

Fayette Station Audio Tour Transcript

Welcome, to New River Gorge National River and the National Coal Heritage Trail.

You are about to embark on a drive down Fayette Station Road. a small winding road that takes you to a bridge at the bottom of the New River Gorge.

For about 100 years, this route was the only way to cross the New River in this immediate area without getting wet.

In 1977, the arching modern New River Gorge Bridge was built up on Route 19 And Fayette Station Road lost its importance as a vital link in the area.

Before starting your drive and beginning your adventure, please take a moment to listen to a few tips that will make your experience safer and more enjoyable along the way.

First, to keep in sync with the interpretive story, please maintain a speed between 15 and 25 mph after you get on Fayette Station Road.

The second tip is for those listening to a cd instead of an audio tape, whenever the program says to stop the recording, just turn off your cd player, when you turn it back on, the cd will resume playing at the correct point.

When you take this route without stopping along the way, the trip will take you about 30 minutes. A far cry from the 30 seconds or less it takes to cross the river on the highway today.

If, however, you stop along the way to read the interpretive exhibits at each pull off, plan on taking an hour to enjoy the tour.

Before leaving the parking lot of Canyon Rim Visitor Center you may want to set your cars' trip reader to zero. This will help you find your way on the map that accompanies this program.

Now, let's begin the journey.

As you leave the parking lot, turn left to get back on Route 19.

Take a right on Route 19 and go north approximately 3/10 of a mile to the first road on the right.

Take this right onto Lansing-Edmond Road. you will see signs that point out the route as you drive along. Stop the recording now, until you turn onto Lansing-Edmond Road.

New River Gorge National River was established by congress in 1978 as part of the National Park System to conserve and interpret the outstanding natural, scenic, and historic resources of the gorge and protect the New River itself as it flows through this part of West Virginia.

You probably have already heard that New River Gorge National River is renowned for its world class whitewater boating, hiking, warm water fishing and rock climbing.

But it is also known for its abandoned coal mines, company towns, tipples and coke ovens which are remnants of the late 19th and early 20th century industrial age when coal was king, and the railroad was the lifeline of the gorge.

Watch for a store on the right at the intersection of Route 82, turn right here onto Route 82 and immediately take the left fork.

This road will take you down into the gorge.

100 years ago, the New River Gorge was a bustling noisy smokey place with thousands of residents. New towns sprang up around every bend of the river.

Trains chugged through the gorge and smoke from continuously burning coke ovens clouded the valley, obscuring the beautiful views that we see today.

Clues to the industrial past can easily be overlooked as one drives in this area, because plants have overgrown the decaying structures of towns and mine sites.

This tour, however, is designed to help you catch a glimpse of the vitality of the region as you travel down one winding road into the past.

You will first travel through Lansing. A small town that began as a farming and coal mining community.

During the summer, it may be difficult to see the New River itself from Fayette Station Road because of all the dense foliage.

But this rich plant diversity is a part of what makes this park a national treasure.

New River Gorge National River lies at the core of a globally significant unfragmented forest and contains the most diverse flora of any river gorge in central and southern Appalachia.

The park provides essential habitats for endangered mammals, rare birds, and amphibians.

As you drive Fayette Station Road and enjoy exploring the many other delights of this national park, please minimize your impact here and leave the park in the condition that you found it. Respect wildlife, dispose of waste properly and be considerate of other visitors.

Stop the recording now until you leave or pass the first pull off just beyond Lansing

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Long before the age of dinosaurs about 300 million years ago, trees ferns fungi mosses and lichens flourished in this area in a vast flat humid swamp.

When the plants in these dense forests died, they decomposed in swampy stagnant water.

Over millions of years, their remains became peat bogs and ultimately coal.

You see, coal is peat that is naturally hardened and turned into rock underground.

The process is called coalification.

As layers of sediments thousands of feet thick covered the peat bogs, the temperature of the bog layers gradually rose because of all the pressure.

The peat in buried bogs cooked at very high temperatures for millions of years. In the New River area, the peat bogs became a high grade of coal, which would ultimately be used to fuel steel mills, heat homes, and fire the boilers of trains and ships around the world.

The coal in the gorge was deep underground and inaccessible until about 100 million years ago. When an ancient river called the Teays started to flow north from the uplifted Appalachians.

Through millions of years, several ice ages and thaws the Teays flowed through this area and ultimately west to the Mississippi, carving down and exposing layer upon layer of sedimentary rock such as sandstone shale and coal.

The twisting path of the New River follows the historical course of the ancestral Teays. And continues to carve and erode the gorge today.

As you approach the New River Gorge Bridge, you will see several pull offs on the left. If you want to take the opportunity to learn more about the bridge, geology rock climbing and coal mining of this area, park and read the interpretive exhibits.

The road is narrow here so please be careful if you walk along the road between the pull offs. Stop the recording now and enjoy the views.

Restart the recording as you pass under the New River Gorge Bridge.

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Native Americans and settlers in the area knew about the coal in the gorge because it was so visible, and they may have gathered it for their own use.

However, the large coal seams in this remote region, lay basically undisturbed until 1873, when the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway completed the railroad through the gorge, opening a gateway to the rugged wilderness and untapped coal fields.

Suddenly, the eastern seaports of the mid-Atlantic states were connected, via the gorge, to the industrial cities of the Midwest, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago.

Astute businessmen seized this golden opportunity and immediately started setting up coal mining operations.

Now there was a way for New River Gorge coal to reach its market.

The railroad literally became a highway through New River Gorge, connecting towns that were relatively inaccessible by any other means.

The population increased dramatically. African Americans migrated from the south and thousands of poor European immigrants streamed into southern West Virginia in search of work, riches, and a better life.

The railroad pulsed life into the area as mining companies built towns with houses stores hotels and railroad depots.

Residents could easily get the morning paper from Richmond or Cincinnati the same day it was printed because of the number of trains that ran through the gorge each day.

In 1910, for example, more than 200 people a day traveled through Thurmond's new train station, which made more money for the C&O Railroad than any other place on the line.

You should be approaching a very tight hairpin turn to the left. If you want to end your tour of Fayette Station Road, you can return to Route 19 by turning right onto Burma rd.

Water trickles down the steep cliffs and hillsides of the gorge through permeable layers of shale, sandstone and coal feeding the streams and creeks that empty into the river.

Originating in the mountains, near Blowing Rock, North Carolina, the New River flows north until it merges with the Gauley River.

Together, the New and the Gauley Rivers form the Kanawha River which flows into the Ohio River and ultimately the Mississippi River.

Water molecules from springs in the gorge may eventually end up in the Gulf of Mexico.

Water is a precious resource, and the New River watershed was once blessed with naturally good water quality.

Unfortunately, some of the small streams in the area are polluted by untreated human sewage, garbage, and residual minerals.

Such pollution impacts habitats and lives. Not only locally but hundreds of miles away.

You might see people collecting water here in large containers. For some people, the spring is the only source of drinking water. But local authorities cannot give their stamp of approval because the water has not been treated.

Here, water is passing through the old Ajax mine. Which was owned and operated by the Ames mining company along with the Michigan, Elmo, and Sunnyside mines.

Its 3-foot-thick coal seam was part of the Sewell coal bed. The old mine shafts and tunnels are now a honeycomb of underwater passages.

At the spring, you are over halfway to the bottom of the gorge.

You've descended more than 500 feet so far and have another 500 to go. Imagine travelling down this road in a horse drawn wagon in the late 1800's.

The road had 2-way traffic and wasn't paved. Like today, the road was subject to constant mudslides, and it wasn't plowed in the winter.

The main line of the C&O Railway was built right along the banks of the New River. With branch lines extending along up many of the New River's tributaries.

Companies located their mining operations along the main line with mine openings or portals high up along the steep walls of the gorge.

Long chutes or conveyors transported the coal down to the tracks. By 1905, approximately 75 mines were operating in the gorge between Thurmond, 15 miles south of there, and Hawk's Nest, 4 miles north.

To supply the mines and house the suddenly expanding population, more than 13 towns sprang up from here to Thurmond. That's about 1 per mile. Two of these towns are at the bottom of the gorge on either side of the bridge.

Fayette on this side of the river and South Fayette on the other side of the bridge.

Except for the foundation for the Bloom Company store in Fayette, the railroad tracks on both sides of the river and the bridge itself there are few clues that this was an area bustling with activity 100 years ago.

The town of Fayette can trace its roots to Martin Bloom an enterprising man who sold the rights away to his property to the C&O Railway.

Thinking of his family's future, Bloom negotiated an agreement that allowed him and his descendants to ride the trains for free as long as they were running.

The deal lasted for more than a century. Bloom owned the Fayette Coal and Coke Company the Fayette mine and the Bloom Company store.

By 1875, 2 years after the first train traveled through the gorge, Bloom's town of Fayette was already supporting a post office train depot, store, and a saloon.

You should now be approaching the tracks of the main line for the CSX Railroad, the Fayette Station Bridge, and the New River.

Please stay off the railroad tracks for your own safety. The rail line is still very active today.

Since the land on this side of the bridge is privately owned, don't park here. Instead, drive across the bridge and continue 100 yds to the parking areas on the right.

Then if you wish, take time to walk back to the bridge, to explore the river, enjoy the views and learn more about the bridge's history and the two towns that flanked it here at the bottom of the gorge, Fayette, and South Fayette.

Restroom facilities are located over the wooden bridge at the second parking area if you're taking this tour between April and October, you may see rafts and kayaks on the river.

Whitewater boating is a very popular activity.

Large boulders from the eroding sandstone walls coupled with the steep gradient of the land, create wild, challenging and sometimes dangerous rapids.

Sometimes upstream south of Thurmond, the river offers long pools and class I, II, and III rapids, which are suitable for intermediate whitewater paddlers.

North or downstream of Thurmond, the river narrows into class IV and V rapids which are more technical and challenging. these rapids are only suitable for advanced and expert paddlers, or for those boating with a qualified river guide.

Fayette Station Rapid, which you can see downstream from the bridge is rated class IV, depending on water levels.

Stop the recording now and turn it back on after you have driven under the CSX railroad bridge and passed the wolf creek parking area in your car.

Although only the CSX railroad bridge remains today, south Fayette was one of the first stops established along the C&O Railway main line.

People who wanted to go to Fayetteville the nearby county seat travelled by train to South Fayette.

They were then taken by horse and buggy up the steep south slope of the gorge to Fayetteville.

This lucrative business continued with taxi service even after the road was paved in the late 1920's.

As you continue along Fayette Station Road, you will slowly climb the south side of the gorge.

Think how long it must have taken to travel this twisting route in the early 20th century before the road was paved.

Between the 1870's and the 1950's New River Gorge coal contributed directly to the industrialization of the United States.

As it fed the nations trains, factories, ships, and power plants.

West Virginia surpassed Pennsylvania as the nation's leading coal producing state in the 1927. With 145 million tons which equal 28% of the nation's production.

The lure of quick wealth, drew investors and the prospect of desperately needed jobs attracted thousands of workers to the New River Gorge in the early 1900's.

English, Irish, Italian, northern European and African American workers all entered the mines and lived on both sides of the river, here in company owned housing.

Out of necessity, immigrants quickly learned English, which hastened their assimilation as Americans.

They shop at the company store, using company money called scrip.

Played on company baseball teams and performed in company sponsored bands company towns like Fayette and South Fayette typically included churches hotels and the ever-popular saloon.

The mine was the most unifying force in the community.

Common experiences in the mines forged bonds among most workers regardless of their race or national origin.

But outside the mines there was discord and violence.

Miners were kept indebted to the company for housing tools and supplies from the company store.

And they were often cheated of their proper pay.

Safety in the mines was of great concern. Between 1890 and 1912, West Virginia had a higher mine death rate than any other state.

In response to poor conditions and low wages, workers began to develop unions. Company owners and corrupt officials responded with force.

They hired private guards and thugs to physically threaten employees.

They fired union miners and perpetuated racial and class division among workers to keep them from unionizing.

Some of the most violent labor management disputes in our nation's history occurred in southern West Virginia.

At the hairpin turn in the road, you will see the Wolf Creek Trailhead for the Kaymoor Trail. It's an easy hike, but parking here is limited.

Another option is to drive to Kaymoor Top after you complete this tour of Fayette Station Road and hike to Kaymoor Mine from there.

You can find driving directions and information about hiking trails at all our visitor centers.

You should soon be approaching the southern end of the New River Gorge Bridge.

This is the second highest bridge in North America.

And the second longest single arch bridge in the world.

It's 3,030 ft long, which is almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile.

The arch itself is 1700 feet long.

Earlier on your tour, you may have parked under the two piers that anchor the bridge on the north side of the river, you will now drive, by the other two piers on this side of the river.

Each concrete pier weighs 11 million pounds and together they support 44 million pounds of steel overhead.

Imagine how life in this part of the state changed when the New River Gorge Bridge was completed in 1977.

Suddenly, communities became neighbors.

The time it took to cross the river was reduced from about 30 minutes to a matter of seconds.

Each autumn since 1977, West Virginians gather to commemorate the completion of the bridge.

The festival, called Bridge Day, takes place on the third Saturday of October.

It's the only day when the bridge is closed to traffic and pedestrians are allowed to walk across the bridge.

As you continue to climb Fayette Station Road, take a look across the river, to the north side of the gorge where you'll get a long view of some of the best rock-climbing sites in the eastern United States.

About 100 million years ago, when the ancient Teays river started to carve out the riverbed of the New River, it exposed coal seams and layers of sedimentary rock.

Nuttall sandstone, which can be seen at the top of the gorge is a great rock for climbing. It's very hard and resistant to weathering due to its high percentage of quartz.

Just across the river, the ridge area crags featuring more than 200 climbing routes further south, the Endless Wall sprawls upriver for about 4 miles with more than 600 climbing routes averaging from 80 to 100 feet in height.

But the Endless Wall is more than a mecca for rock climbers.

It's also a very important and fragile habitat for rare plants and wildlife, including potential nesting cliffs for peregrine falcons.

Today we appreciate this rocky landscape for its beauty recreational opportunities and value to wildlife.

Miners who lived here 100 years ago were not climbing the crags, they were working, deep inside of them.

Usually, a pair of miners was sent to one section of a mine, working together, and lying on their sides in very cramped wet conditions.

The pair first undercut the coal seam about 3 feet into the face of the wall, using short, handled picks.

Then the two miners blasted the coal loose with dynamite and shoveled the coal into a mine car, tagging it with their payroll identification numbers, imagine working on your knees all day, shoveling coal in a dark space that might only be 3 or 4 feet high.

This was backbreaking, dangerous work.

In the mid 1920's a single miner could mine and load more than 10 tons a day. A second product of the mines was coke.

This isn't the kind that you drink.

It's a fuel that burns hotter than coal and is used in making steel. Coke was produced in the gorge in large ovens that were heated up to 2000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Under these extremely hot conditions, the impurities of the coal were burned away, leaving mostly pure carbon behind.

Producing this concentrated carbon, called coke, was very profitable because of its high demand.

You should be approaching a large curve to the left.

The last interpretive wayside exhibit along Fayette Station Road is located in the pull off to your right.

Stop the recording now, until you have left or passed the last pull off in your car.

As you continue to climb out of the gorge to US Route 19, you will follow Mar Branch and its beautiful waterfall, on the right.

While most famous for the river itself, the side canyons, tumbling mountain streams and more tucked away wonders of New River Gorge National River are also worth exploring.

And other sites that you may want to discover within New River Gorge National River may include Thurmond, Grandview, and Sandstone Falls.

You can drive a few miles south along Route 19 to Glen Jean and continue on Route 25 to Thurmond, which was once one of the great railroad towns along the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway.

The historic Thurmond Depot has been restored as a park visitor center, where exhibits and period furnishings bring the golden days of railroading back to life.

You can also continue further south to Grandview and Sandstone Falls where you will have opportunities to hike picnic and enjoy spectacular vistas.

At Sandstone Visitor Center you can learn more about the park and the New River watershed through interpretive exhibits and media presentations.

Like Canyon Rim Visitor Center, Sandstone Visitor Center is open year-round.

The visitor centers at Thurmond and Grandview however are open only during the summer season.

You can also travel south on Route 19 and continue learning more about the areas rich coal history by traveling other portions of the National Coal Heritage Trail through southern West Virginia here along Fayette Station Road, you have travelled back in time to see how coal played an important role in the region and in the industrialization of the United States.

Today, coal remains important to West Virginia, the state has the 4th largest coal reserve in the nation, and it currently produces more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of all the coal that's exported in the United States.

Coal mining has stopped in the gorge and today, the National Park Service is dedicated to protecting the natural, scenic, and historic resources of New River Gorge National River as part of a larger family of nationally significant places.

New River Gorge National River includes 55,000 acres of land and 53 miles of river that belong to all the people of the United States and are part of our legacy to future generations.

We hope that after travelling down and up this steep winding road into the past you take away a deeper understanding and appreciation of the people who once lived here and the natural scenic and cultural heritage of the park today.

As the development pressures continues to surround and encroach on park boundaries, it becomes increasingly important that our natural and cultural heritage is safeguarded.

New River Gorge National River and the 83 million acres of national parklands across the country are sanctuaries.

Not only are the parks home for wildlife, but they are also places that renew the mind body and soul.

The preservation of our parks is important, not only for us living today, but for those generations to come.

The protection of our national parks is a big responsibility, it requires a commitment from us all.

Help ensure that the natural and cultural resources we enjoy today, will be left unimpaired for future generations.

We thank you for travelling along Fayette Station Road and the coal heritage trail with this program as a guide to the past.

Have a safe and enjoyable visit.

Please return this recording to one of the parks visitor centers so that other visitors can learn about the history surrounding Fayette Station Road.

If you wish to return to Canyon Rim Visitor Center, turn left when you reach Route 19 and continue across the New River Gorge Bridge to the visitor center on the right.