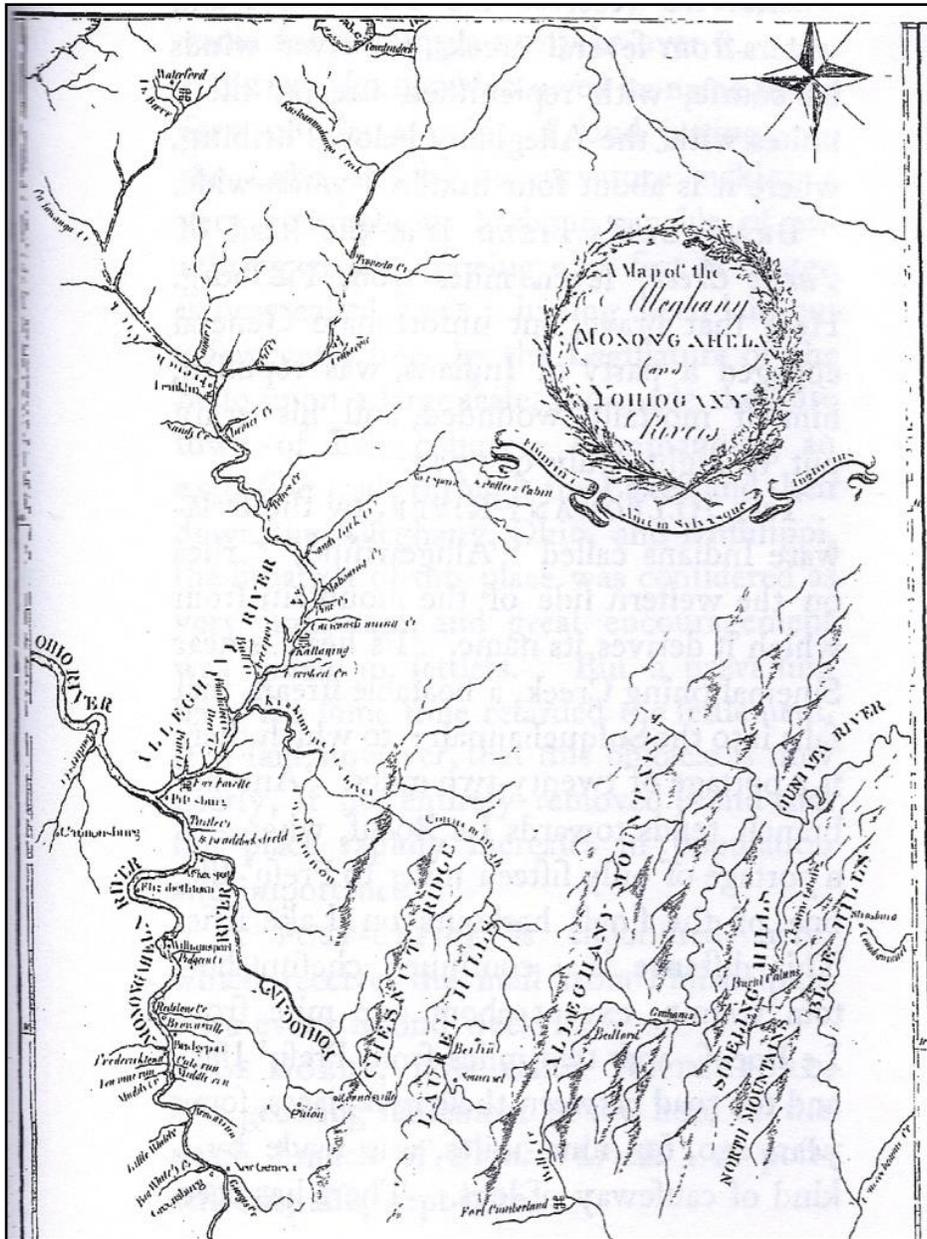
Early Settlement and the ‘Westsylvania Movement’

The first permanent settlers arrived in the area in the 1770s, although white traders passed through here before then. At that time this portion of Indiana County was part of Westmoreland County, while Cambria County was part of Huntingdon and Somerset Counties.

The area was included in a petition circulated in 1776 to create a new state to be known as Westsylvania. The movement died because Congress was in no mood to address the establishment of a new state during the Revolutionary War. Settlers complained that the area was ignored and too distant from seats of government due to impassable mountains - something that even modern residents can relate to.

Buela – An Early Welsh Settlement

Buela was located between present-day Nanty Glo and Ebensburg, on a hillside along the South Branch of Blacklick Creek. It was laid out by Reverend Morgan John Rhys (Reese) in 1792 and consisted of about 300 inhabitants, mostly of Welsh descent. The town had two hotels, a store, mill, school, church and a circulating library of 600 volumes. It served as the first polling place for this part of Cambria County. The town was eventually abandoned when Ebensburg was designated as the County seat in 1804. Only a small cemetery remains at the site.



Map of the Alleghany Region from: The Journal of a Tour of Thaddeus Mason Harris, 1803.

On the map Blacklick Creek is shown but not named.

The Conemaugh and Kiski Rivers are named on the map along with Chestnut Ridge and Laurel Ridge.

John A. Roebling and the Early Iron Furnace Speculators

In the late 1830s and early 1840s the Pennsylvania Railroad began searching for a route to extend their railroad line westward. The Pennsylvania Canal was in existence but was unprofitable and would eventually be sold by the state to the Pennsylvania Railroad.

John A. Roebling, as a young immigrant from Germany, led a team of surveyors through the Blacklick Valley to explore a possible route for a railroad. He spent three years surveying railway lines across the Allegheny Mountains, from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, for the state of Pennsylvania.

Roebing went on to greater fame as the designer and builder of the Brooklyn Bridge and other notable bridges. Roebing witnessed the failure of hemp rope at the Portage Railroad Inclined Plane, which spurred his interest in developing wire strand rope - the cable that was eventually used in his world-famous bridges.

Investors in the iron furnaces began to buy up large tracts of land in the early 1840s to provide timber for charcoal and limestone and ore to use in the iron furnaces.

The Conemaugh Valley was deemed the more useful railroad route. It would be another 50 years before a railroad would reach the interior of the Blacklick Valley, when it arrived in Vintondale in the early 1890s.

The Iron Furnace Era – 1845 - 1856



The first significant industrial activity in the valley came when three iron furnaces were constructed in the late 1840s. The iron furnace investors speculated, incorrectly it turned out, that a railroad would be constructed through the Blacklick Valley, providing an easy way to transport their iron to market.

The iron masters found a valley rich in hardwoods which provided ample resources to produce charcoal used to fuel the furnaces. Since farming had never been practical in most of the Blacklick Valley, due to the steepness of the terrain and rocky conditions, the clearing of forests for charcoal-making was the first significant harvesting of trees in the valley.

Charcoal-making was one of the earliest industries in Pennsylvania. At hundreds of furnaces throughout the state iron ore was reduced to iron by smelting ore using charcoal as the fuel. Producing charcoal required woodchoppers, who cleared the forests. Charcoal was produced by colliers who prepared the charcoal pits and tended to them to produce the charcoal that was needed to fuel the furnaces. The finished charcoal was hauled to the furnaces by teamsters in wagons and stored for later use. Although it has been many years since charcoal was produced in the Blacklick Valley the charcoal hearths remain relatively free of vegetation and can still be found in wooded areas of the Blacklick Valley. Bits and pieces of charcoal can still be found at the sites.

Three iron furnaces were constructed: Eliza Furnace (1845-46), Blacklick or Wheatfield Furnace (1846) and Buena Vista (1848). All the furnaces failed due to several reasons: the cost of shipping the iron by wagon to the PA Canal at Ninevah; the poor quality of local iron ore; the failure of the Pennsylvania Railroad to go through the Blacklick Valley; the use of outdated technology, and the discovery of the Mesabi Iron Ore Range in Minnesota.

1857 to 1892 – The Silent Era

At the closing of the Buena Vista Furnace and the Blacklick/Wheatfield Furnace in 1856 the Blacklick Valley entered a period of little human activity. The forests harvested for charcoal production re-grew and scatterings of settlers moved into the area. For the most part this was a time of renewal, waiting and silence until the next major activities: railroading, timbering and coal mining, would begin. During this period, large tracts of land, originally purchased by the iron speculators changed hands several times.

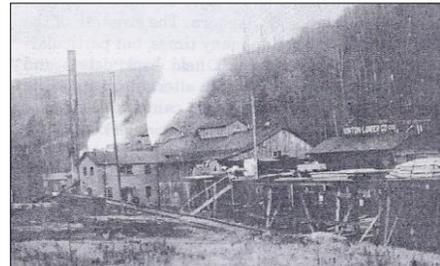
Grist Mills – 1773 to 1940s

Grist mills were some of the earliest and longest operating small industries to operate in the Blacklick Valley. Water to power the mills was abundant in numerous streams and creeks. William Bracken established the first mill in Indiana County at Dilltown in 1773. Other grist mills operated at Bell's Mills near Josephine; Hoskinson's Mill at Heshbon; Red Mill and White Mill on the North Branch of Blacklick Creek. The mill at Heshbon operated until the 1940s; its last owner was R.V. Clawson.

A lawsuit was filed in the early 1900s by the owners of the Dilltown Grist Mill against the mining companies. The pollution of Blacklick Creek by mining caused the water to be unsuitable for the grist mill, effectively putting it out of business. No record of the outcome of the lawsuit has been located but this was most likely the first environmental lawsuit filed over activity in the Blacklick Valley.

The Lumber Era - 1890s to 1914

Natural resources drew people to the Blacklick Valley, including large stands of hardwoods and pines. During the iron furnace era hardwoods were harvested for charcoal, at that time hemlock was not significantly harvested. Charcoal production resulted in the harvesting of large tracts of trees; a typical iron furnace would use the equivalent of about one acre of hardwood forest every few days.



Vinton Lumber Co. at Rexis, c. 1906

In the forty years after the furnaces ceased operating the forests re-grew and lumber companies were attracted to the valley. They were seeking hardwoods, white pine, hemlock and tanning bark. A lumber boom occurred in Twin Rocks and Vintondale in the 1890s. Major purchasers of lumber included the railroads and the burgeoning coal industry. Several companies established large sawmills including the Vinton Lumber Company, Johnson & Company and the Vintondale Planing Mill. Much of the land was purchased from the Cambria Iron Company.

The Vinton Lumber Company operated a large sawmill at the site of the present-day Rexis Access Area of the Ghost Town Trail. This sawmill was capable of sawing

100,000 to 200,000 board feet of lumber per day. The VLC eventually constructed 19 houses and an office in Rexis for its operations in addition to its mill. An 1899 fire destroyed the mill but it was quickly rebuilt. A mill pond on the North Branch of Blacklick Creek was used to store logs. A 1901 newspaper account reported a 2 ½ pound trout caught in the millpond. Today, trout are found in the upper reaches of the North Branch of Blacklick Creek.

Getting logs to the mill was made possible by the construction of the Blacklick & Yellow Creek Railroad, which began operations in 1904 on the North Branch of Blacklick Creek. The Vinton Lumber Company ceased operations in 1907 and moved to Kentucky. The BL&YC Railroad was sold in 1910 to J. Heil Weaver and B. Dawson Colman. The BL&YC line was only 10 miles long at the time but it was eventually extended. In 1911 it was chartered as the Cambria & Indiana Railroad.

Natural Disasters

Nature has played a major role in shaping both the environmental and human history of the Blacklick Valley. Major floods in 1888, 1889, 1936, 1977 and 1996 along with many smaller floods literally changed the course of Blacklick Creek and affected many people's lives. The 1888 flood, one year before the famous Johnstown Flood, resulted in the loss of several covered bridges including a large covered bridge at Buena Vista.

The Flood of July 19-20, 1977 caused significant damage in the Blacklick Valley and ultimately contributed to the railroad's decision to abandon rail service. One person lost their life in Dilltown and the communities of Nanty Glo, Vintondale, Dilltown and Black Lick were all seriously affected. The state eventually constructed flood control levees in Nanty Glo and Dilltown many years after the 1977 flood. Three railroad bridges destroyed by the flood have since been replaced with trail bridges on the Ghost Town Trail.



The loss of the American Chestnut tree, due to the chestnut blight, was another significant natural disaster. Just prior to 1900 and into the 1930s large stands of Chestnut trees succumbed to the blight. New strains of disease-resistant chestnuts are being developed – in time maybe Chestnut trees will once again grow on Chestnut Ridge.

“Before the turn of the century, the eastern half of the United States was dominated by the American chestnut. Because it could grow rapidly and attain huge sizes, the tree was often the outstanding visual feature in both urban and rural landscapes. The wood was used wherever strength and rot-resistance was needed. In colonial America, chestnut was a preferred species for log cabins, especially the bottom

rot-prone foundation logs. The edible nut was also a significant contributor to the rural economy. Hogs and cattle were often fattened for market by allowing them to forage in chestnut-dominated forests.” - American Chestnut Foundation

The Railroad Era - 1893 to 2005

“Few people who have not been in the Blacklick Valley recently would be able to recognize the wilderness that it was a few years ago. Prior to 1893, when the Pennsylvania Railroad Company extended the Ebensburg & Cresson Branch to Vintondale, the country which the road traverses was wild mountain land. No effort had been made to till the soil along the Blacklick and miles and miles could be traveled without seeing a single habitation.”

The extension of the railroad, as if by magic, transformed the valley into live, hustling communities and busy hives of industry. Sawmills were created to turn the giant trees of the forest into lumber. Many coal mines were opened, so that the Blacklick region might yield up its vast mineral wealth to the busy mills and factories of the East. New towns and villages sprung up, as if by the magician’s wand, to house and care for the many workmen and artisans who found employment among its inhospitable hills. To-day thousands of tons of coal are being shipped from this prosperous valley, the people are happy and contented, and no more promising coal region exists in Pennsylvania. And it is only in its infancy.”

*Charles Hasson, The Weekly Tribune (Johnstown, PA)
January 29, 1904*

Ebensburg & Blacklick Railroad



The next railroad to enter the Blacklick Valley after the BL&YC was the Ebensburg & Blacklick Railroad, a subsidiary of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The E&BL arrived in Ebensburg in 1892 and to Vintondale in 1893. By 1900 the line was extended to Dilltown and by 1904 to Black Lick. Near Josephine the line joined the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railroad. The BR&P acquired track rights on the E&BL

to ship coal and coke from mines in the Blacklick Valley to the Lackawanna steel mills near Buffalo. Passenger service was also provided until the early 1930s. The photo above shows the “Mountain Goat” which provided passenger service between Blairsville and Ebensburg.

The Cambria & Indiana Railroad

The C&I, formerly the BL&YC, eventually serviced 23 mines in Cambria and Indiana Counties. It also serviced the Ebensburg Sand, Clay and Stone Company which operated a quarry on the Rexis Branch near Red Mill, from 1920 until WWII. Concrete foundations of the quarry tipple and buildings are still evident.



C&I Railroad ‘Hootlebug’ offered passenger service on their line.

By 1962 the C&I was serving only four mines, but when Bethlehem Mines opened Mine 33 near Ebensburg and Barnes & Tucker opened a large mine at Stiles in 1965 things began to improve. The line continued to operate for another 40 years until Mine 33 closed. After its demise, much of the line was donated to the Cambria County Conservation & Recreation Authority to become part of the regional trail system. Four miles of the C&I line are now part of the Ghost Town Trail.

The C&I Railroad was a successful and highly profitable railroad - considered to be one of the finest short line railroads to ever operate in the country. At one time the little C&I owned more coal cars than any other railroad in the United States.

The Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh Railroad

The Buffalo, Rochester and Pittsburgh Railroad secured track rights to operate in the Blacklick Valley from the E&BL. It was the primary railroad in the valley hauling coal and coke from major mines in Vintondale, Wehrum, Claghorn and other locations to Lackawanna, NY.

The final railroad to operate in the Blacklick Valley was Norfolk Southern. In 2005 the Norfolk Southern sold its remaining 13 miles of railroad property from Black Lick to Dias, ending the railroad era in the valley. By the fall of 2005 the 13 miles were converted to a popular, and especially scenic section, of the Ghost Town Trail.

Coal Mining



Nothing has impacted the environmental conditions and lives of the people of the Blacklick Valley more than coal. Both underground and surface mining have occurred here, much of it before environmental laws were enacted leaving streams tainted orange and lifeless from mine drainage.

Malcolm Cowley once wrote of the Blacklick Valley, *"It was if my country had been occupied by an invading army which had wasted resources of the hills, ravaged the forests with fire and steel, and now was retiring without booty."*

Large mines in Nanty Glo (first known as Glenglade), Twin Rocks, Vintondale, Wehrum and Claghorn reached their peak of production in 1918. Nanty Glo alone had five separate coal mines; the largest was the Heisley Mine which employed 1,130 workers. Mining production decreased after WWI but revived again during WWII.

The Vintondale #6 mine closed in 1968. Many companies closed older mines rather than comply with new environmental regulations, especially the costly treatment of acid mine water. Coal production in the Blacklick Valley continued to a lesser scale in

the intervening years and still occurs from time to time. Some surface mining is currently taking place on State Game Land 79 near Vintondale. Large areas near the Oneida Mine Road are used for fly ash disposal from nearby power plants.

The Influence of Warren Delano III



No individual shaped the fortunes of the Blacklick Valley more than Warren Delano III. From the 1890s until his death in 1920 Warren Delano III was the principle owner and financial backer of six coal mines, along with extensive mine facilities and company housing that existed in the communities of Vintondale, Wehrum and Claghorn. It was under Delano's influence that the Blacklick Valley became a major coal producing area and the exporter of coke from Vintondale to the steel mills in Lackawanna, New York.

Delano was the maternal uncle of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Delano, through his company employees and police force, controlled the coal towns with an 'iron fist' to keep out the union and control life in the towns. Ironically his nephew, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, would enact labor laws as President to strengthen unions and worker's bargaining rights.

Delano died in a horse accident in 1920 yet his influence continued for many years afterward. In 1922 Vintondale garnered national attention for the oppressive practices of its coal and iron police. By the early 1930s the union in Vintondale was officially certified, making Vintondale one of the last mines to be unionized in the region. The sale of the Buena Vista Furnace in 1957 by the Delano Coal Company to the Indiana County Historical Society finally ended the Delano influence in the Blacklick Valley.

Clarence Claghorn was employed as the first superintendent of the Vinton Colliery Company. Claghorn played a major role in determining the fate of Delano's ventures. Claghorn was a mining engineer, innovator and highly accomplished individual. He attempted early long wall mining methods in Vintondale and presented papers at meetings of mining engineers. He supervised the construction of the towns, mines, associated buildings and all aspects of the towns. A newspaper account described Mr. Claghorn as, "Monarch of all he surveys - there is no man that does not owe fealty to him, directly or indirectly, for the position he holds. His authority is absolute". The town of Claghorn was named in his honor.



Left: a photograph of the coke oven construction in Vintondale, c. 1906. Clarence Claghorn supervised all aspects of construction of the towns and mine facilities for Warren Delano III. Eventually 152 coke ovens would operate in Vintondale.

The Ghost Towns

The abrupt closure of the Wehrum mine in 1929 resulted in the creation of the largest of the 'ghost towns' in the Blacklick Valley. Wehrum once had 230 homes, a bank, company store, hotel, jail, post office, school and two churches. Other ghost towns located in the valley include: Claghorn, Dias, Scott Glen, Amerford, Lackawanna #3, Bracken (also known as Weber) and Buela.

Henry Wehrum (*shown at right*) dreamed that Wehrum would be a major coke producing facility, but coke production never occurred in Wehrum. Henry Wehrum was dismissed by the company in 1903 and died in 1906 in Buffalo, NY - his name lives on in a town that no longer exists.



This 1939 photo aerial shows the abandoned town of Wehrum. Streets and the layout of the town are still evident, ten years after the town's demise.

Although some foundations remain in Wehrum today, most of the area, except for the large bony pile, is now overgrown and wooded.

The current highway bridge, reconstructed in 2016, is located upstream of the bridge shown in this photo.

The large building appearing on the left side of the photo was the Wehrum School. It remained in use into the 1960s.

The Environmental Cost of Coal

The economic benefits of coal mining have not come without a cost to the environment. Abandoned mine drainage, before the enactment of environmental regulations, caused extensive stream pollution and the widespread loss of fish and other aquatic species.

For many years, the valley was dotted with mine refuse piles (known as bony or gob piles) that provided a stark visual reminder of what was left behind. By the 1980s the refuse piles were being re-mined as a source of coal for cogeneration plants. A few refuse piles remain, silent sentinels to a time when coal was king here.



Tourism and the Environmental Era - 1991 and Beyond



Beginning in 1991, the creation of the Ghost Town Trail led to a growing interest in improving the environment of the Blacklick Valley. Trail developers hoped that getting people to the trail to see the environmental conditions in the valley would create interest in working to advocate for improving the setting of the trail.

The creation of the Blacklick Creek Watershed Association and the on-going efforts of its members has been the primary force in several major remediation projects. Much work remains, but environmental conditions in the Blacklick Valley have improved in recent times and the valley's future is now brighter than it once was.

A 2009 economic impact study reported that the trail has a regional impact of \$1.8 million dollars per year. This figure will grow as the trail continues to become more well-known and attracts more visitors.

Ebensburg, at the upper reaches of the Blacklick Valley, once prospered in the late 1800s as a summer mountain resort for wealthy visitors, including Andrew Carnegie and the Vanderbilts.

People came then to enjoy the fresh mountain air and majestic scenery. Nearly 125 years later, people have returned to this area to relax and refresh themselves in a valley that is gradually undergoing a transformation.



Nanty Glo, 1937

Malcolm Cowley envisioned the rebirth of the Blacklick Valley. In 1929 he wrote:

"I had no fear of what would come. The hills had shown a power of recuperation; the trees were creeping back into the desolate choppings where fire had raged; the fields were resting for other tasks under a blanket of white-tip and goldenrod. The people, too, felt a common aim; they would find other resources inevitably."

*- Malcolm Cowley, My Countryside, Then and Now
Harper's Weekly January 1929.*

The rich history of the Blacklick Valley is a compelling story – one worth telling and preserving for our time and future generations.

Informational handout prepared by Ed Patterson, Indiana County Parks & Trails