



The Montour Trail Council: Building trail since 1989

January-February 2026, Vol. 38, No. 1

## Work Advances on National Tunnel

Work to stabilize the shuttered National Tunnel is complete, allowing the Montour Trail Council to move forward with a plan to temporarily reopen the trail before Summer.

The trail council's Engineering & Construction committee is evaluating several plans to allow restricted access through the tunnel prior to undertaking the major initiative to construct a steel liner, similar to the one installed at the Greer Tunnel two years ago.

"The trail council has been working diligently throughout the past two months to assess the safest and most cost-effective means to reopen the tunnel," says Julian Wolfe, MTC president. He adds that a decision will be made soon and suggests trail-users consult [montourtrail.org](http://montourtrail.org) and social media for updates.

The National Tunnel, at mile marker 25 in Cecil Township, has been closed since mid-November due to significant deterioration of its ceiling. Built in 1913, the 623-foot curved tunnel is the longest on the Montour Trail and one of its most recognizable landmarks.



The total cost of the National Tunnel rehabilitation is still being determined, but could reach as high as \$3 million. To fund the project, the Montour Trail Council, which owns and manages the trail, will pursue grants from multiple sources. Because many grant programs require matching funds, a public fundraising campaign will launch soon, offering trail users and community supporters an opportunity to contribute.

One of the first steps in the National Tunnel project was a point-cloud survey, which uses laser scanners to capture millions of data points to create a 3D digital model of the structure's accessible surfaces. According to David Wright, the trail's chief engineer, this data helps determine how much the structure had changed over time and will guide where the permanent steel and concrete liner is to be installed.

The survey also revealed that part of the western portal has separated from the tunnel structure, and plans now call for reinforcing the portal and its wingwalls as part of the rehabilitation.

Plans call for replacing the upper cracked portion of the western portal with new reinforced concrete and covering the lower face with a 12-inch thick layer of concrete, Wright says. *continued on page 5*

## From Facebook Post to Historic Trail Marker

By Brad Cowden



### GEORGE WASHINGTON

GRANTED 2,813 ACRES OF LAND IN 1774 SURROUNDING THIS SPOT NEAR MILLERS RUN. HE VISITED HERE IN 1784 & SOLD THE LAND IN 1796.

MONTOUR TRAIL

WILLIAM G. POMEROY FOUNDATION 2026

Mock-up of the sign to be erected on the Montour Trail.

Hoffman had carefully geolocated. The post caught the eye of Montour Trail Council President Julian Wolfe.

Julian reached out to us at Historic Fort Cherry last July, curious to learn more. While I hadn't met him, I knew the trail council from collaborating on my Eagle Scout project in 2013. His interest made perfect sense when I realized the Montour Trail passes directly through the Miller's Run tract.

*continued on page 5*

## Winter Wonderland

When a fresh blanket of snow transformed the Montour Trail in early January, Kristen Locy didn't hesitate — it was ideal cross-country skiing weather. She slipped out on her lunch break and glided along the trail near Tandem Connection (trail mile marker 27) for a low-impact cardio workout in the fresh air. "I like to just get out and enjoy the winter," she says.

Locy, 29, works for a UK-based company and was home in Strabane for the holidays, revisiting the trail she's loved since childhood growing up in Peters Township. Locy enjoys running on the trail as well. "It's a great resource," she says, a sentiment that feels especially true when the Montour Trail turns into a snowy playground. (photo: Tony Prezioso)





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*The Montour Trail Council is a volunteer-driven 501(c)(3) nonprofit that acts as a land trust, responsible for preserving green space within the trail's viewscape. The MTC owns and manages the 60-mile Montour Trail in Allegheny and Washington counties in Southwestern PA.*

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## Prez Sez:

### A View of the Montour Trail from Harrisburg and Washington County: PA state Senator Camera Bartolotta

By Julian Wolfe

*The volunteer-led, nonprofit Montour Trail Council regularly engages state and local political leaders on issues of interest to the council and our trail users, such as funding opportunities and trail safety.*

*Here, State Sen. Bartolotta, who represents a large section of our trail community in Washington County, discusses several of these key issues.*

#### *What was your first interaction with the Montour Trail?*



Sen. Bartolotta

My first memories of the trail go back to the early 1990s, when my late husband and I were raising his two young children. We lived in a development near Trax Farms that backed up to the trail. We would take the kids out on their bikes and just enjoy our time together outdoors. Those simple bike rides helped spark a lifelong appreciation for this incredible community resource.

#### *How do you envision the role of trails, like the Montour, in Pennsylvania's long-term economic, environmental and public-health strategies?*

Branching out trails into more communities will increase accessibility and give parents fewer reasons to keep their kids glued to "smart" devices. We have got to get our youth moving. In fact, we need to get all of us moving. And it's not only about being active, but it's also the opportunity for silence that allows you to connect and talk with one another. It's a chance to escape our cell phones' constant "bings" and "boops" that have us acting like Pavlov's dogs. The trails will, in turn, improve our mental health and reduce long-term healthcare costs.

Walking and running trails are no longer seen as amenities. They are increasingly considered essential infrastructure. Additionally, these trails support stormwater management, protect wildlife habitats and encourage responsible land redevelopment. Not to mention creating practical reasons to renovate historical structures like the Greer Tunnel in Peters Township.

#### *Trails are major tourism drivers, as we've seen with the Great Allegheny Passage. What can the Commonwealth do to better market Pennsylvania's trail network and support trail-adjacent businesses?*

Pennsylvania has an outstanding trail system, but we do not always necessarily tell that story well. I think we can play a stronger role by coordinating marketing efforts through the Department of Community and Economic Development and Pennsylvania Tourism Office, focusing promotional efforts on positioning trails as destination experiences.

#### *With the drawdown in federal funding for trails, is Harrisburg capable and willing to fill the void? Are there opportunities that could expand resources for trails from state agencies such as DCNR?*

The state continues to make significant investments to expand trails, improve parks and protect public lands in nearly every county across Pennsylvania. The 2025 budget included a \$13-million increase in funding for DCNR.

I strongly believe in the economic, environmental and public-health value of trails. But we are heading into some tough, lean years, and we have to be realistic about what the Commonwealth can sustainably commit to every avenue. What we can do is be smarter and more strategic with the resources we have by prioritizing high-impact projects, encouraging regional cooperation and leveraging public-private partnerships that stretch every dollar. *continued on page 3*

## Trail Friends' Meetings and Work Parties

### MTC Board Meeting

Every third Monday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at 2589 Boyce Plaza Rd., Suite 4, Upper St. Clair. Turn at the traffic signal on Boyce Road between the railroad and the creek. Call the Montour Trail Office for more information or to get on the agenda.

### Airport Area Friends (MM 0 to 12.6 and the 6.3 mile Airport Connector)

Friends of the Trail meet every second Wednesday of the month at 7:00 p.m. at the MTC Western Corridor Garage, 450 Cliff Mine Rd., North Fayette Township 15108. New volunteers are always welcome. For more information, call Mark Modispacher at 412-266-1544. Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information call 412-262-3748.

### Fort Cherry Friends (MM 12.6 to 20.7)

Friends of the Trail meet every second Wednesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at the McDonald Trail Station, 160 S. McDonald St., McDonald 15057 (adjacent to the Panhandle Trail). Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information, contact Tim Thomassy at 724-926-4617 or Chuck Hughey at 724-926-9436.

### Cecil Friends (MM 22.0 to 28.5)

Friends of the Trail meet every fourth Wednesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at the Kurnick Access area along the trail off Cecil Henderson Road. Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information, contact Bob Mihalco at 786-910-5575 or ramihalco@icloud.com.

### The Montour Railroad Historical Society

For more information, email [mrhs@montourrr.com](mailto:mrhs@montourrr.com).

### Peters Township Friends (MM 28.5 to 30.4, Library Jct to near MM 35 and part of the Bethel Branch)

Friends of the Trail meet the first non-holiday Monday of each month at 7:00 p.m. at various locations depending on weather and time of year. Work parties on the first Friday and third Saturday of every month at 8:30 a.m. For more information on meetings or work parties, please email us at [petersfriends@montourtrail.org](mailto:petersfriends@montourtrail.org).

### Bethel Park Friends (The 2.75 mile Bethel Branch and a short piece of main line trail around MM 35).

Friends of the Trail meet every first Tuesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. in the Bethel Park Municipal Building Caucus Room behind the Council Chambers. Anyone interested in the Bethel Park Trail segment is encouraged to come. Work parties, every second and fourth Saturday of the month at 8:30 a.m. For more information, call Bill Capp at 412-833-5928.

### South Hills Friends (MM 35.4 to 46.6)

Friends of the Trail meet every second Tuesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at South Park Township Community Room or the Township Library located in the Township Building at 2675 Brownsville Rd., South Park 15129. Work parties on the second Saturday of the month. For more information, contact David Oyler at 412-831-9288, [davidoyer1950@gmail.com](mailto:davidoyer1950@gmail.com) or Paul McKeown at 412-835-6692, [mckeownp@comcast.net](mailto:mckeownp@comcast.net).

### Westland Friends (MM 21.0 to 21.9, and Westland Branch)

Friends of the Trail meet every first Wednesday of the month. For more information, contact Deb Thompson at [intrepidscout@theneonweb.com](mailto:intrepidscout@theneonweb.com).

### continued from page 2 - Prez Sez

*Many trail users believe the Montour Trail is publicly-funded and maintained. How would you recommend broadening awareness that this isn't the case and the Montour and other trails need financial support?*

This is a great question, and I'll be the first to point my finger at myself. Raising awareness starts with those of us who have metaphorical megaphones, anyone with a platform that reaches beyond their immediate circle. We need to do a better job of using our voices to tell the full story. Local leaders should openly acknowledge the role that nonprofit trail organizations play. Business leaders who benefit from trail traffic should help spread the word and encourage support.

*Among the most challenging issues for trails concerns the use and oversight of e-bikes. What role can Harrisburg play to help local municipalities establish e-bike rules and ordinances? As an example, state Rep. Jill Cooper is seeking co-sponsors for a bill to assist in helping local governments with e-bike oversight.*

Electric bikes are certainly a complex issue — and, fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, they're here to stay. I'll admit, when I travel, I often take an e-bike ride, so I understand firsthand why they've become so popular and accessible for people of all ages and abilities. On the other hand, I understand how e-bikes can be perceived by others on the trail. At the same time, you can

have someone on a traditional bike who blasts past you, going far too fast. E-bikes can be a great option for people who want to get out on the trails.

Under the Pennsylvania Vehicle Code, e-bikes that meet specific criteria are classified as standard pedalcycles and thus follow the same rules as traditional bicycles on roads and sidewalks. In addition, both federal and state governments have clearly defined policies for e-bike use in national and state forests. Where things become more challenging is at the local level. I would support potential legislation that gives local municipalities the ability to enact e-bike ordinances.

*Connecting to other trails is important to the Montour Trail Council. How can the state support efforts to connect the Montour with other trail systems?*

We all recognize that connecting trails is where the real long-term value is. With your help in identifying potential gap-closure projects, my office can assist in prioritizing those plans with my colleagues in the Senate, especially when a connection crosses into another district.

Having legislators aligned from the start makes a real difference. My office can also assist by coordinating communication among the layers of local governments and state agencies.

*This column kicks off a new occasional series featuring local lawmakers whose districts touch the Montour Trail.*

## Lifetime Achievement Award: Deb Thompson

Deb Thompson, whose commitment to the Montour Trail spans more than three decades and continues today, has received the MTC's highest honor, a Lifetime Achievement Award.

She received the honor from MTC President Julian Wolfe at the council's annual volunteer holiday party in December.

Ms. Thompson has served on the Montour Trail Council board during two significant periods — 2017 to 2022 and again from 2024 to the present. In 2021, she became the MTC's first woman chief executive.

Ms. Thompson got involved with the MTC in the early 2000s as the webmaster along with her husband, Dave Hajnik. She championed the adoption of modern information systems, digital tools and online resources, including the development of the trail's interactive map.

In 2023, Ms. Thompson chaired the office relocation task force, overseeing the smooth transition to the MTC's current HQ in Upper St. Clair after 22 years in Bridgeville.

In addition to serving on the board, she is president of the trail's Westland Friends Group, which has expanded its volunteer base and achieved financial self-sufficiency.

Before retiring from her career, Ms. Thompson was VP of information technology for Civil & Environmental Consultants, experience that she brought directly into her volunteer leadership.

"We are proud to present Deb with this Lifetime Achievement Award, a well-earned recognition for a leader who has given so much to the trail she loves," said Mr. Wolfe.



President Wolfe presents award to Deb Thompson.

## Scout Leads Eco-Friendly Bench Upgrade

As part of his Eagle Scout service project, Russell Riberich of Boy Scout Troop 1313 of McMurray led the replacement of two aging benches with durable, environmentally-friendly seating near trail mile marker 30. The new benches are constructed from 100% recycled plastic, sourced through a partnership with Clean and Tidy Our County in Washington, PA.

Russell's project required months of planning, coordination and problem-solving. After securing approval from the Montour Trail Council, he led volunteers through site preparation and old bench clearing; safety briefings and tool instruction; concrete mixing and bench assembly; and mulching and site beautification.

The project was made possible through the generosity and encouragement of many family, friends and organizations.

Russell and the Montour Trail Council extend appreciation to Clean and Tidy Our County and local companies that donated material for the project including Evey True Value Hardware, Bethel Park; Georges Supply Center, South Park; Miller's Ace Hardware, Canonsburg; and Venetia Landscape Supply.



New benches level up comfort along the trail, thanks to (L to R) Tyler Lingis, Owen Tomnay, Russell Riberich, Wyatt Smith, C.J. Peters.

## New Safety Fencing Erected

By Terry Bimle

New fencing has been installed to keep trail users safely away from the trail edge after recent streambank stabilization work removed vegetation and exposed a steep drop-off.

Roughly 750 feet of treated-wood fencing was built by Metro Fencing across three locations. The approximately \$25,000 fencing expense is part of a larger \$155,000 stabilization project completed in 2025, supported in part by a \$100,000 grant from the Allegheny Regional Asset District.

These photos show the new fencing at trail mile markers 4.8 and 5.0. With the 250-foot section near mile marker zero now installed, the project is officially complete. A separate streambank protection effort along Montour Run at mile marker zero is scheduled for construction this year.



## Construction Crew: 4,000 volunteer hours!

The Montour Trail's Construction Crew had a busy 2025. They worked in South Park, Bethel Park, Peters Township, Cecil Township, Westland, Muse, McDonald, and the Airport Area. Their work primarily consisted of clearing landslides, replacing drainage pipes, diverting runoff from trail surfaces, creating new trail, and resurfacing three to four miles of existing trail.

The replacement of a large, 36-inch drain pipe near mile marker 1.7 that was almost completely filled with dirt created one of the larger challenges last year. The crew had to dig out a ditch 7-feet wide by 5-feet deep by 40-feet long in order to replace it.

Additionally, the crew scraped and resurfaced approximately 1.5 miles of trail in the Westland area. Work continued on a half-mile section of the Westland trail near Johnston Road, where the crew scraped, leveled, resurfaced the trail, and constructed new drainage ditches. To further address

*continued from page 1- National Tunnel.*

Covering the portal wingwalls with concrete will be an option in the contract.

Inside the tunnel, crews have installed shoring that supports 20 feet of tunnel where the most significant deterioration exists.

Wright notes that WEC Engineers of Bridgeville — hired for the Greer Tunnel renovation — have been selected for the project that will include the design work for the tunnel and the western portal. At Greer, a custom-fabricated galvanized steel shell was installed in the eastern half of the 235-foot tunnel, which is at mile marker 28.5 in Peters Township.

Originally constructed with 12-by-12-foot timber lining, the National Tunnel was encased in concrete in 1928 when its portals were added. A long crack now runs down the center of the ceiling, and years of water infiltration and freeze-thaw cycles have further compromised the structure.

*Paul McKeown, project manager for the tunnel project, contributed to this article.*

*continued from page 1- Historical Marker.*

The timing was remarkably fortunate. Just two weeks earlier, while walking the Panhandle Trail in McDonald, I'd noticed a new historic marker commemorating the 1891 Cook Oil Well Fire. The sign credited a partnership between the William G. Pomeroy Foundation and Rails to Trails Conservancy.

Intrigued, I investigated and discovered applications were still being accepted — but the deadline was less than three weeks away. When I shared this with Julian, he didn't hesitate. He brought in Bryan Seip, president of the Montour Railroad Historical Society, who submitted an application before day's end. Their swift, decisive action told me this project had potential.

The following months brought intensive collaboration. We gathered primary sources, interpreted archival maps and carefully crafted the marker's verbiage. Amy Kapp from the Rails to Trails Conservancy in Washington, D.C., proved invaluable as our liaison with the Pomeroy Foundation.

water-related damage, three major slope drains were repaired and filled with large rock.

The crew leveled the trail base and resurfaced a 6/10th of a mile portion of the Muse branch, while also completing multiple drainage improvements for the same section.



In general, the Construction Crew tackles work that is beyond routine trail maintenance and upkeep, which is the purview of the trail's Friends Groups.

The Construction Crew consists of about a dozen men from various backgrounds who

live near different sections of the Montour Trail. While most work wherever repairs are needed, a few prefer to work closer to their homes.

The work schedule is Monday, Wednesday and Friday, March through November. They begin working before 9 a.m., depending on the season and generally wrap up around 3 p.m. (not including commuting time to the trail garage at the Kurnick trailhead.)

Typically, six to eight men show up to work each day, with a few helping with equipment maintenance during the off-season months. By the end of October, 4,000 volunteer hours had been tallied — even as work continued in the trail garage.

Each year, the season begins with a "State of the Trail" drive by the most experienced Construction Crew members to assess what needs to be done after the winter. After that, they decide which projects should be prioritized.

*David Mikula, a Construction Crew member, helped gather the details for this article.*

By mid-September, we were ready to select a location. Julian, Bryan, my Historic Fort Cherry co-director Vinny Curtis, and I met at the Montour Trail's Galati trailhead to find the perfect spot.

This marker offers crucial context for understanding America's former western frontier. This year, as we celebrate the U.S. Semiquincentennial, our nation's 250th anniversary, the moment is ideal for elevating these lesser-known, but locally significant, historic sites and stories.

"The marker to be placed along the Montour Trail embodies not only the rich history of the Fort Cherry community, but that of the nation," said Ms. Kapp.

Bringing this idea to life required a true partnership among the Montour Trail Council, Montour Railroad Historical Society, Historic Fort Cherry, Rails to Trails Conservancy, and the William G. Pomeroy Foundation.

*Mr. Cowden is co-director of the nonprofit Historic Fort Cherry. Contact him at: [info@historicfortcherry.org](mailto:info@historicfortcherry.org)*

## Montour Railroad History

### McDonald Transfer

by Bryan Seip, Montour Railroad Historical Society



*The Montour Railroad brings a loaded coal train down the transfer track while overhead a train of empty hoppers heads east toward coal mines. (Photo: Gene P. Schaeffer)*

The McDonald Transfer Track began its existence as a spur off the Pennsylvania Panhandle Division main line at the edge of the town of McDonald. It was constructed in 1917 to service the newly opened McDonald Mine, located along what is now Noblestown Road. The mine was owned by Carnegie Coal Co., which also owned and operated 10 other mines along the Pennsylvania Railroad Panhandle line. All these mines shipped their coal on the PRR.

Even though the Montour Railroad was extended over the valley in 1914, there was no connection between the two railroads. The Montour crossed over the PRR on the McDonald Viaduct.

The PRR spur included the bridge over Robinson Run that is still in use by the Montour Trail. The bridge is three spans of 20-foot I-beam construction supported by wood trestle bents. There were originally two bridges side-by-side to provide two tracks access into the coal mine. One of the bridges was dismantled after the mine was closed.

A blueprint from 1920 shows proposed additional trackage continuing from the mine tracks across Noblestown Road and up the hill to a connection with the Montour to allow interchange of cars with the PRR. The interchange was completed and became known as the McDonald Transfer.

When the Champion Preparation Plant was built in 1928, McDonald Transfer became the closest point where coal loads could be delivered for shipment on the PRR. Thus, most of the coal shipped by the PRR was delivered to McDonald. In later years when unit trains of coal were shipping to a single customer, these privately-owned 70-car trains of empty hoppers were delivered to the Montour at McDonald, taken to Champion and loaded, then returned to the PRR at McDonald.

Most empty PRR cars were delivered at Hills Transfer in Peters Township as that interchange was closest to Montour Mines #4 and

#10. Those cars would be loaded at the mines and the raw mine coal was taken to Champion for cleaning and sorting. The processed coal would be reloaded into the PRR hoppers and then usually delivered to McDonald for shipment to their final destinations.

The McDonald transfer tracks were on a 2% grade connecting to the Montour, which is considered a very steep grade on a railroad. Montour engineers had to be extremely careful when descending the grade with fully loaded cars as the track curved under the McDonald Viaduct. Pulling cars up the transfer track was not as dangerous as those cars were empty and thus weighed less.

At the upper end of the transfer track, a siding was constructed along the Montour main line. McDonald Siding was used to temporarily store cars going to or from the PRR connection. If the trains travelling on the transfer were too heavy for the smaller Montour locomotives, they might be split into two or more sections and the loads taken down the hill using multiple moves.

At the lower end of the transfer track where it met the PRR, several siding tracks were located to store the coal hoppers for direct delivery to or from the PRR. This was the actual connecting point and the Montour would take care of the traffic on the transfer track while PRR locomotives would stay at the bottom of the valley on their own tracks. The Montour provided maintenance of the transfer track.

The McDonald Mine on the transfer track is shown as closing in 1934, but there are references to activity on the mine tracks until 1940. The McDonald Mine was listed on the 1940 Montour Timetable and a note was added that Montour crews must protect against PRR engines working the mine and transfer tracks.

After both the Montour and the Pennsylvania Panhandle Division were abandoned, the Montour Trail Council acquired the transfer track right-of-way and constructed a trail to connect the Montour and Panhandle trails. This became known by the trail organizations as the Montour-Panhandle Connector.



*Caboose 35 trails a train of hoppers on the Montour main line while engine #80 sits on McDonald Siding. The track diverging to the right is the top of the McDonald Transfer Track. (Photo: Gene P. Schaeffer)*

**You can contact the Montour Railroad Historical Society through Facebook by searching for the Montour Railroad Historical Society. There are currently 425 members from across the country. There you'll find a wealth of information about the Montour Railroad and you can pose questions of its membership. You can also check out [montourrr.com](http://montourrr.com)**

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## Welcome New Trail Members and Donors

The Montour Trail Council welcomes these new members and donors and thanks them for their support. We would also like to thank all our members and donors who have recently renewed their annual contributions. Please note that foundations and other grant-making agencies often look at a strong membership as one criterion in their consideration of our funding requests. Not all new members have been entered as of our print deadline and will be listed in the next edition of the *Trail-Letter*.

### Champion

Steve & Shelley Ross  
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