

Nearby Get-Away

A Trail Keeps a Fascinating Railway Legacy Alive

Constructed 100 years ago, the Virginia Blue Ridge Railway no longer exists, but its legacy lives on. The railroad was forced to close down over 30 years ago for lack of business, but were it not for the rail-bed that remained, the trail created for hiker, biker, and equestrian use in Nelson and Amherst counties would not have been possible. The Virginia Blue Ridge Railway Trail is an outstanding example of a rails-to-trails project and an ideal get-away for Lodge residents, 45 minutes from Old Trail Village.

The smooth, flat trail paralleling the Piney and Tye rivers passes through a varied landscape of woodlands and open areas. The first quarter mile of the seven mile route is suitable for people with wheelchairs and walkers. The entire trail is an easy ride for bicyclists and a popular spot for birding. With no exit at the end, travel over the whole trail requires a round trip.

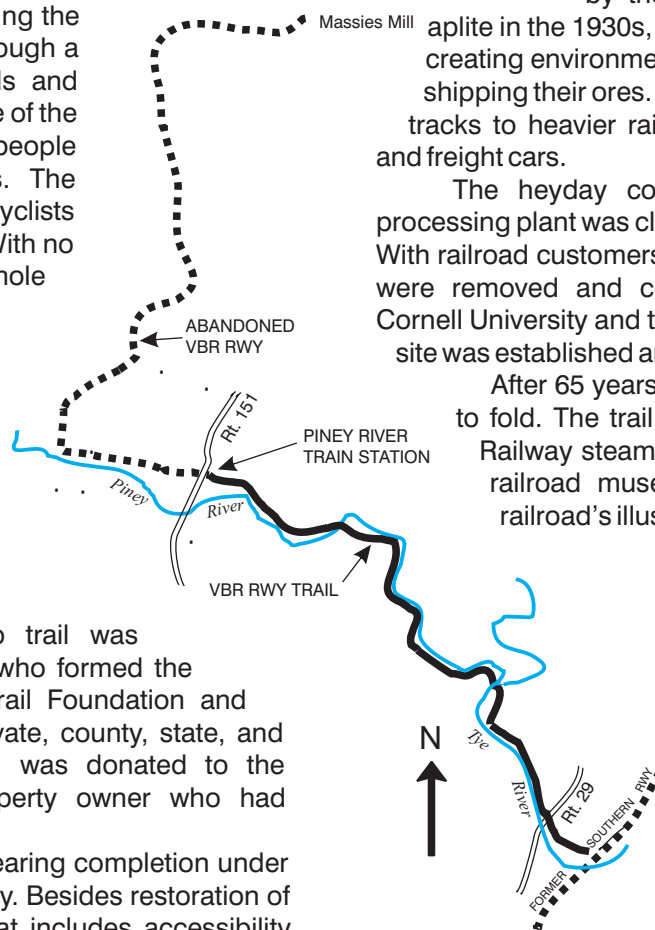
The trailhead at the village of Piney River has a large parking area and portable toilet alongside the original Piney River train station. It is accessible by driving south on VA Route 151 through Nellysford, a distance of 28 miles from U.S. Route 250.

The transition from rail to trail was spearheaded by local citizens who formed the Virginia Blue Ridge Railway Trail Foundation and helped gain financing from private, county, state, and federal sources. The roadbed was donated to the counties by an adjacent property owner who had purchased it from the railroad.

Added enhancements are nearing completion under the supervision of Nelson County. Besides restoration of the Piney River train station that includes accessibility



The Piney River trailhead sign is framed by track crossties and rails salvaged from the railroad. Part of the trail is suitable for people with wheelchairs or walkers.



additions and the installation of interpretive signs, a traditional railroad cover is being added to the bridge that crosses Naked Creek toward the far end of the trail. All construction will be completed in May.

Built in 1915 to transport chestnut logs to a junction with the Southern Railroad (now Norfolk Southern) at the village of Tye River, the 16-mile railroad extended to Massies Mill through Piney River. Hastily built inferior track work caused frequent derailments, toppling locomotives and freight cars on to their sides.

But derailments and flood washouts were nothing compared to the calamity faced by the railroad when the chestnut blight wiped out nearly every chestnut tree in Virginia. Passenger traffic and what little else could be hauled were insufficient to support the enterprise.

Then, much to the surprise of the railroad owners and as if staged by some super power, the railroad was resuscitated by the discovery of titanium dioxide and aplite in the 1930s, ushering in a new industry that, while creating environmental damage, relied on the railway for shipping their ores. The railroad responded by upgrading tracks to heavier rail and purchasing more locomotives and freight cars.

The heyday continued until 1980 when the last processing plant was closed and transport of the ores ended. With railroad customers having vanished, rails and crossties were removed and corporate records were donated to Cornell University and the University of Virginia. A Superfund site was established and contamination cleanup followed.

After 65 years in operation, the railroad was forced to fold. The trail and two former Virginia Blue Ridge Railway steam engines on display in a New Jersey railroad museum are the only remnants of the railroad's illustrious past.



The newly constructed covered bridge across Naked Creek is a replica of a traditional railroad cover.