

Trips Awheel: Where to Go and How to Get There

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Cycle Route 34 (1897-1898 series)

Johnstown to Pittsburg

This last stage of a trip from Philadelphia, to the Iron City by the present writer last month. See Trips Nos. 33, 32, 31, 30 and 28.

Johnstown was known as Conemaugh until 1834; previously it had been "Conemaugh Old Town" and "John's" or "Jahn's town" – the town of Joseph Johns, Jahns or Yantz, a native of Switzerland, who came here about 1791 and whose log cabin stood near what is now the intersection of Stonycreek and Levergood streets, and before the white settler's advent, the site was occupied by Kickenapawling's Indian "town."

However slovenly the red man may seem, and undoubtedly is, with regard to the inside of his hut, he is to be credited with considerable artistic taste in the selection of its surroundings. See the magnificent valley he had chosen for his home here!

A feeling of sadness must needs mingle with our admiration for this spot, for it will be long ere the memory of that 31st of May, 1889, can pass away, when the town was almost wiped out of existence, and thousands of its inhabitants perished in the flood.

In the shadow of so appalling a disaster the present architectural aspect of Johnstown, its commercial activity and its population (which increased from 8830 in 1880 to 38,728 last year) speak volumes for American vitality and American pluck; make as long a stay as your time permits in this brave city; it supplies an object lesson which fills an American with pride as well as with heartfelt sympathy.

A CHOICE OF ROUTES.

Two itineraries, soon branching off into three, present themselves to the wagon road traveler westward from Johnstown. The southerly route, indicated by a dotted line, has been a long-standing favorite with me up to and including last year; the stroke line shows the zigzag route I followed last month; of the plain-line road I have no recent personal knowledge.

The former I described in substance as follows a year ago:

(1) TO PITTSBURG, VIA YOUNGSTOWN AND GREENSBURG.

We start out of Johnstown down Franklin street, up South street, L into the winding road that climbs up the side of the mountain on which Grand View Cemetery is located; and from the summit, among the graves, we give a last look at the gorgeous panorama of modern Johnstown, and a last thought on the misfortunes of its predecessor.

Five miles from the centre of the town, take L fork; and a mile and a half farther, after half a mile of hard climbing, bear R.

Three-quarters of a mile beyond this point, and a little way back of the road on L, is a farm which I feel I ought to point out for the benefit of any "early bird" who might have started westward from Johnstown before the regular hour for breakfast, assuming thoughtlessly that his wants could be satisfied along the road whenever they would make themselves felt.

Should you ever commit that blunder, as I did once, let me warn you that, west of this farm, you might positively starve for all the food you could obtain, for 12 long miles of mountain roads probably the most toilsome 12 miles of the whole journey from Philadelphia to Pittsburg.

OVER LAUREL HILL.

An abandoned sawmill, a solitary log hut, the wayfarer may see here and there, as he toils and molls over Laurel Hill; but there are stories afloat regarding the few human residents in those woods which make it at least advisable to refrain from seeking help at their hands.

Two miles from the aforesaid farm, turn R in the direction of the telegraph posts, if they happen to be there when you come this way (don't smile; in these parts telegraph posts are not always either "real" or "continuous quantities," my mathematical friend), and now let us brace up for the inevitable.

Up to this point the road from Johnstown is rough, yet ridable; from this onward, it is nothing more than a primitive track, reminding one of nothing so much as the Narrows between Mifflin and Lewistown in their former unimproved ruggedness.

How about training it? Away with the thought. What? The bracing air, the awful solitude, the many novel sensations of this primeval mountain, placed side by side in the balance with the coal smoke and the other so-called comforts of steam-car touring! In any case, you should have considered the question before leaving Johnstown; for no railroad track has crossed Laurel Hill at this latitude yet.

A truly magnificent landscape from yonder summit will amply reward you for your climb. You may have not a little walking going down the western slope until your cyclometer registers 9 ½ m. from the farm above mentioned. There, bear L and 2 ½ m. of a more ridable road will take you to Waterford at the foot of the mountain (18 ½ m. from start).

LIGONIER VALLEY.

They used to call it Waterford (with a very long o), but a lawyer named Boucher procured the place a postoffice, and it is now known as Boucher.

From Boucher, via Oak Grove, to Ligonier (23 m.) the road is good or fair; and here we are in the centre of the beautiful Ligonier Valley, bounded east and west respectively by Laurel Hill (which we are not likely to forget for some time) and Chestnut Ridge; north by the Conemaugh, and south by the Yough – a valley, the silent witness of many a heartrending scene in our early history; for it was a favorite with the Indian on his predatory war trips as well as the battleground of conflicting powers among the whites.

A hundred years ago this place was known as Ramseytown, a mere cluster of log houses around the old Fort Ligonier that you have read about. It is now a borough with some 800 inhabitants.

You may have heard of the Earls Ligonier of the Irish peerage, the first of whom (Earl John) was a noted field marshal in the British army at the time of Marlborough's campaigns. The name is French, and so was he; but England was never very particular about the birthplace of her auxiliaries in war – was she?

THE LAST OF THE GIANT MOUNTAINS.

A mile and a half out of Ligonier bear L, and another mile and a half further we go down to McCance, or Long Bridge, a stone-quarrying village in a deep wooded chasm on the Loyal Hanna Creek, to which we are indebted for showing us this convenient gap.

“Low sunk between the Alleghenian Hills
For many a league the sullen waters glide,
And the deep murmur of the crowded tide
With pleasing awe the wondering voyager fills.”

Thence, amid gorgeous scenery again, we climb up and up and higher still – the roadway varying from good to poor – over Chestnut Ridge. This is another long range extending from Maryland into Indiana county north of us.

YOUNGSTOWN, LATROBE.

And now we make our way down into Youngstown (32 m.), at the foot of the ridge, and we leave behind us the last mountain, though not the last hill, as will be seen presently, on our road to Pittsburg.

At the beginning of the present century Youngstown consisted of five or six huts, half of them used as inns; in 1832 the number of dwellings had increased to forty and that of the taverns to two; it now boasts some 500 inhabitants.

Two miles from Youngstown notice that X: To Latrobe R. 2 m.; to Pleasant Unity L, but pass on.

The guide books to Washington, D. C., may possibly have told you that Architect Benjamin H. Latrobe (who died seventy-six years ago) designed the first House of Representatives there, or a large part of it. Did you know that he was the designer also of the old Bank of Philadelphia and of the Bank of the United States, in our city?

One mile and a quarter beyond this X is St. Xavier on a rough but rideable elevation; and two miles ahead is Huckleberry Hill, practically our last ascent of any importance. Near its summit, amid the loose stones of its rocky bed, we take breath at Denison's Postoffice (37 ½ m.), and after another five miles' ride we climb up East Pittsburg street into the main street of Greensburg (42 ½ m.). It may not surprise you to hear that we are 1100 feet above tidewater. Fisher House is temptingly near the first corner we strike; we may do worse than alight.

GREENSBURG AND VICINITY.

Greensburg recalls brave General Greene, of the Revolution; indeed, this whole section teems with reminiscences of our early struggles.

South of this place lay the trail which Braddock followed on his way to the battlefield where he paid so dearly for his stubbornness.

Close by, on the north, was the trail selected by General Forbes, another prejudiced Britisher of the Braddock type who so managed his expedition against the French at Fort Du Quesne that he found himself fifty miles from the fort just about this time of year, without any provisions. A good thing that the French, deserted by their Indian allies, abandoned their stronghold and that young Colonel George

Washington, with his Virginia troops, secured it right way, to the greater honor and glory of the said Forbes, his commander-in-chief.

It was then (1758), as you know, that "Fort Du Quesne" was changed to "Fort Pitt;" whence our modern "Pitts-burg."

On that same Forbes road, about three miles on our right, stood Hannastown. Hanna is a common name in the north of Ireland to this day, and it was from there that Robert Hanna had come at an early date and started a shibbeen here on this out-of-the-way trail. In time there grew up around Hanna's shibbeen, something that looked more like a town than any other conglomeration of human habitations in these wilds, and when Westmoreland county was formed in 1773, Hanna's town was naturally looked to as its future seat; before nine years had passed, however, it was burned down by the savage mercenaries of the "mother county," and has never been rebuilt since.

Here in the Presbyterian cemetery at Greensburg, was buried General Arthur St. Clair. The hills of Chestnut Ridge that we crossed a while ago were his home during the closing years of his busy life.

OFF AGAIN.

From East Pittsburgh street we cross into West Pittsburgh street, a half mile up, we bear R, and away we go. No more mountains; but we'll say nothing of the hills.

"Grapeville" (47 m.) may possibly remind one of Egg Harbor Fair; Egg Harbor, however, has no such climbs as these; and its new gravel road could not be compared with this loose roadbed.

At Adamsburg, about two miles ahead, bear R. Our road is good to Irwin (52 ½ m.), but hardly keeps up the same standard beyond it.

At Circleville, nearly two miles farther, we bear R. again for Stewartsville (55 ½ m.).

A short distance north of Stewartsville is the place where Braddock encamped two days before his too memorable defeat; and right there, West Turtle Creek (our next destination), at the present borough of Braddock, is where he sneered at the tactics of Washington's Provincial troops and insisted on fighting Indians in a virgin forest according to the rules of European warfare on an open battlefield.

This tremendous hill, going down to Turtle Creek Station (62 m.), and the equally stiff climb that awaits us on the other side of the village, give us a faint idea of what this vicinity must have been in its primitive condition.

From this eminence do not fail to give a look at the surrounding country.

Half a mile from the creek, take care to bear R up the hill, and now a series of more or less pleasant ups and downs take us to Wilkinsburg (68 m.).

Here a sudden change in the condition of the roadbed makes us realize the fact that this is almost a suburb of Pittsburgh.

Three miles of luxurious riding separate us from East Liberty and, there, it is 5 miles to the centre of the Iron City, say 76 m. from Johnstown by this itinerary.

(2) THROUGH LAUREL HILL ALONG THE CONEMAUGH.

Had anything been wanting to influence the choice of our route out of Johnstown, this year, the opening of a brand new pike between that city and Nineveh a day or two before our coming was sure to win the casting vote. Clearing Laurel Hill on a gravel pike! What next?

Should you determine to follow our example, come down Main street as far as the Capital Hotel; there turn sharp R and for 1 3/4m. from this corner (let us make it our starting point) keep company with the trolley car along the smooth brick pavement, and don't cross the Conemaugh on R.

At the end of the said pavement turn sharp L over R. R. tracks into Fairfield avenue, up the avenue to yonder bridge, R into the second street beyond it (Strayer street), and three-quarters of a mile of poor riding (which may be a thing of the past when you come this way) takes us to the beginning of the much-talked of new pike.

This new claimant to public favor, making a bee line around the flank of one of the limbs of Laurel Hill is indeed an ideal driveway; the northern portion of the mountain on the other side of the gap, the precipitous ravine beneath, where the Conemaugh first showed man a level course across the range, make up for the wayfarer a beauteous diorama which brings him to Nineveh (Seward P. O.) altogether too soon.

"Too soon" for more reasons than one; for here (10 m from start) the new pike gives way to the old-time poor, loose, stony roadway.

Turn L into the village for the distance of one block; R past railroad station and on to the last house on the street; there a post on L tells you that New Florence is 5 miles off in that direction. Half that distance you will find pretty fair; as a consolation for the remainder, let me tell you that there is every probability of the Johnstown pike being continued all the new to New Florence at an early date.

THROUGH CHESTNUT RIDGE OR OVER IT?

When you strike the universal village-crossroad in New Florence, opposite Queen Hotel (15 m), inquire for the best road to Blairsville; if the answer is not "The railroad, sir," you are fated to see a white crow that day, for sure.

Now the railroad track has its advantages; it is level, for one thing, and the scenery through the Chestnut Ridge Narrows goes far to compensate for the discomforts of cinder path riding.

Still, if you are bent on genuine cycling and on seeing the country, a detour by way of Washington will prove but 1 ½ m longer than the tortuous railroad track; let us try it.

We ride through New Florence, past the R. R. station, cross the Conemaugh, cross another R. R. track, bearing L as we do so; and now for a long hill with a good road.

From its summit (16 ½ m) the road keeps G or F; and, although it gives an occasion dip downward, its general tendency is still "excelsior," until, after taking care to bear R at fork (19 m) where the sign is at present almost obliterated – we reach Washington (20 1/2 m) on what is locally known as the "old pike."

This little hamlet has been ordered to give up its honored name owing to the prevalence of the latter throughout the country, and is now officially designated Clyde. It possesses no hotel of course, but try this neat little house at the cross-road and see what a meal Mrs. Schaffer can fix up for you.

The "old pike" into which we turn L here is decidedly rocky on the whole, and uniformly hilly. About 5 m from Washington we reach the apex of Chestnut Ridge with its glorious views (my pen will still insist in jotting down those words, meaningless as they are by the side of the reality) and when our cyclometers mark 31 m from start we are in Blairsville.

It looks very direct on the map from Blairsville to Pittsburg via New Alexandria, Murrys ville and Wilkinsburg, a distance of thirty-eight miles, but it is very poor riding. Indeed, when I went out of my course to Murrys ville (as shown by the stroke line on the map), so as to see things for myself in that section of the pike, I met two cyclists from Pittsburg en route to Philadelphia, who could scarcely express their utter disgust for it, and one of whom had had several falls in the course of eighteen miles due to no other cause, he said, than the wretched condition of the road.

Considerably better is the Saltzburg and Sardis road.

VIA SALTZBURG AND SARDIS.

Just before passing the station at Blairsville, notice on R en passant the bicycle repair shop of I. D. Waterman; go straight through to the river, but turn sharp R before crossing it.

4 m. out of town, going downhill, keep L (R to Evansville). 1 ½ m. farther, don't go into Livermore; turn sharp R round a farm and then L.

How about the road? So good, generally, that, for the first time in a long while, we indulge in considerable coasting.

Lest you should lose your way into Tunnelton on L, Clarksburg on R, or at any other of the numerous turns and crossings follow the telegraph posts up and down, and up, up, up you get into Saltzburg (45 ½ m.).

THE END IN SIGHT.

Turn L at Church, past R R station, over bridge, R along river and up a long, steep hill, part of which you must needs walk.

At this fork, where the branch R goes to Avonmore, we turn L and away we go, keeping up the hilly tenor of our way along fair roads.

At Oakland Crossroads, where I gave a run down to Murrys ville for the purpose aforesaid, keep straight on westward to Sardis (61 m.).

This section is thinly inhabited and Sardis is but a hamlet. Should you be on the lookout for a store, there is one, here on L a few yards from the crossroad.

This L turn is an excellent road to Murrys ville (5 m. distant); R to Logan's Ferry; straight on to Pittsburg (18 m. off).

With few exceptions, we find the riding F, or positively G, as we pedal along through Centre; past the Strikers' Camp 2 miles beyond it; down into Armstrong a couple of miles farther; and down (a long down) to Sandy Creek.

From this, a stone road now in the course of construction will shortly supply a pleasant winding up of this route right into East Liberty, even though, part of it will necessitate some walking owing to its steepness.

PITTSBURG.

When Colonel Bouquet made his historic return of the number of houses, etc., at Fort Pitt, on April 14, 1761, the inhabitants, including the officers, soldiers and their families, numbered exactly 332. Within the next fifty years a population of 5000 gathered around the place; by 1830 it had increased to 12,542; in 1840 to 21,715; in 1853 to 110,241; in 1880 to 156,389, and at the time of the 1890 census it numbered no less than 238,617.

To the gigantic activity of Pittsburg this is no place to do justice. Let me just record here, as an illustration of the spirit to which its development is due, an anecdote once told by Clay before Congress.

To illustrate the commercial habits and enterprise of the American people, he said, he would relate the story of the vessel built and cleared out at Pittsburg for Leghorn, in Italy. When she arrived at her place of destination the master presented his papers to the custom house officer, who instantly declined to believe him, declared that his paper were forged; that there was no such port as Pittsburg in the world and that his vessel must be confiscated. The trembling captain laid before the officer the map of the United States, directed him to the Gulf of Mexico, pointed out the mouth of the Mississippi led him a thousand miles up the river to the mouth of the Ohio, and thence another thousand up the latter to Pittsburg. "There, sir," he said, "is the port from whence my vessel cleared out." Before the Italian had seen the map, he would as readily have believed this vessel had been navigated from the moon.

A.E.