

# Then and Now: Black Diamond Trail soon becoming reality

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(Photo: Provided photo)

Let's get one thing clear. This is not a steep ski trail, though you can ski on it.

The history of ski trail ratings is unclear, but using the symbol of a black diamond for the steepest ski runs may have originated with the Walt Disney Company when it built a resort in California.

This black diamond refers to coal, which was mined in northeast Pennsylvania. It became a huge economic engine for energy and commerce in the late 1800s.

Ithaca built its first railroad in 1832 with one main aim: to get coal from Pennsylvania to the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. Only by 1873, aided in part by Ezra Cornell, a second rail line was built from Geneva to Ithaca.

In 1874 it connected with the Ithaca & Athens, down into the Susquehanna Valley of Pennsylvania, and both those roads became part of wealthy **Asa Packer's** Lehigh Valley Railroad, with its arteries and capillaries all through the Pennsylvania coal country.

Starting in 1896, the road's premier train was the luxuriously equipped "Black Diamond Express." It ran from Jersey City to Buffalo and Niagara Falls and was named, of course, for the most profitable commodity on the railroad: coal.

In later years it was also known by some as "The Honeymoon Express," as many newlyweds took the train to the famed falls as their first connubial trip.

By the 1950s, following World War II, transportation was changing with more private autos and better highways. Passenger trains were in serious decline, as were shorter railroads generally.

By 1959, the Black Diamond no longer ran, and the railroad line from Ithaca to Trumansburg was abandoned by 1962. The woods and gorges that once echoed to the 70 mph rush of steel wheels and blasts of diesel horns had only the quiet murmur of falling creek waters and birdsong.

Some few saw this as an opportunity. The old rail route from near Cass Park to the rail bridge over the gorge at Taughannock could make a great alternate non-automotive route for hikers, bikers and skiers. Part had already been leased for NYSEG (New York State Electric and Gas) to run its power lines up West Hill.

By the early 1970s, the State Parks Commission proposed the idea of a hiking trail to follow the line of the railroad, and in 1983 it made an agreement with the City and Town of Ithaca to create it.

Things moved slowly but were helped in the 1990s by a federal grant and the hard work of State Parks Natural Resource Planner **Sue Poelvoorde**. In 1999, NYSEG granted an easement and land transfer to the State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation for 10 miles of trail, and hopes rose that the trail would quickly soon.

While it is never easy to build a new recreational trail past miles of private property, persistent efforts through the next decade kept the possibility alive. Volunteers came forward to help clear portions of the now-overgrown trail. The County Highway Department offered heavy equipment and personnel help, as did State Parks.

With ongoing enthusiasm from a community group, BDTEN, and ups and downs from the State of New York through possible financial aid, the Black Diamond Trail kept getting closer, like a glimpsed viewpoint on a long hike.

By 2014, major obstacles had been crossed, like bridges across Glenwood and Willow creeks, repair of serious gully washouts caused by summer torrents, and acquisition of the final bits of land.

At the end of this year, we will all have a new way to get from Ithaca to Taughannock (or vice versa). It's uphill going north, but never more than a gentle gradient.

The sound of traffic is mostly distant. There is a wonderful feeling to be walking through woods, past many small creeks and alongside open fields with birdsong, the occasional deer or even a wild turkey crossing ahead of you.

The surface will eventually permit bicycling. In winter, the trail provides great cross-country skiing, gliding along beneath crisp winter skies.

This is the new Black Diamond Trail: easy enough for anyone to traverse.

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