

When Mt. Washington, née Coal Hill, Powered the Nation

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Coal Hill may not sound familiar to modern Pittsburghers, yet it's visible from anywhere downtown. What today is known as Mount Washington was once an essential generator of the industrial boom that transformed Pennsylvania and the nation.

During the 1800s, Pennsylvania led the charge in the coal industry nationwide, as well as providing valuable fuel for the burgeoning steel industry. Even before large-scale industrialization, Coal Hill, had something special: exposed veins of coal.

"That would be back in the 1700's," said Pitt professor Elise Ryan. Ryan's perspective is rooted in a class she taught called Secret Pittsburgh, that encouraged students to explore the history of the different neighborhoods of the city. Coal Hill was one such neighborhood.

Ease of access to coal was a major factor in the region developing into an industrial powerhouse. Coal was used to fuel early pig iron plants, with one of the earliest in the city dating back to the 1700s, located near modern-day Point State Park.

"The connection between being able to just get the coal im-

mediately out of the ground [and to the plant] meant iron manufacturing goes back quite a way in the region," Ryan said.

The coal that fueled the mills led to industrial developments that evolved into Pittsburgh's iconic steel industry.

"I think that it literally shaped the region...it certainly created a mindset about the region's resources," Ryan said.

Not only has Coal Hill acted as a flashpoint for the industry that put Pittsburgh on the map, it also saw the development of two modes of transportation that are tied to the city's identity as much as the steel industry: the city's mammoth stairs and its inclines.

According to Pittsburgh history site, Brookline Connection, an early example of the iconic city stairs were the Indian Trail Steps, a mile long trail leading up the side of Mount Washington to aid workers on their trek from the neighborhoods at the bottom of the mountain to work at the top.

The route the stairs follow dates to pre-colonial times and was a treacherous dirt path up the mountain used by indigenous tribes in the area long before set-

tlers arrived.

Seeking to further expedite the transportation of workers in the now highly industrialized region, several inclines were constructed, the first of which is the still-operational Monongahela Incline. The start of the incline era marked the end of the Coal Hill era, with the name of the neighborhood being changed to Mount Washington in 1876, five years after the construction of the Monongahela incline. •

