

# REGIONAL HISTORY

## THE NOT-SO-NEW RIVER

Despite the misleading name, the New River is considered to be the oldest river in North America and the second oldest river in the world after the Nile. Prior to the Pleistocene ice age, which began nearly two million years ago, the ancient Teays River carved a path northward from what is now Virginia, through West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois where it dumped into a large inland sea that covered much of the Midwest. Advancing glaciers and glacial melt water dissected the Teays leaving the present day New River as the largest remnant of its historic course. Throughout the tumultuous 400 million years of Appalachian uplift and erosion, the Teays and New Rivers have managed to carve a path northwestward across the continental divide suggesting to some geologists that the river was flowing before the Appalachian Mountains even existed.

Nearly every drop of water that falls on the eastern slope of the Appalachian Mountain

range will be pulled eastward by gravity and eventually find a home in the Atlantic Ocean. It's the raindrop that lands in Ashe County, North Carolina, at the headwaters of the New River that will follow an entirely different path. It will wind its way north through Virginia and into West Virginia where it picks up speed and erosive force as it plows through "The Grand Canyon of the East," the New River Gorge. This dramatic stretch of whitewater weaves a circuitous path through the heart of the Appalachian Range, 1000 feet below the surrounding countryside. Downstream of the gorge the pace of the river slows, exhausted by the energy required to cut through mountains. North of the gorge the Gauley River joins in and the two rivers combine to form the Kanawha River. The Kanawha flows into the Ohio, the Ohio into the Mississippi, and soon enough the humble drop of water that fell over North Carolina finds itself in the Gulf of Mexico.

## THE ROCK

A cross section of the land surrounding the New River Gorge would reveal a thin top layer of soil over a one hundred foot thick layer of Nuttall Sandstone. It's in the river gorges that this cross section is visible and the rock is exposed for climbers to enjoy. Unlike the desert southwest's Navajo Sandstone or the Red River Gorge's Corbin Sandstone, the Nuttall Sandstone of this region is bullet hard. Nuttall Sandstone is comprised of up to 98% quartz making it extremely resistant to weathering and as hard as Yosemite granite. The texture ranges from smooth as glass to 10-grit sandpaper but is generally fine-grained, offering excellent friction while not being sharp to the touch. In many places the rock has cleaved vertically creating perfect cracks, corners, and arêtes but it's the unique horizontals that make it special. Due to the layering of the sedimentary rock you'll find perfect edges on otherwise blank faces or custom-cut letterbox slots for protection. Varying mineral deposits have created kaleidoscopes of color from blinding white and deep brown to the famous orange and black tiger-striped faces dotted throughout the gorge. It's the diversity that makes this rock unique. What other climbing medium yields splitter cracks, technical faces, and desperately steep roofs? It's no wonder that New River rock has been called America's Best by climbers from around the world.

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The first European settlers began exploration of the New River region in the late 1600s. Differing stories exist about how the New River acquired its name but one version is widely accepted. As explorers moved westward they would preface their territorial expansions with "New" such as "New Brittain" or "New Virginia." When they discovered a river flowing west they believed they were approaching the Pacific and finding the river unmarked on their current maps named it



TK encounters the New's brilliant stone on TK route. Photo Adam Harrington.

"New River." Farmers and trappers began to call the area home in the late 1700s when the town of Vandalia, which would later become Fayetteville, was founded. It wasn't until the industrial revolution, however, that the region would come into its own.

With the advent of the steam engine and the coal industry booming, the New River Gorge found itself at the epicenter of progress. First, the New River cut a path through the Appalachian mountain range making east to west travel through the mountains possible. Railroad tracks sprung up on both sides of the river. More importantly, the steep walls of the gorge allowed easy access to the abundant coal. Below the thick layer of Nuttall Sandstone was a horizontal seam of some of the highest quality coal in the world. The gorge walls allowed miners to easily burrow straight in from the side. Getting the coal to points east and west wasn't a problem either. Conveyor belts transported the coal



The northwest flowing New River drains into the Gulf of Mexico and is the second oldest river in the world. Photo Michael Turner.



A Victorian lady contemplates an 1899 ascent of Beauty Mountain's *Gun Club*, but is discouraged by her long dress. TK photo credit.

downhill to the processing plants on the banks of the river. From there it could be loaded onto trains and transported upstream to points east, or downstream to Charleston where it could be loaded onto ships accessing the entire Mississippi basin. Floating coal up the Ohio River to Pittsburgh was vital to the nation's production of steel, another element at the core of the industrial revolution. The New River region became a boom town, or boom towns to be more precise. Mining towns popped up overnight throughout the gorge. Thurmond, Nuttallburg, and Kaymoor are just three of the more than 60 mining operations that operated within the gorge. It could be argued that America could not have risen so quickly to industrial superpower status without the steady stream of coal pouring from either end of the New River Gorge.



The completion of the bridge in 1978 made the area accessible and led to a rebirth of the economy based on outdoor recreation. TK Photo credit.

By the end of World War II the amount of accessible coal in the region had dropped drastically. Throughout the 1950s most of the mining operations were abandoned and Fayetteville's flash-in-the-pan prosperity gave way to poverty and unemployment. As if taking its destiny into its own hands, the New River Gorge covered the ghost towns with foliage, and natural beauty returned to the gorge. In the early 1970s recreational whitewater rafting began to gain popularity; the New River was once again at the forefront of development but the trickle of commerce from folks willing to make the voyage for a scenic float trip was not putting the region back on its feet. Part of the problem was that people couldn't easily access the New.

That all changed with the completion of the New River Bridge in 1978. The bridge was an attraction in itself. It was the longest arch bridge in the world and the tallest vehicular bridge in the Americas but more importantly, it opened up north/south traffic through the region. The same year the bridge opened the National Park Service designated the 53 mile stretch of river from Hinton to Hawk's Nest a National River. With ease of access solidified, and the natural resources federally protected, the region was primed again for development of a different sort.

Throughout the 80s and 90s the whitewater industry rose from mom-and-pop operations to multi-million dollar businesses. Outdoor recreationists and interstate commerce brought money to the region and fueled a local economy that is now largely based on tourism. For the second time, Fayetteville had found itself situated in a prime position. Centrally located between the urban areas of both the eastern seaboard and the Midwest and offering world-class whitewater, climbing, and mountain-biking, the New now stands at the core of the east coast outdoor recreation scene.

### THE NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL RIVER

In 1978 President Jimmy Carter signed legislation establishing the New River Gorge National River. The 70,000 acre area covers 53 miles of river and falls under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. It was designated "for the purpose of conserving and interpreting outstanding natural, scenic, and historic values and objects in and around the New River Gorge and preserving as a free-flowing stream an important segment of the New River in West Virginia for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

The resources protected by the park are as diverse as the landscape itself. The waters of the river contain a variety of aquatic ecosystems that are home to many different species of rare fish, invertebrates, and plant life. The flanks of the gorge offer distinctly unique habitats including continuous forest, cliff side and rim-rock environments, and even abandoned mine portals. The mine portals house two endangered species of bat that are among the 63 identified mammals found in the park. Also found here is the endangered Allegheny woodrat, which scurries among the 1,342 species of plant life.

The New River Gorge lies along the migratory path of many species of bird including the fastest creature on earth, the Peregrine Falcon. In



An NPS program has helped Peregrin Falcons return to the New River Gorge. Photo Mike Turner.

1987 the Park Service began a program to help the falcons thrive along the cliffs they require for nesting. In 2009, a pair of falcons nested in the New River Gorge marking the first tangible success of their long-term project.

Protecting the biodiversity is only one aspect of the Park's conservation efforts. It is also in the interest of the NPS to preserve the historical and cultural aspects. Within the depths of the gorge are numerous abandoned ruins of a time gone by. Coal mining equipment and machinery as well as entire ghost towns line the banks of the river. Significant efforts have been made to preserve the Kaymoor and Nuttallburg coal mines offering visitors a glimpse of the bustling infrastructure that once dominated the Gorge.

While still providing a haven for wildlife and cultural preservation, the Park is visited by over one million people annually. They come to enjoy the world-class whitewater, rock climbing, mountain biking, fishing, and sight-seeing. The New River Gorge is a place where man meets nature and nowhere is that more apparent than from the cliffs that tower above this majestic river.