

# TRAIL SERIES

# KINZUA BRIDGE STATE PARK

Winter brings a unique atmosphere to the area surrounding Kinzua Bridge State Park, where forests and snow-covered trails create a peaceful setting for outdoor exploration. Approaching the park along the Knox and Kane Rail Trail offers a gradual journey through history, following a corridor once used by trains hauling coal and timber through the region. The towering remains of the Kinzua Bridge still dominate the landscape and show visitors the massive engineering ambition that shaped the area. Today, the park blends recreation and education, giving hikers, cyclists, and families an opportunity to experience scenic views while learning about Pennsylvania's railroad heritage and the powerful forces of nature that changed it.

## Winter at Kinzua Bridge

by Melanie A. Wood

Punxsutawney Phil apparently knew what he was talking about this year. February delivered another snowstorm, and the fresh snowfall created the perfect setting for a winter hike toward one of Pennsylvania's most fascinating landmarks. Our route began along the Knox and Kane Rail Trail, heading toward the famous Kinzua Bridge inside Kinzua Bridge State Park.

The Knox and Kane Rail Trail follows the former railroad corridor of the Knox and Kane Railroad, which once hauled lumber, coal, and passengers through the forests of northwestern Pennsylvania. Today, sections of the old rail

massive steel structure begins to appear through the trees. On this particular day, the scene felt cinematic. The dark iron of the bridge contrasted sharply against the fresh white snow. The effect was striking enough to resemble something out of an old black and white film.

The history of the Kinzua Bridge is as dramatic as its appearance. When it was first constructed in 1882, the bridge was considered one of the greatest engineering achievements of its time. Designed by civil engineer Octave Chanute, the original structure stood more than 300 feet tall and stretched over 2,000 feet across the Kinzua



through the valley and toppled many of the bridge's massive steel towers. Eleven of the twenty towers collapsed and twisted across the valley floor in a scene that looked like

every sound, the forest stands still, and the towering bridge looms above like a monument to another time. Hiking in along the Knox and Kane Rail Trail offers not just exercise and scenery, but also a journey through the layers of Pennsylvania's industrial past. Now that March has arrived and the ground is beginning to

thaw, Kinzua Bridge State Park will soon welcome more visitors eager to explore the trails beneath the bridge. Families will return to walk the paths through the valley, see the fallen towers up close, and experience the powerful story of engineering, nature, and history that makes this place so memorable.

### If You Do It

**Location:** Kinzua Bridge State Park is located at 296 Viaduct Road near the town of Mount Jewett in McKean County.

**Trail access:** The Knox and Kane Rail Trail connects to the park area and follows the historic rail corridor once used by the Knox and Kane Railroad. The trail surface is crushed limestone and generally wide and level, making it suitable for hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing in winter.

**Distance:** Hikers can choose distances depending on where they start along the rail trail. A walk from nearby trailheads into the park and back can range from a couple of miles to much longer out-and-back trips.

**Park highlights:** Visitors can walk the Kinzua Skywalk, which extends along the remaining portion of the historic Kinzua Bridge.

**Facilities:** The park includes a visitor center with exhibits about the bridge's history, restrooms, picnic areas, and parking. Hours may vary by season, so check park information before visiting.



bed have been converted into a 7.5 mile multi-use trail that welcomes hikers, cyclists, and cross-country skiers. In winter, the wide and relatively gentle grade becomes especially inviting for cross country skiing. Fresh snow blankets the path and the trail stretches ahead like a white ribbon winding through the trees. Our goal was the Kinzua Bridge, and reaching it this way added a sense of anticipation to the journey. The trail gradually leads you through the forest until the

Creek valley. At the time of its completion, it was the tallest railroad bridge in the world.

The bridge was rebuilt in 1900 using stronger steel to handle heavier locomotives. For decades, trains carried coal, timber, and passengers across the enormous viaduct high above the valley floor. The structure became a regional landmark and a symbol of the industrial growth that shaped this part of Pennsylvania. Nature eventually changed the story. In July of 2003, a powerful tornado swept

something from a giant's scrap yard. Rather than rebuild the entire structure, the state preserved what remained and transformed the site into a unique park experience.

Today, in warmer weather, visitors can walk out onto the remaining portion of the bridge on the Kinzua Skywalk and look down through a glass observation platform toward the valley and the fallen towers below.

A winter visit amplifies the feeling of an era lost and transformed. The snow softens



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