



IRONTON RAIL-TRAIL

Historical Tour of the Ironton Rail-Trail

23 HISTORIC SITES

Whitehall Township • Coplay • Pennsylvania

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Text researched and written by Karen Gensey of the Whitehall Historical Preservation Society.

The tour below visits historic sites in close proximity to the Ironton Rail-Trail, presented in tour order.

1 Ironton Railroad, through Ironton, Ormrod, Egypt, Coplay, Hokendauqua, West Catasauqua.

A charter was granted to the Ironton Railroad in March 1859. It began operation on May 24, 1860. The objective was to connect with the Lehigh Valley Railroad to facilitate transportation of iron ore mined along its line (Ironton) to the local blast iron furnaces in Hokendauqua, Coplay and Catasauqua. The Thomas Iron Co. purchased the Ironton Railroad in 1882.

After the establishment of several cement plants in the late 1800s, the Ironton Railroad served the cement industry. Lehigh Valley Railroad and Reading Railroad took over the Ironton Railroad in 1925. Sections of track were abandoned, the last two sections, Coplay to Ormrod and from West Catasauqua to Egypt, were abandoned on July 13, 1984. The former rail bed is now the Ironton Rail-Trail.

2 American Cement Company and A.C.C. Vault, Whitehall Parkway, access via Chestnut Street.

The first cement plant known as Egypt Mills began operation in 1884 on the North side of Chestnut Street. Shortly afterward, it was sold to the American Cement Co. The vault also located on the North side of Chestnut Street was used to store the company's documents and payroll. The ruins of structures on your right were the cement mills where quarry stone was burned in kilns to produce clinker and ground into cement. They were (in order from west to east): Giant Mills #1 & #2, built in 1895 (Boyko Petroleum property); the Pennsylvania Mill, built in 1889; the Columbia Mill, built in 1892 (named in honor of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America); and the Central Mill, built in 1903.

The structures on your left were stockhouses and

baghouses. The smaller structure was Egypt's first fire engine house. The company also operated a power generation plant on the property that supplied themselves as well as the village of Egypt with electricity and streetlights. After bankruptcy in 1911, the company reopened in 1913 under the name Giant Cement Co. The Central Mill was the last one in operation and was dismantled in 1929. The Reliance Mill was built in 1905 near Reliance Street and still stands.

3 Rail Yard Office Car, Whitehall Parkway, near Coplay Creek at MacArthur Road, on your left

This Pullman car was used as an office to expedite the switching of railcars loaded with iron ore, limestone, cement, or other materials to various destinations. A sister car was refurbished and is used by the WanamakerKempton Railroad.

4 Fort Deshler, Route 145 & Chestnut Streets, on your left

Adam Deshler immigrated from Switzerland in 1733 and settled in Whitehall Township. At that time, this area was the frontier, and only the brave would consider living in such an isolated place. Deshler was employed by the Provincial Government 1756-1758, during the French and Indian War. He built his home in 1760 as a fortress strong enough to serve as a refuge against Indian attack. The 2-1/2 story stone structure was 40 x 30 feet in dimension with only one door.

A row of small windows was placed high in the gable ends for maximum protection. Gun ports were concealed throughout the thick stone walls. Deshler's Fort was the key defense of the frontier during the Indian Massacre of 1763 that left nine people killed and two wounded in Whitehall alone. The wounded were taken to Deshler's. In

1899, the fort and 151 acres were sold to the Coplay Cement Co., who used it as housing for employees. The building was demolished about 1942. An historical sign on MacArthur Road identifies the site.

5 Ironton Railroad Loop (Southern) Split

This line of trackage was built in 1907 along the Coplay Creek to connect to a freight yard built at that time. This new trackage was built after the founding of Lehigh Portland Cement plant in Stiles, which you will see shortly, so that it could ship supplies and products to and from its plant.

6 Kern Homestead, on your left

George Kern settled on this land in 1737. His son, Peter, married the daughter of Adam Deshler. This stone homestead was built about 1820. It is said that the Kern family operated a distillery that produced fine quality applejack from plum trees growing along the waterway.

7 Lehigh Portland Cement Company, on your right

The company was founded by Gen. Harry C. Trexler. The first plant, Mill A, was built in Ormrod in 1897. In order to increase production, Mill B was built in 1900 near the village of Stiles on a portion of the Eli Hoffman Farm. The plant was the catalyst for the development of the village of Stiles. Production began in 1901. The mill's rotary kilns produced 3600 barrels of cement daily, shipped via Ironton Railroad.

MacArthur Road passes over a portion of the plant's 21-acre quarry. A railroad bridge still exists over the Coplay Creek near Columbia Street to access Mill B. Operations were ceased in 1927 because it was one of the older, less modern facilities operated by the company. It was officially abandoned in 1930. Most of the structures and large smoke stack that comprised Mill B were demolished in 1999 in order to build

a retail grocery store.

8 Jacob Mickley/Valentine Weaver Homestead & Quarry, on your right

Weaver was a mining agent for the Crane Iron Co. (Catasauqua) and later became Superintendent of the Thomas Iron Company's Lock Ridge Furnace in Alburtis. Weaver married Mary Mickley, daughter of Jacob, thus acquiring this property. A quarry on the property supplied limestone to the Atlas Cement Co. in Northampton.

9 Biery Train Yards, across Coplay Creek from Eberhart Road, on your right

The Biery Yards were constructed in 1907 when a branch line of the Ironton Railroad was built to include service to the Lehigh Portland Cement Company. Biery Yard was established to facilitate switching cars between the Ironton Railroad, the Lehigh Valley Railroad and the Catasauqua & Fogelsville Railroad, all of which connected just south of this point. The Ironton Railroad's freight station had been located in Coplay prior to 1910 when it was relocated to the Biery Yards.

10 Ferdinand Eberhart Homestead & Quarry, "Cameron Tract", on your right

Eberhart Road was named after German immigrant Ferdinand Eberhart who purchased the 76-acre Miller farm. He opened a quarry where now the west end of the Pine Street Bridge rests as well as another quarry on this property we now call the "Cameron Tract." These quarries supplied limestone to the blast iron furnaces in Catasauqua and Hokendauqua. He became an expert in blasting and was the first to use dynamite in local quarries with his blasting powder called "Dualin."

11 Civil War Monument/Fairview Cemetery, 2420 Lehigh Avenue, West Catasauqua, on your right

Fairview Cemetery is the home of the first Civil War Soldier's Monument in the state of Pennsylvania. It was erected in 1866 at the deathbed request of David Thomas to his brother, Samuel, to establish a fitting tribute to honor those who fought in the Civil War. Inscribed on each of the four sides are 159 names, rank and regiment of local soldiers who served and the names of the battles in which they fought.

This Italian marble monument stands on a rise known as Lincoln's Hill, and is surrounded by four cannons. A carved American eagle with outspread wings stands at the top of the shaft, with the American flag in stone cascading down its sides. Civil War soldiers are buried near the monument as well as throughout the cemetery.

12 Lehigh Valley Railroad, entire eastern township boundary along the Lehigh River, on your right

Planning for the first railroad in the Lehigh Valley began in 1846 to connect with the anthracite coal regions lying to the north. Asa Packer purchased its controlling stock in 1851, and construction was completed in sections. The section through Whitehall Township opened on July 4, 1855. The transportation access it created served as a solid base for future industries. Later acquisitions and connections shaped an intricate rail system for passenger travel and shipments to points all over the country. LVRR's stations became the delivery point for the U.S. Mail, with destinations listed as the depot's name, i.e.

Ferndale (Fullerton), Catasauqua (West Catasauqua), Hokendauqua, Lehigh Valley (Coplay), and Whitehall Station (Cementon). Passenger service with connections to New York City, Philadelphia, and Buffalo were now possible and affordable. LVRR was best known for its fast

passenger service called the "Black Diamond Express" which began in 1896. A sharp decline in the shipment of anthracite coal and cement followed World War II. By 1962, Pennsylvania Railroad acquired 70% of LVRR's stock. It was later acquired by Conrail, and over time, sections of track were abandoned.

13 Darktown, on your right

Darktown was settled in the 1860s mainly by Irish laborers hired by the local iron companies. The character of the neighborhood was the proverbial "wrong side of the tracks" separated and isolated from the regularly employed workers who resided in the villages of Hokendauqua and Catasauqua. Taverns were not permitted in Hokendauqua, so the "groggeries" operated along Water Street. The neighborhood became known as "Darktown" shortly after the turn of the century when the villages along the main trolley route were wired for electricity. Darktown was bypassed due to its location.

14 Thomas Iron Company, Lehigh Riverfront, Hokendauqua

David Thomas established the company in 1854. It was he who perfected the method of smelting iron in blast furnaces using anthracite coal in the United States. David and his brother, Samuel Thomas, founded the village of Hokendauqua in order to provide housing for employees of the Thomas Iron Co. This company provided every necessity of life for its employees: church, school, both which still exist, and a water system. The first two blast furnaces used to smelt iron ore became operational in June and October of 1855.

Two more furnaces were added during the Civil War, and yet another two were built by 1873. The company was the first to successfully use anthracite coal to fuel the furnaces, which were 55 to 65 feet in height. By 1904, this was the largest iron company in this country. Under the

Thomas family's management, the company gained international recognition as a role model of the industry with assets reaching nearly \$4 million in 1914. Competition from the steel industry followed World War I, and the furnaces ceased production in 1927.

15 Thomas Iron Co. Office, on your left

General office and purchasing departments were located on the first floor and private offices of the Superintendents, John Thomas and David H. Thomas.

16 Thomas Iron Co. Blowing Engine House, on your right

The largest structure that still exists and can be seen today is the ruins of the 2-1/2 story blowing engine house built in 1904. This structure provided compressed air for the hot blast by a steam blowing engine for the enormous blast furnace named "Mary."

17 Thomas Iron Co. Barn, on your left

Horses and mules were used on the premises to haul narrow gauge carts from the supply house to the furnace. A blacksmith shop to care for the animals also operated on the property.

18 Ironton Railroad Office, American Legion Drive, Hokendauqua, on your left

This structure was built about 1880 for storage on the first floor, and the second floor was occupied by the Hokendauqua Library Association. It later contained offices for the Ironton Railroad. The other side of this building on which a train is painted housed the company's vault.

19 Ironton Railroad President's Home, white house at top of Legion Drive, on your left

This was the home of the Ironton Railroad's president, Samuel R. Thomas, who was the son of the Thomas Iron Company's superintendent. His hobby was meteorology and he was known for keeping accurate temperature and barometric records.

20 Thomas Mansion and Carriage House, 3229 N. Front Street, Hokendauqua, on your left

When the founder of the Thomas Iron Co., David Thomas, retired in 1867, his son, John, became Superintendent of the company. The company built this mansion for him, which he named "Pen-y-Bryn." He lived there until his death in 1897. The carriage house still remains at the rear of the property.

21 Lehigh Valley Iron Company-later known as the Coplay Iron Company, site of General Supply

Established in 1853 by Stephen Balliet & Co. Balliet died in 1854 and the company reorganized and incorporated as the Lehigh Valley Iron Co. The company owned nearly half of the land now occupied by the borough of Coplay. Its first iron was produced in 1855 from Furnace No. 1 with a 14-foot bosh and 45 feet high. Furnace No.

2 was built in 1862 and No. 3 in 1867-68. All were masonry stacks. A depression in the iron industry bankrupted the company. It reorganized in June 1878 as the Coplay Iron Co. Ltd. The company's product was mainly foundry iron. The company again filed for bankruptcy in 1890 and its assets were sold over the next several years.

22 Coplay Cement Company, vicinity of N. 2nd Street Coplay and N. Coplay Road

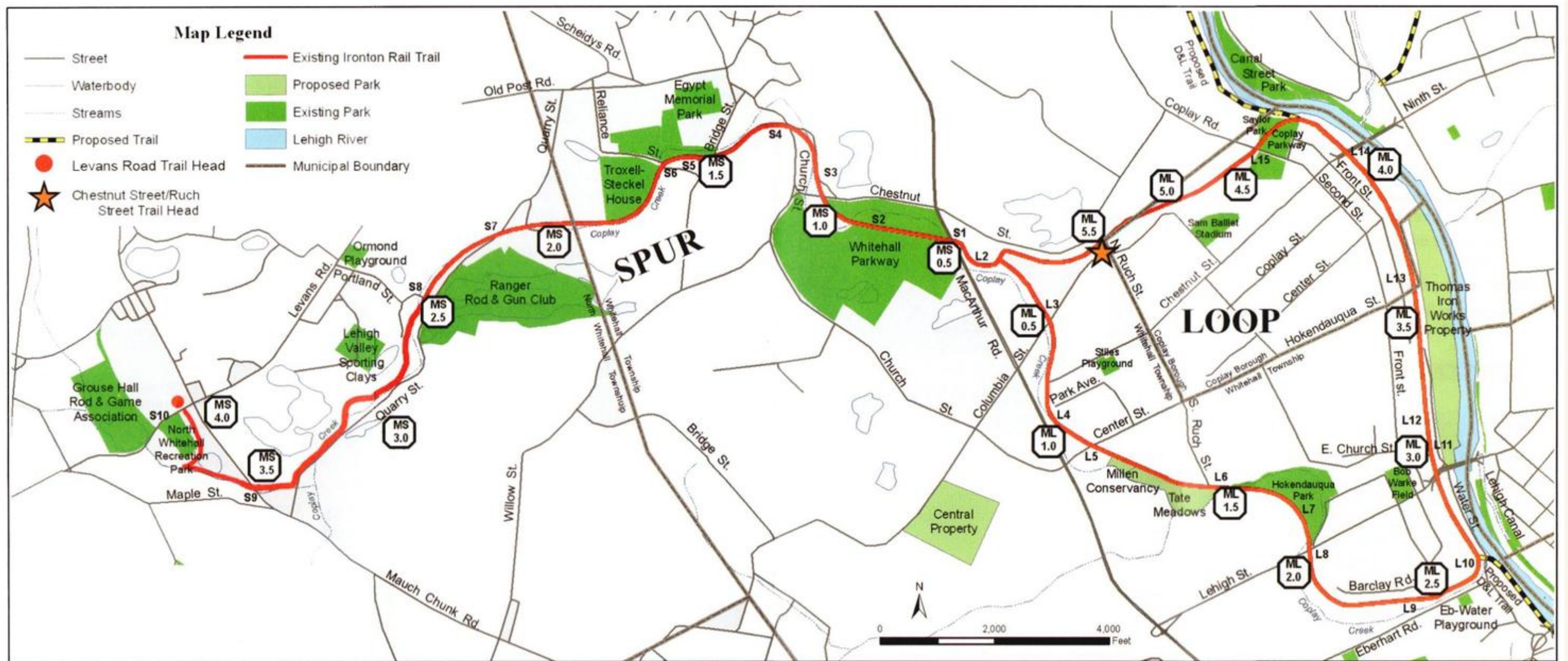
Founded in 1866 by David O. Saylor, Coplay Cement Co. operated Mill A (to your right), built in that year in the vicinity of Stone Terrace. Mill B (on your left) was built in 1892, which remains are the Schoefer kilns preserved as the Saylor Park Museum. Mill C (to your right) on the west side of Coplay Road was built in 1899 at a cost of \$400,000. David O.

Saylor patented the process of making Portland cement, and until 1885, the company was the sole producer of Portland cement in the United States. It received the highest award for quality at the Centennial exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. In 1976, Coplay Cement Co. was acquired by Essroc. Some of its structures were demolished in 1998. An Industrial Park has been developed on part of the tract along West Coplay Road.

23 Lehigh Valley Traction Company Trolley Bridge, N. Ruch Street and W. Coplay Road

The trolley trestle was built in 1900 to cross over the Ironton Railroad when the trolley line was extended to Egypt. On the south side of the tracks once stood a stone schoolhouse that served residents of the community until 1869. A nearby washhouse still exists where workers would clean up while waiting for the trolley to take them home. The remaining bridge abutment contains a memorial to Eric Shafnisky, one of the founders of the Ironton Rail-Trail and recognized for his work in researching the local history associated with the Ironton Railroad.

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MEMBERSHIP

If you would like to join our Trail as either a volunteer, a member, or a sponsor for a specific Trail activity, please contact Ray Bieak.

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