

# TOWPATH TRAIL

FRENCH CREEK COUNCIL

BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

# **PROCEDURE FOR HIKING THE TOWPATH TRAIL**

One copy of the Trail Program booklet is furnished free upon request to a unit. Additional copies can be obtained at the cost listed on the pamphlet. Copies of the history section should be made and distributed to each Scout hiker.

Unit Leader, in conjunction with his youth leadership, selects date to hike the trail, completes appropriate paperwork, and forwards to French Creek Council, 815 Robison Rd. W., Erie, PA, 16509.

The Erie Extension Canal Towpath Trail is located at State Gamelands #214.

Originally the towpath of the Erie Extension Canal and later the bed of the Bessemer - Lake Erie Railroad, this remarkable grass surfaced trail takes the hiker along a rich wildlife corridor that is bounded by wetlands and woods its entire length.

The hike is approx. 4 miles and should be completed in one day. This is a great trail for Webelos Dens or for new Boy Scouts, warm-up hikes and it is simply a beautiful hike. Estimated time to hike the trail is 2 to 3 hours. You may begin either at State Rt. 258 terminus, or you may begin at the Hartstown terminus.

If you begin on State Rt. 285, you will head south from the trailhead on PA Route 285 you will find parking is located just off State Rt. 285 towards Conneaut Lake, just over the railroad tracks to the right. Or, from Conneaut Lake towards Ohio, on your left.

If you begin at the Harstown terminus, locate the Hartstown cemetery, off of cemetery Rd. on US Rt. 322. If you are heading west, the cemetery is visible on the left, before the stoplight. You may embark here and head north on the trail.

This trail is bounded on one side by a body of water that was the original dredging of the canal, which has been further impounded by beaver dams at its southern end.

Hikers must be in appropriate uniform, keep together as a group, respect property along the trail, observe good hiking manners, and stay out of the water. Adults are advised to keep their Scouts away from the water's edge and not to throw anything (including sticks and stones) into the water at any point.

While hiking, be alert for ATVs and make sure their way is clear if you come across any. Never hike this trail during hunting season.

Upon completion of the hike, each Scout must write a 100 word essay about what he has learned about the history of the canals in this area. These are collected by the unit leader. The unit leader then files the application for Trail Awards, along with the appropriate remittance, to the Council Service Center.

A patch is available for each person completing the hike and writing the essay.

## **HIKING SENSE**

- 1) Always wear comfortable, sturdy hiking boots when taking a hike of any distance.
- 2) Please be courteous of other hikers and those who live in the area. Use good Scout sense.
- 3) Take plenty of water along.
- 4) Be good-scout-like. Never litter. Always carry a trash bag with you for your own personal trash.
- 5) Always tell someone where you're going and when you expect to be back. This is just good hiking sense, no matter where you go.
- 6) Dress or pack for all possible weather conditions forecast that day. Layers are the wisest way to dress for the outdoors, of course - you can add or subtract as you go. We also strongly recommend long-sleeved clothing, especially in warmer weather.
- 7) Hiking Dangers
  - A) Poison ivy loves us here, growing as small plants, tall shrubs, vines, even small trees.
  - B) Ticks. The larger dog tick is far more common than the smaller, possible Lyme disease carrying deer tick. Long clothing with a spray of repellant at the cuffs is your best defense.
  - C) Mosquitoes & Flies. With the swamps being so near, mosquitoes and deer flies abound on this trail. Hikers should plan to wear plenty of bug repellant.
  - C) Poisonous snakes. The copperhead is relatively common in our area, though snakes tend to be shy, so mostly just keep an eye to where you step.
  - D) A word on dogs. Treat any dog you may come across on the way as if it were a wild animal.
- 8) Accident, fire, emergency: 911
- 9) There are no garbage cans or toilet facilities on this hike so please plan accordingly.
- 10) Adults should NEVER plan to have their Scouts hike this trail during hunting seasons as hunters can abound on this trail.

## *History of the Area*

The Shenango River originates just north of Hartstown, PA in the swamp. It flows out of the swamp, at a point you will pass, northward to the upper part of Pymatuning Lake, across the spillway into the main lake, turning sharply south in both Ohio and Pennsylvania toward Espyville, Pa., and Andover, Ohio, then southeast to Jamestown, Pa., and over the Pymatuning Dam. Then it heads southward towards the Ohio River.

The first known inhabitants of the area were the Mound Builders. It is not known why the Mound Builders left the area, but it was well before the time that Europeans first came to North America. The Erie were the next group to inhabit the area but they were wiped out by the Seneca nation at about the same time as the Europeans began coming to America. The area was then a "border" area between the Seneca and the Lenni Lenape (Delaware), who inhabited most of Pennsylvania when the European settlers came.

The Lenape left the area and headed west. The Seneca tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy moved in to take their place. Pymatuning was used by the Seneca as a hunting ground.

In 1794, after the battle of Fallen Timbers and the Second Treaty of Fort Stanwix, the Seneca were forced to move out and white settlers moved in to the area. The first settlers were farmers. As you will be able to tell on your hike, the swamps and marshes were a hardship to them. Animals that strayed from the farms typically got lost in the quicksand of the swamps. Dangerous bogs, floating islands and an inability to determine where land ended and water began were constant problems. The swamp was also a haven for predators such as fox, bears and mountain lions. Corduroy Roads were built. These were logs laid crosswise to build a path to make passage through the swamp possible. Millions of mosquitoes carrying yellow fever also made life difficult.

The area of the Towpath Trail is teeming with wildlife. It is a major stopover for migrating waterfowl, a nesting area of the American Bald Eagle, and many other animals. Peak fall populations of Canada Geese occur about the middle of October when migration is at its peak, with about 15,000 geese flying through the area. It is impossible to determine how many geese use the area each year because the birds are arriving and leaving all during the migratory season. The most prevalent nesting species of ducks are mallards, black ducks, wood ducks, blue-winged teal, and gadwalls.

## *Beaver and Erie Canal*

In the session of 1822-23 the Legislature authorized a survey to ascertain the practicability of connecting Lake Erie with the Ohio River by a canal. In 1824 the United States Government ordered an examination to be made with the same object in view, and the engineers reported in favor of the scheme. After considerable contention the route via the Beaver and Shenango Rivers was adopted. In 1827 the Legislature passed the act for the construction of the canal, and also for the "French Creek Feeder," which previously had been surveyed. Ground was broken on the latter at Meadville, August 24, 1827, and it was completed to Conneaut Lake in December, 1834, but nothing had yet been accomplished toward building the main line.

The State ultimately made a preliminary re-survey. This was followed, under the administration of Gov. Ritner, by a limited appropriation, which resulted in pushing the work toward completion. In 1842 the Legislature adopted the watchword of "retrenchment;" the enterprise was throttled by annulling all the contracts and stopping the work. This short-sighted policy resulted in sufficient costs of litigation to have completed the enterprise and made it efficient. Gov. Porter, in his annual message in 1843, said that ninety-seven and three-fourths miles of the main line had been finished, extending from Rochester on the Ohio to the mouth of the French Creek Feeder in Crawford County, and that \$4,000,000 had been expended on the improvement between 1827 and 1842.

The work was now turned over, without cost, to the "Erie Canal Company," chartered by the Legislature at the session of 1842-43, on condition that that corporation would finish and operate the canal. In September, 1843, contracts were let for the unfinished portion of the work, and December 5, 1844, the two first boats, the "Queen of the West," a passenger packet, and the "R. S. Reed," loaded with Mercer County coal, passed through to Erie. Business was brisk, and a new life sprang into the Shenango Valley. It spoiled many old mill-dams along the Big Shenango, but gave recompense in increased facilities for transportation. Sharon, Clarksville, Big Bend and Greenville were all given a commercial importance by this new means of travel and transportation. Big Bend was specially important and active, because it was the point from which supplies were hauled to the eastern, central and southeastern parts of the county. The canal flourished until the Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad was completed along the same route, when a downward movement began, which finally resulted in its purchase by that company in 1870. The railroad company continued to operate it until 1871, when the fall of the Elk Creek aqueduct in Erie County gave them an excuse for abandoning the enterprise, which no doubt was the intention at the time of purchase. Its bed has since been a source of annoyance to the people of the towns through which it passed, as a breeder of disease, though most of it is now filled up. The whoop of the boy on the towpath is no longer heard, but instead the shrill whistle of the iron horse.

*History of Mercer County, 1888, pages 174-175*

As you hike the trail, have your Scouts try to imagine horse or mules using the very same trail to haul canal boats up and down its length, from Lake Erie to the Ohio River. At some point we recommend stopping and having your Scouts try to picture the boats in the ditch they are following and imagining how different life was in our area over 150 years ago. The trail you hike on is the actual towpath of that canal and the ditch on the side was an important part of the commerce of our country in the 1830's and 1840's. The trail bed is nearly entirely all fill dirt from the construction of the canal over 150 years ago.

## **HISTORICAL FACTS**

- ⇒ Pymatuning is the Lenni Lenape (Delaware) word for "Crooked-mouth man's Dwelling Place." "Lenni Lenape" translates to "Original People". It was the name the natives gave themselves. The name "Delaware" was given to them because they were the original inhabitants of the Delaware River Valley in eastern PA.
- ⇒ Shenango is the Lenni Lenape (Delaware) word for Bull Thistles.
- ⇒ The Erie Extension Canal was the major means of travel from Pittsburgh to the Great Lakes from 1840-1871. This canal system was vital to the iron industry in western Pennsylvania before the introduction of the railroads.
- ⇒ First canal boat from Greenville loaded with coal gets to Erie, 1849
- ⇒ As railroads grew, canal travel declined. Many railroads were constructed on the canal towpaths since they were already wide enough and level for their tracks. When this canal's days were drawing to a close, this towpath too became railroad property. Eventually, the Bessemer & Lake Erie Railroad controlled this right-of-way, but later removed their tracks further west.

## NEARBY ATTRACTIONS

**Canal Museum** To learn more about the canal era, plan a Field Trip to the Canal Museum on Alan Ave. near Riverside Park in Greenville. To tour the museum and see an actual model of a canal boat, contact them at 724-588-7540.

**Waterfowl Museum** Near the northern terminus of the trail, north of the Linesville Spillway, is the Waterfowl Museum. The Pennsylvania Game Commission maintains it to display mounted specimens of most of the birds that nest or visit the Pymatuning. Over 300 specimens, all taken in the immediate area, are on display. Parking and admission are free. Hours during May, June, are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. hours for July, August and September are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. To groups applying in advance, the Game Commission will provide lectures on the birds and the area as their time permits. Contact them at 1-800-333-6764.

**Fish Hatchery** Not far from the Waterfowl Museum, the Pennsylvania Fish Commission operates the world's largest warm-water fish hatchery and visitor's center. It is open to the public seven days a week from 8:30a.m. to 3:30p.m. Scouts can learn about fish culture and see a working model of a fish egg incubation system. Guided group tours are offered, contact the visitor center to schedule a tour. (814) 683-4451. Parking and admission here is free.

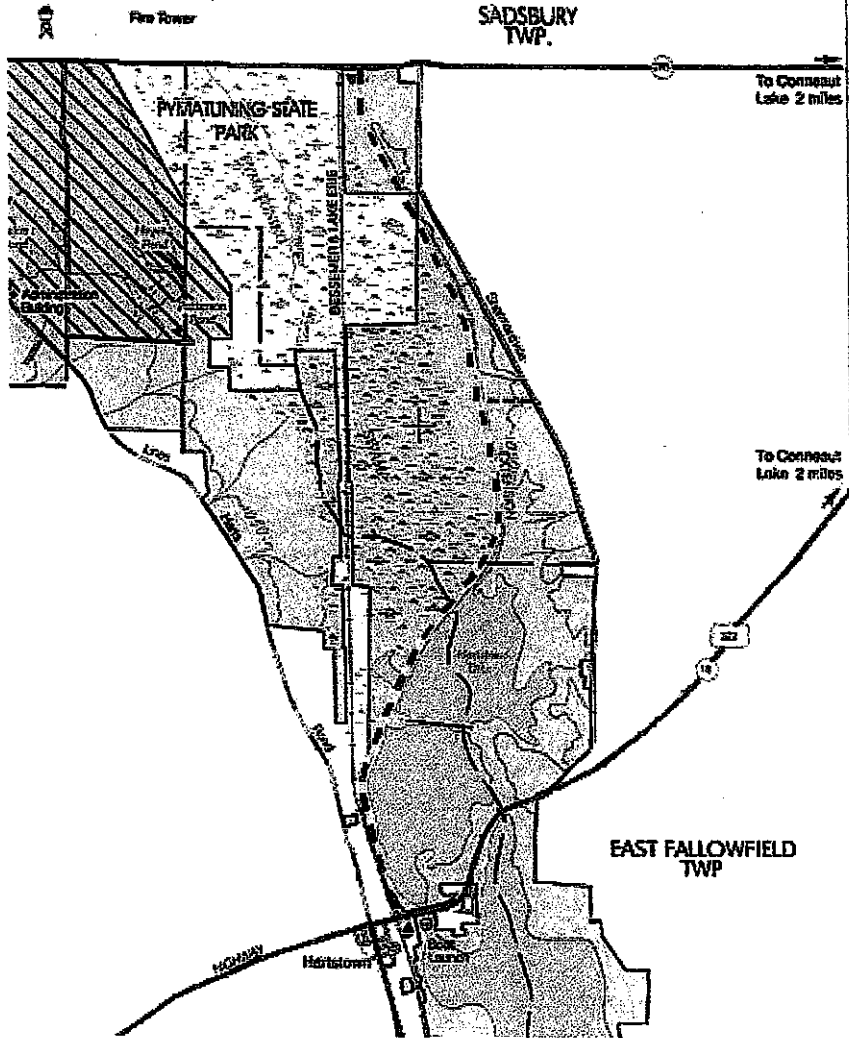
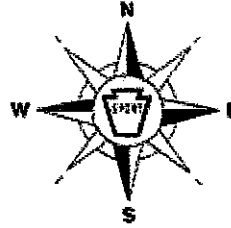
**The Spillway** Near the northern terminus of the trail, the Spillway is famous for a unique spectacle. It's known as the place "where the ducks walk on the fish." Carp collect at the base of the spillway at such a density that ducks can cross from one side to the other and barely touch the water. Snacks are available. You can also purchase bread to feed the fish, or, bring your own old bread. Parking is free.

**Pymatuning State Park** Near the southern terminus of the trail is Pymatuning State Park, north of Jamestown, PA. This park offers camping, fishing, and swimming opportunities as well as canoe rentals and other activities. If you wish to take advantage of anything the State Park has available, please contact them in advance for more information or to make reservations. The Park Office phone number is 724-932-3141.

**LEGEND**

- ROAD CLASSIFICATION**
- Limited Access
  - Primary Highway, Hard Surface
  - Secondary Highway, Hard Surface
  - Light Duty Road, Hard or Improved Surface
  - Unimproved Road
  - Trail

- MISCELLANEOUS FEATURES**
- Power Line
  - Telephone Line
  - Pipeline
  - Building
  - Parking Area
  - Swamp
  - Stream
  - Lakes & Dams
  - Special Trails
  - Fire Tower



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