An Uncommon Passage
Edited by Edward K. Muller
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The Great Allegheny Passage, a biking and hiking trail built along former railroad lines, cuts through the Allegheny Mountains to link Pittsburgh with Cumberland, Maryland. It generally follows the National Road and Braddock’s Road as well as ancient Native American paths. An Uncommon Passage is a collection of six essays edited by Edward K. Muller, each exploring a different era of the Passage’s history. Helping tell this story are scores of contemporary and historic photographs, maps, and illustrations.

Martin West, director of the Fort Ligonier Association, describes British endeavors to cut a road through the Alleghenies that would allow them to confront the French at Fort Duquesne. A young George Washington made one of the first attempts in 1754, but the mountains, rivers, marshes, and dense forests slowed his progress. The following year, with considerably more resources at his disposal, General Edward Braddock cleared a 12-foot-wide road, broad enough for wagons to pass single file. Though it would lead him to a stunning defeat, Braddock’s road remained in use in the years following the French and Indian War, bringing settlers to southwestern Pennsylvania.

The rugged terrain of the Alleghenies proved no match for 19th century technology. In an essay exploring the role industrialization played in the region, Robert Gangewere, former editor of Carnegie Magazine, details undertakings by the railroad industry to connect coal-rich southwestern Pennsylvania to the Pittsburgh and Baltimore markets. During the mid-1800s, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad laid tracks along the banks of the Youghiogheny and Casselman rivers, a level path carved through thousands of years of erosion. Fifty years later, with the easiest route already taken, the Western Maryland Railway built bridges, viaducts, and tunnels to carry its trains over rivers and through mountains.

Today, the Western Maryland route forms a substantial chunk of the Great Allegheny Passage. Paul Wiegman chronicles the efforts of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and regional rail-trail groups to convert abandoned rail lines into trails. The logistical challenges of acquiring the land and updating 100-year-old infrastructure seem nearly as daunting as constructing a road through the Alleghenies in the first place. Wiegman also contributes dazzling contemporary photographs of the Passage, many of which would not seem out of place hanging on a museum wall.

An Uncommon Passage is not a mile-by-mile guide of what to expect when traveling the Great Allegheny Passage. Instead, it is a comprehensive biography of the trail aimed at those seeking more information on its place in regional history rather than what can be gleaned from the historical markers that dot the trail.

Reviewed by Matthew Strauss, Digital Collections Archivist