Pedalin’ to Philly
Traveling the Schuylkill River Trail from Reading to Philadelphia
Text and photographs by Cindy Ross

STOPPING OUR BIKES ATOP AN OLD RAILROAD bridge in Reading on the Thun Trail section of the Schuylkill River Trail, we grasp the chain-link fence and gaze across the Schuylkill River to a massive, coal-powered generator plant. The steam stacks of the Titus Station look menacing, yet no sinister smoke billows out. The plant ceased operation four years ago.

As the use of coal decreases in America, replaced of late by natural gas, this now-shuttered power plant seems a fitting tribute to the partially completed, 125-mile-long Schuylkill River Trail. Today, what used to transport coal from origin to market has been transformed, populated with bicycles and pedestrians rather than canal barges and railroad cars.

Our cycling adventure began a couple days ago in Schuylkill County, where anthracite coal was first mined in 1790, and we are now midway through our journey, ready to traverse from Reading to Philadelphia. The right-of-way that we’re traveling upon once held the rails of the Pennsylvania Railroad, a later competitor of the Reading line, before it was consolidated into Conrail and then acquired by Norfolk Southern in 1997.

This section of the trail, about 60 miles long, can be cycled over a period of two days, and the Mainstay Inn in Phoenixville, just a stone’s throw from the trail on East Bridge Street, will provide a nice overnight respite. Staying at a B&B means we won’t have to carry a tent or sleeping bag, and we only need to bring a few essentials for the night.

The Thun Trail
I just met that I hailed from the Reading area, I often referenced the Reading Railroad in the game of Monopoly as a kind of landmark. One of the first railroads and the first double-track main line built in the United States, the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad was primarily constructed to move anthracite.

The highly successful line into Philadelphia was opened in 1834, and two years later, it became the nation’s first line to carry a million tons of freight in one year. The railroad’s main production and repair shops were located on a massive 36-acre complex, which comprised much of Reading’s downtown.

Today, Reading is no longer the thriving city it was back in the early 1900s when coal was king. This section’s two developed ends are linked by a four-mile, on-road midsection, and the quiet, shady River Road with its large historic, brownstone homes provides a nice deviation from the isolated trail. The delis along the way are popular spots to stop for a bite to eat.

As we make our way to Pottstown, where the Thun Trail ends, we are treated to multiple river crossings and views of the ever-widening Schuylkill River.

In Philadelphia, the Schuylkill Banks section of the trail takes riders and walkers out over the water for a truly unique view of the city and experience with the river. The trail meanders through a four-mile, on-road midsection, and the quiet, shady River Road with its large historic, brownstone homes provides a nice deviation from the isolated trail. The delis along the way are popular spots to stop for a bite to eat.

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Editor’s Note: Cindy Ross explored the first part of this trail, from Pottsville to Reading, in the July/August issue. In this edition, she finishes her biking journey along the second half, from Reading to Philadelphia.
Between Douglassville and Pottstown, we follow the edge of a vast, unbroken forest called Hopewell Big Woods. The conservation area, which contains 73,000 acres or 110 square miles of forest, offers cultural, natural and historic resources, including more than 4,000 acres of old-growth forest.

At this point, you can leave the Schuylkill River Trail and head up to French Creek State Park and from there to the Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site and Crow’s Nest Preserve, where 100 miles of trails beckon. We park our bikes and study the map, tempted to make the detour, but instead we decide to stop and see the historic buildings at the trailside attraction of Morlatton Village, which was settled in the early 1700s, when Berks County was still the frontier.

The village’s Mouns Jones House, built in 1716, is the oldest home in the county, and the stately George Douglass mansion dominates the settlement. However, the more modest White Horse Inn played an important role in history by serving as an assembly place for militia musters. Conferences between Native Lenape and local leaders, including members of the Daniel Boone family, were held there, and the tavern was an important stopping point on the main road to Philadelphia. Today, the tavern can be reserved for private parties.

Pottstown to Phoenixville

THE CHARMING RIVERSIDE BOROUGH of Pottstown is home to the headquarters of the Schuylkill River Greenway Association, which manages the entire Schuylkill River National & State Heritage Area. Stop in to learn about the watershed with the help of interactive displays and beautiful museum-quality exhibits, including a tabletop relief map of the heritage area. A large wall map spotlights visitor sites, recreational opportunities, significant trails and other points of interest. The highlight of the center, a glass “water wall” with circulating, flowing water, is meant to remind visitors about the focus of the association's efforts: the river.

Pottstown is one of three towns that provide a free bike-share program. The Schuylkill River Heritage Area staff manages a fleet of sturdy, well-maintained, easy-to-use, single-speed yellow cruisers that can be taken out for a short period or an entire day.

Before leaving Pottstown, check in at the Schuylkill River Trail headquarters at 140 College Drive to ask for route recommendations to navigate the upcoming, on-road, 7.5-mile section. The trail section picks up again in Parkerford on a trail of smooth, crushed stone and continues to Phoenixville. About 17.5 miles downstream later, we arrive in Phoenixville, where we will spend the night at the Mainstay Inn. We enjoy a dinner of pizza and wine at the inn’s Italian restaurant before heading to our room to rest up for our final day of pedaling.

Historic Diversions

As we prepare to embark on the last 30 miles of the trail, we are looking forward to some historic diversions from pedaling, beginning with Lock 60 at Oaks in Montgomery County. The Schuylkill River Canal Park here is home to one of only two surviving stretches still holding water on what was the Schuylkill River Navigation System. The only operating lock on the river is also located here. The locktender’s home, which overlooks the lock, contains exhibits, historic documents and photographs. However, since it is only open the third Sunday of each month, chances are you will only be able to explore the outside of this picturesque, historic stone home.

As we cycle past the canal, turtles slide off logs and plop into the dark water, and anglers, carrying rods and buckets of bait, head to their favorite fishing spot.

In Oaks, we decide to take a short side trip along...
Fall Festivals Along the Trail

If you plan to visit the Schuylkill River Trail this fall, you may want to check out some of these events along the route:

- 24th Annual Conshohocken FunFest, Saturday, September 23
- Craft Marketplace, Sly Fox Brewery Can Jam Festival, Pottstown, September 30
- Phoenixville Blues Festival, Sunday, September 9
- Revolutionary Row Scramble/Walk, Perkiomen Trail, Saturday, September 16
- 20th Annual Conshohocken FunFest, Saturday, September 23
- Mayhem at Morlatton, Saturday, October 28
- Schuylkill River Trail are available online at schuylkillrivertrail.com or bikeschuylkill.org. Additional details on the river National and State Heritage Area, go to schuylkill.org.

Heading Into Philadelphia, the attractions continue to come as fast as we can pedal. Where the trail parallels Kelly Drive and enters Fairmont Park, we pass a world-renowned sculpture park, wall murals and seven historic homes. We pedal by Boathouse Row with its line of clubhouses, the Philadelphia Art Museum and the Fairmont Waterworks Interpretive Center.

For the last leg of the Schuylkill River Trail, a 2,000-foot-long concrete boardwalk provides a spectacular finale to our ride. Built 50 feet from the shore, this over-the-water extension was added because the trail on land was crowded out by the railroad that still uses the tracks. The boardwalk features four lookouts with benches where travelers can stop to take in the expansive views of the river and city skyline. Solar-powered overhead lights make this trail section accessible at night, and the boardwalk is visited by some 19,000 users every week.

Before officially ending our trip, we have one last stretch of the Schuylkill River Trail to experience: the Bartram Mile, which opened last spring. The trail loops around Philadelphia’s hidden gem, Bartram’s Garden, a historic, 45-acre botanical garden located across the river from Grays Ferry. In 1728, America’s first botanist, John Bartram, purchased 102 acres of land along the Schuylkill to house his collection of North American plants.

Today, visitors can enjoy this free public park and see such sights as the oldest ginkgo tree in America and the city’s largest community orchard. Bartram’s handmade, historic stone home and garden are National Historic Landmarks, and guided tours are available.

Plans are under way to link the Schuylkill River Trail in center city to Bartram’s Garden, but in the meantime cyclists can access Bartram Mile by either navigating a short distance on the road from the South Street Bridge or taking a Schuylkill River tour aboard a boat from the Patriot Harbor Lines. The Patriot is a reproduction of a classic 1920s mini-commuter yacht, and cruises depart from the Walnut Street Dock, which is located on the Schuylkill River Trail along the east bank of the river. In addition to tours of Bartram’s Garden, the line offers a one-hour cruise along the tidal river. “The Secrets of the Schuylkill” is a great way to learn more about the history of the river.

While on the Bartram house tour, I spy two photos of the Bartram family, one from the 1800s and the other from the 1980s. John Bartram, one of the descendants of the 19th century family, lives in Schuylkill County, where our 125-mile cycling adventure began. Deeply inspired by his botanist ancestor, Bartram personally orchestrated the building of the Schuylkill River Trail at its northern origin in Schuylkill County as a way for trail users to trace the path of coal to Philadelphia.

And so our cycling adventure began and ended with the Bartram family to create a perfect example of the interconnectedness of time and space.