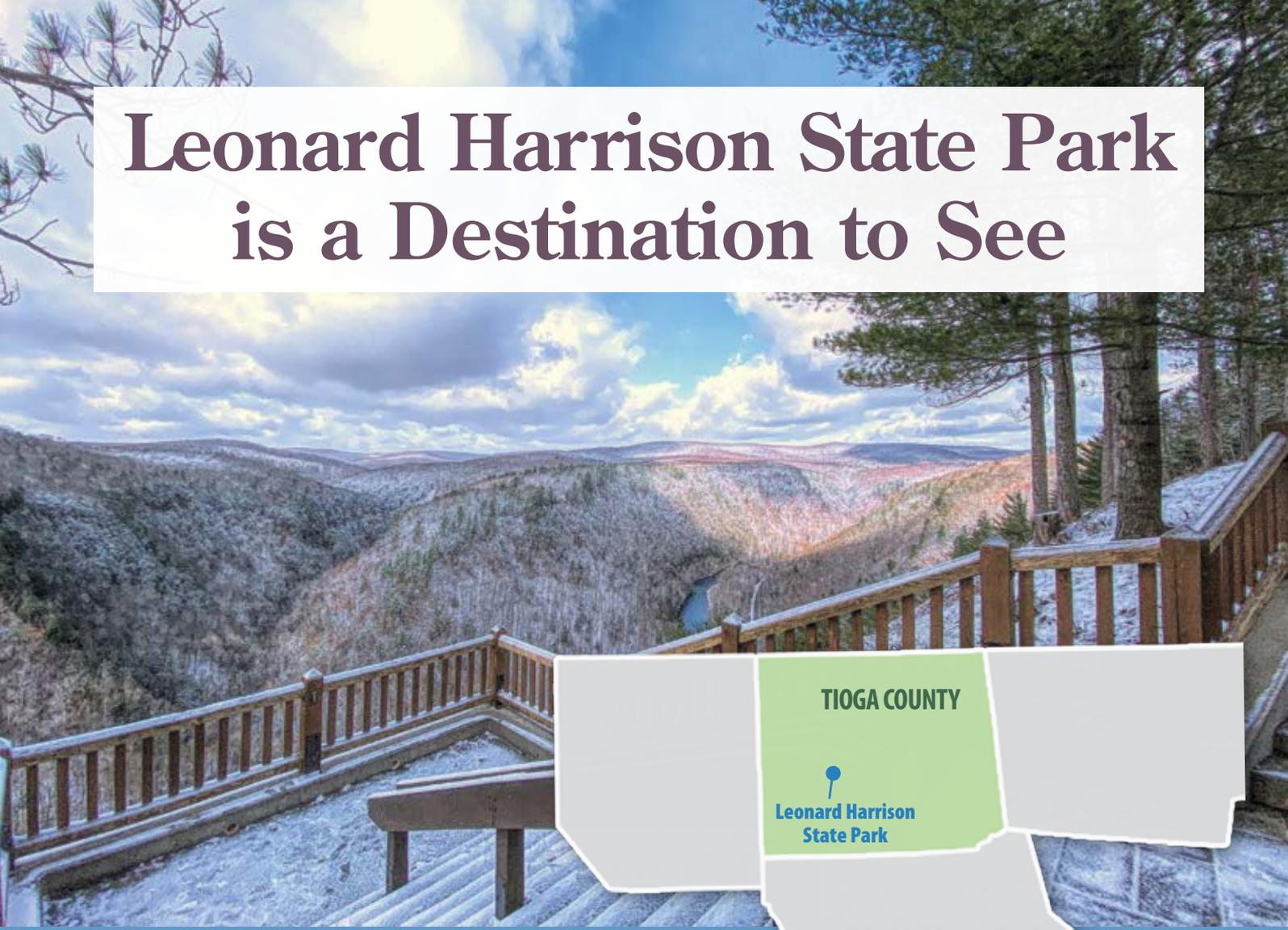


Leonard Harrison State Park is a Destination to See



by Linda Stager photos by the author

The cold winter wind howls and stings my face. Its bitter coldness bites into the skin on my hands and my fingers, even while wearing warm gloves. I feel the familiar sense of my fingers starting to numb.

But, I do not move away. This is where I want to be today. The scene is magnificent as it lifts my spirits. It does not matter when I visit this place; it is simply good for my soul. This scene is one of the most sought out destinations in Pennsylvania.

This place is the overlook at Leonard Harrison State Park. The overlook is a tiny fenced-in concrete platform perhaps 24- by 10-feet that clings to the cliffs on the rim of the Pine Creek Gorge. From here, visitors may gaze north or south for a spectacular panoramic view of the remote, isolated wilderness known as the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon. Across the gorge, the overlooks at Colton Point State Park, a sister park on the west rim of the gorge, are barely seen.

The Pine Creek Gorge here is almost 4,000-foot wide (a little more than $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile) and 800-foot deep (.15 mile). In places, it is almost 1,000-foot deep. But, all through the gorge, Pine Creek, the largest “creek” in the country and one of Pennsylvania’s

designated “Scenic Rivers,” runs through the bottom, separating the gorge into two isolated, wooded, and divided areas.

The Pine Creek Gorge was designated a National Natural Landmark in 1968, and its 12,163 acres is also protected as a Pennsylvania State Natural Area. The rocks are estimated to have been around for about 400 million years, but the gorge itself was carved about 20,000 years ago during the last Ice Age. It is a geological landmark, formed by water erosion and cut through five major rock formations.

In its early years, previous to the human ecological destruction eras, the area was 85% hemlock and pines, with the rest of the trees being hardwood. It was said to be the home to a herd of 12,000 American bison. There were also herds of elk and some of its other wildlife inhabitants included the Pennsylvania panther, wolves, wolverines, and lynx.

In 1794, two early explorers found the northern end of the gorge and followed Pine Creek to explore the areas along the early Native American walkway. They found a lush wilderness and a creek full of trout and other fish.

Shad, salmon, and eels were also inhabitants of the fresh and pristine waters.

By the early 19th century, opportunistic industrialists found something of great value in the 47-mile wilderness along Pine Creek that is now designated the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon. The pines and hemlocks were sought out as ship masts. During the lumbering era, trees were cut and floated downstream on Pine Creek to the Susquehanna River and beyond to the Chesapeake Bay, where mills and shipbuilding factories awaited.

Once the pines were gone, local lumbermen moved on to the hardwoods of the forest. Sawmills dotted the countryside. In 1883, the Jersey Shore, Pine Creek, and Buffalo railroad was built along Pine Creek through the bottom of the gorge to haul lumber, freight, and passengers through the wilderness.

By the early 20th century, the entire area was clear-cut, and the gorge was now bare. Erosion and landslides followed as did fires. The land was barren and wasted.

One of the area's lumbermen, Leonard Harrison, had a sawmill at Tiadaghton, a small railroad town located partway through the most isolated portion of the Pine Creek Gorge. The mill burned, and the town eventually became a ghost town. Harrison was living in Wellsboro, Tioga County, at the time, and was active there as a civic leader. He helped construct the sandstone courthouse on Main Street, rebuilt the historic Penn Wells Hotel after a devastating fire, and assisted with many projects in the borough including drawing up plans for what was to ultimately become Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hospital (now UPMC Susquehanna).

In 1906, Harrison bought 121 acres of land at the site of the current Leonard Harrison State Park. Harrison wanted to develop the area for tourism. He created the "Lookout" and invited the public to visit.

In 1922, Harrison donated his picnic grounds to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Over the following years, the state slowly bought other lands, often abandoned lumber companies in the gorge area, and those lands ultimately became the Tioga State Forest located across the gorge from

Harrison's "Lookout." Now, the state forest encompasses 160,000 acres, and Leonard Harrison State Park on the east rim of the canyon has grown to its current 585 acres nestled among private lands.

The park saw many improvements during the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) era. Its pavilions, comfort facilities, and roads were all built by the "CCC Boys," members of the local CCC camps. Today, there is a bronze statue of a CCC worker at the park that stands in tribute to their contributions.

Through the years, the park and surrounding areas continued to attract statewide and national attention. According to Church Dillon, well-known Tioga County author and naturalist, the area now has over 225 species of wildflowers, plants, and trees. The forest is lush and vibrant. There are scattered stands of old forest, but most of the gorge is now second-growth trees that may be over 100 years old. The fall "leaf peeping" season is especially popular because of the warm fall colors of the many hardwoods that populate the canyon's sides.

Recreation is a popular activity. Pine Creek becomes wild enough for a few weeks of river running by kayak, canoe, or raft. By summer, the river is host to tubing activities.

Likewise, fishing in legendary Pine Creek is superb during certain times of the year. Fall is the perfect time for trout fishing, as the waters cool and rise from fall rains. During the summer, warmwater fishing is popular, but trout fishing is paramount during the spring and fall months. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) stocks parts of the creek with trophy trout. Another area, south of the park, is stocked by the Pennsylvania Brown Trout Club. Various regulations exist across the length of Pine Creek including Delayed Harvest Artificial Lures Only, Catch and Release All Tackle, and conventional Commonwealth



The Leonard Harrison State Park entrance.



A fall day at Leonard Harrison State Park, Tioga County.



Fog rolls in for sunset at Leonard Harrison State Park.

Inland Waters regulations. For more information, see the *Pennsylvania Fishing Summary*.

In warmer weather, when Pine Creek waters are warm and low, bass fishing rules. Not far from Leonard Harrison State Park are Lake Hamilton and Lake Nessmuk, just outside Wellsboro, that provide fishing opportunities. Further away is Hills Creek State Park. Bring a boat or fish from shore.

Back at Leonard Harrison State Park, high on the canyon's rim, sits one of the best camping areas in northern Pennsylvania. The park is known for its views from the lookouts, but its campground is a great staging area for local outdoor activities.

The campground is located along an unpaved loop driveway and has approximately 24 campsites. Some of the sites have electrical hookups. The campsites are a mix of shaded and sunny areas. The campground has fire rings, picnic tables, a playground, and campground amenities like a dump station and comfort stations with hot water showers. It is open from April to October.

Summer and fall are the seasons during which most people visit because of the scenic views and ample outdoor recreation opportunities near the park. Hiking is a popular activity. The park is host to the 1 mile (one way) Turkey Path Trail that snakes back and forth along a mixture of dirt path and wooden walkways down the side of the gorge to its base. The Turkey Path Trail ends at the Pine Creek Rail Trail, the award-winning multi-purpose biking and walking path that follows the route of the original Jersey Shore, Pine Creek, and Buffalo railroads. Pine Creek will be in front of visitors who make it to the bottom of the path. The Turkey Path Trail passes a series of seasonal waterfalls along Little Four Mile Run. But, visitors should be warned that the path is steep with rugged terrain. Hiking the path is for the hearty. Know your limits and take it slow and easy on the way back up the side of the gorge.

A less strenuous trail is the Overlook Trail that makes its way to Otter View lookout along a ¾ mile (one way) hiking path. All of the trails at the park pass close by to

many steep cliffs and follow rugged terrain. Stay on designated trails, and wear sturdy footwear. Not only will you be safer, but you will protect fragile vegetation and minimize erosion.

No description is complete without mentioning the opportunities provided by the Pine Creek Rail Trail, the 62-mile trail that starts 3 miles north of Wellsboro and ends in Jersey Shore. This basically flat, smooth surface, well-groomed, hard-packed limestone trail is doable by all.

While at the park, panoramic views are only

100 yards past the Visitors Center at the entrance to the park. It is an easy, mostly flat walk along the rim of the canyon to the overlooks. Those interested in walking to the cliffside viewing platform will negotiate a series of 52 concrete steps and intervals of flagstone landings.

During the summer season, interpretive and educational programs are provided by park staff and volunteers. Educational displays including a video are available in the park's environmental interpretive center.

The spectacular vistas at Leonard Harrison State Park are a draw for visitors year-round. Even during the off-season, visitors may carefully traverse the walkways at the park and stand in awe on the viewing platforms. All of the park's trails are closed starting in October because of the extreme danger from ice and snow.

Whenever you visit Leonard Harrison State Park, it is a good time to think about the far-ranging vision of Leonard Harrison, who can be credited with the creation of this high-demand destination. Standing in this spectacular location, no matter the weather or the season, his gift is felt with all of the senses. ☐

More information:

Leonard Harrison State Park, Tioga County, in north-central Pennsylvania, is about 10 miles west of Wellsboro, a quaint Victorian town with good restaurants and shops.

The park is reached via PA Route 660 West from Wellsboro. Detailed Information is on the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources website at www.dcnr.pa.gov.

Visit the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon and fish for trout in one of Pennsylvania's best scenic rivers. Throw a line into a local lake, and try your hand for warmwater fish species. Hike the many trails in the state parks or Tioga State Forest. Bicycle the award-winning Pine Creek Rail Trail. Consider cross country skiing during snowy periods or snowmobiling the many miles of forestry roads during the winter months.