

Tool Houses

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

While traveling the Montour Trail at several locations, you might pass a concrete slab with rails imbedded in it next to the trail. These were the foundations for tool sheds – listed as tool houses on railroad track charts – which were used by the railroad section gangs. The slabs supported a 12 foot by 16 foot steel shed. The rails allowed a motorcar or hand cart to be wheeled in and out of the shed.

The Montour Railroad employed several track section gangs, each having a section of track where they were responsible for maintenance. A similar method is still in use today by the Friends of the Trail groups, as each local group of volunteers maintains a section of trail and have their own buildings or sheds to store mowers, trimmers and tools needed for those never-ending tasks.

Tool houses were spaced along the main line to give the track gangs easy access to work their various sections of the railroad, holding materials and tools used by the workers. Spike kegs, tie plates, joiner bars and bolts, along with track tools were stored in the sheds. Most had a pot-bellied stove as the houses were used as a shelter for the track gangs year-round. A gasoline powered motorcar was also stored and used by the gang to carry the men, materials and tools to a work site. A pushcart pulled by the motor car might be used as well. The pushcart, new ties and rail sections were usually stored outside the tool house.

The houses were made up of sheet steel panels that had interlocking tabs with steel wedges that held them together. They were basically 4-foot panels that formed the walls, some including windows or doors for access. They could be disassembled and moved if necessary when a section of track was added or abandoned.



The tool house at Gilmore Junction is seen in this 1981 scene. The doors on the left side gave a motorcar stored inside access to the main line track. Tim Sposato photo

A few of the houses were made of wood and had either wood or cinder floors instead of a concrete slab. These types typically did not have a motorcar inside and were of various sizes. The sheds were secured by a standard Montour switch lock.

One of the easiest to find is at Gilmore Junction in Cecil Township at trail mile 21.5, which has an open shelter installed on the slab. It is adjacent to the Southview Road crossing where the Westland Branch, with its active railroad line, diverges from the main trail.



**The tool house slab at Gilmore Junction shows rails imbedded in the concrete slab.
Bryan Seip photo**

There was a tool house at Montour Junction that was used until the end of railroad operations. Others were listed on the track chart and a concrete slab may still be found at several of those sites. These were located at: Imperial (trail mile 8), McAdams (mile 15), Gilmore Junction (mile 21.5), Cowden (mile 23.5), Georgetown (mile 27.2), Thompsonville (mile 31) and McMurray (mile 32.5).

Champion (mile 12.7) and Library Viaduct (mile 37) had wooden sheds, but no visible remains can be seen at these sites.

A few of the tool houses were repurposed when the railroad ceased operations in the 1980's. The Montour Junction and Cowden houses were acquired and moved to the Pennsylvania Trolley Museum, where they were combined to make a storage shed that was used for 30 more years. The McMurray house was moved to an adjacent property where it was used as a horse stable and then storage. These houses were acquired several years ago by the Age of Steam Roundhouse, which combined reusable parts of the three to restore a complete Montour tool house for use and display on the Roundhouse property.



A weed covered concrete slab with rails embedded shows the former location of a tool house at trail mile 15. Bryan Seip photo.

In the later years of railroad operations, the motorcars and the tool houses themselves were phased out of use as track gangs used hi-rail vehicles which could be driven on roads as well as rails to access work sites on the railroad.



Salvageable pieces of three original sheds were used to reconstruct a Montour tool house at the Age of Steam Roundhouse. Tim Sposato photo