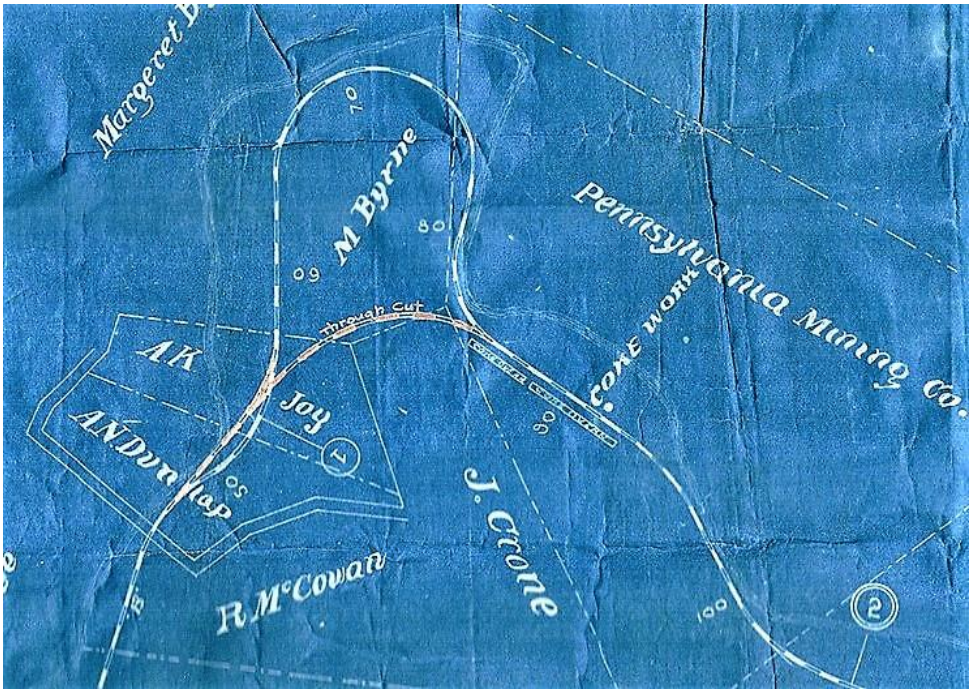
Coke Ovens on the Montour Railroad

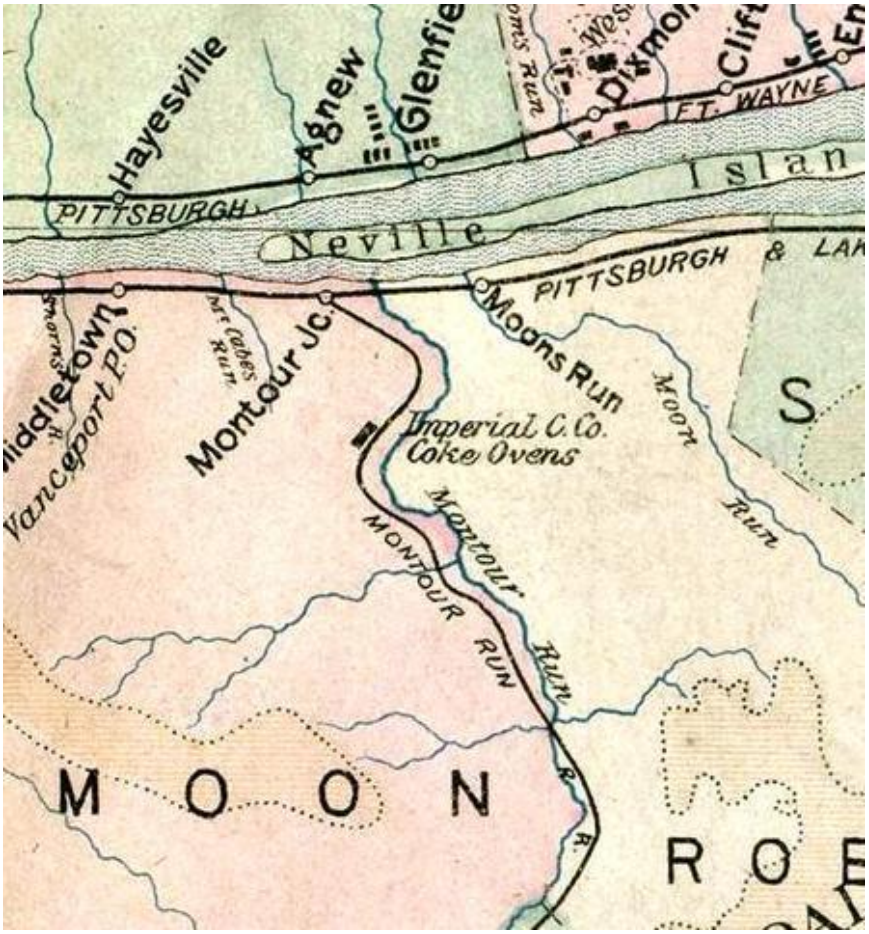
By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

One of the first industries to be serviced by the Montour Railroad was a coke works operated by the Imperial Coal Company, who also owned the railroad. The coke works ran along the railroad just outside of Montour Junction. It was located at Trail Mile 0.3.

The accompanying map from 1881 shows the Montour main line running along Montour Run. Trail Mile 0 is at the left in the A. N. Dunlap property. The original main line ran in a loop along Montour Run around the M. Byrne property. Later, the marked “through cut” was made in the hillside to eliminate the sharp curves along the creek. This is the current trail right of way. Where the railroad Mile 1 is marked in the A. K. Joy property is the current trailhead parking area and road leading to Harry Snyder Steel. Coming out of the cut, where the fenced-in remediation area is now located, was the site of the coke ovens.



The second map also shows the location of the coke ovens as just past the big sweeping curve coming out of Montour Junction. This curve is the parking area and hillside cut at trail Mile 0.



A newspaper article from The Telegraph of June 25, 1879 stated:
“The Montour Coal Co. commenced shipping coal from its new mines over the Pittsburg & Lake Erie road last week. They are making extensive preparations for mining and shipping coal west from these works. They have two banks open, which are reached by a branch road running from Montour station, nine miles to the first and eleven miles to the second. They expect to mine from five to six hundred tons of coal daily. Houses for the accomodation of their men are being erected as speedily as possible, averaging one completed every four days. The vein of coal averages about five feet, and is said to be a kind of block coal. The company will also build a number of coke ovens on the lower end of the branch, near the river, which they will coke the bottom coal and slack. The work is in charge of an experienced and energetic management, and will doubtless soon give steady employement to quite a number of men."

The coal used to manufacture coke was supplied mainly from the Dickson/Cliff Mine and the Partridge Mine, both in the Imperial area. It could be delivered directly from the mines to the coke works by the Montour Railroad. The finished coke was then shipped through the Montour’s connection with the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad at Montour Junction.

From the Colliery Engineer, August 1887:
"The Imperial Coal Company, whose works are on the Montour railroad, will this week complete 42 more coke ovens. This will make the entire number of ovens at that place 102. The firm makes coke from slack or refuse from the mines. The bulk of the coke

goes to the mills operated by Chauncy Andrews, who is interested in several mills at Youngstown, Ohio, and who is also a stockholder in the Imperial Coal Company."

In a coke oven battery, a number of ovens are built in a row with common walls between neighboring ovens. Sometimes there were hundreds in a row. A fire brick chamber is typically 12 ft wide and 8 ft high. The roof has a hole for charging the coal from the top. The discharging hole is provided in the lower part of the side wall. The number of beehive ovens in the Pittsburgh coal seam peaked in 1910 at almost 48,000.

After 1900, the serious environmental damage of beehive coking attracted national notice. The advent of by-product coke ovens in the early 1900s brought the dominance of beehive ovens to an end. By-product ovens captured and recycled the chemical byproducts expelled during coking. Those byproducts became the foundation of the chemical and plastics industries in the twentieth century.

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