

Green Portage - Ten Miles of History

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A pleasant walk along the Headwaters Trail, managed primarily by the Portage Park District, between Garrettsville and Mantua, in northern Portage County is both a lesson in natural and human history. These rolling hills are covered in a mantle of thick loose soils deposited here thousands of years ago following the advance of glacial ice during the Pleistocene period. Just below this till are much older rocks that date back over three hundred million years ago when lowlands, adjacent to shallow seas, made up much of this part of the world. Forty Foot Falls, lying between state route 700 and Asbury Road, is an example of the numerous sandstone outcrops visible in northern Portage. In winter the falls display a marvelous ice sculpture for hikers. Along this section of the trail one may come upon a colony of showy orchis (*Galearis spectabilis*), a small woodland orchid growing along the south side of the trail along the hillside; notable for their purple, pink and white coloration.

Were it not for cleared fields for agriculture and human habitation, this landscape would be densely forested, part of the great eastern deciduous forest that stretches from the Atlantic coast to the eastern edge of the Great Plains. Hardwoods including oaks, maples, hickories, and dozens of other species make up the composition of this once vast forest. The trees along the Headwaters Trail are representative of this biome with dozens of species of hardwoods lining the trail. Especially noteworthy are the number of butternut trees just east of the bridge over the Cuyahoga River. While many groves of butternut have disappeared from our landscapes, this group seems remarkably robust with trees of all sizes.

Human history is also in evidence along the path. The trail itself is in the old railbed of the Erie, and later, Erie-Lackawanna Railroad. Artifacts can be seen in several places. Rotting ties, rusting spikes and tie plates are scattered along the edges throughout the trail's length. Concrete pillars that once supported block signals and stone bridge abutments can also still be seen. Glass insulators, referred to as 'glass monkeys' are sometimes unearthed near the truncated remains of telegraph poles. That concrete structure just east of the walking bridge over the Cuyahoga River was not a privy, but a form of telephone booth for railroad workers to communicate. This line was the railroad's only avenue into Cleveland, a two-track affair that carried passengers from this area to jobs in both Cleveland and Youngstown. The last passenger service ended in the late seventies and the entire line was abandoned soon after by Conrail, the entity that replaced several failing eastern railroads. Within a few years the trackage was removed by scrappers and this corridor lay dormant until local folks dreamed of the potential for a public walking trail and formed the Headwaters Land Trust.

At one somber spot a stone sign tells of a tragic tale that took place in July 1949 between Asbury and Limeridge Roads. A locomotive pulling a mile-long freight train, threw a main rod which punctured the boiler, causing a terrible derailment. The fireman was thrown to his death

while the engineer and brakeman were scalded by the steam. The plaque at the site tells the complete story. At route 700 a plaque also commemorates the once beautiful Jeddo Station, the depot for Hiram in earlier times. Additionally, Garrettsville is the site of the Great Train Robbery in 1935. Machine toting robbers appropriated over \$46,000 in this brazen raid, pulling in G-Men to apprehend Alvin "Creepy" Karpis, and leaving the G-Men tag as the mascot for the Garfield School District athletic teams. The trail also crosses a continental drainage divide, separating waters destined for the north Atlantic from those flowing to the Gulf of Mexico via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. But that is a story for another day.