

Historic Towns Across America. Altoona, Pennsylvania



History of Altoona

The area of Altoona was mostly inhabited by the Iroquois league until settlers came to the future Altoona area around the mid-1700s. Shortly before the War for Independence began in 1775 several forts and stockades were built around the Altoona settlement to protect the settlers from the British and their Native American allies. Several of the forts also had the responsibility of mining lead and making bullets for the Continental Army. However, the problem of the American army not having enough lead was soon solved by the entrance of the French into the conflict. In 1811 the iron industry began to become prominent in the area with the establishment of the Allegheny Furnace. Unlike many Pennsylvania towns, Altoona thrived, not on coal mining, but on the railroad industry. By 1849 the rails of much of the Pennsylvania Railroad had been laid. Altoona soon became notable for its construction of the railroad and especially the forging of the Horseshoe Curve in 1854. The Horseshoe Curve saw great use especially during World Wars I and II. During World War II the Nazis even sent three spies to Altoona in an attempt to sabotage the Horseshoe Curve and thus prevent any more supplies from getting to the Army. This attempt failed since the three men were captured, put on trial, and executed. After World War II Altoona saw a steady decline in both population and the railroading business. Steam trains were soon replaced with diesel and electric engines and halted the need for Altoona to produce trains any longer.



Location/Driving Directions

Altoona is located in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains literally in between the two major cities of Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. If you are travelling from any direction or any nearby airport, such as Altoona-

Blair County Airport or Pittsburgh International Airport, you need to generally stay on Interstate 99 North and then take Exit 33. This route should take you into the middle of Altoona.

President At the Time of Town Founding/Political Environment

Altoona officially became a borough in 1849, which was around twelve years before the Civil War came to fruition. Zachary Taylor had ascended to the presidency in 1849 and thus he was the president of the United States at the time Altoona first became a town. Since these were the years leading up to the Civil War, relations between the North and the South were rather tense and strained. Slavery was not the main cause of the South seceding, in fact slavery was a mere side issue, the real reasoning behind the secession was states' rights. Are states sovereign entities capable of self-government? Or is there a need for a strong centralized government to dictate what the states must do? The United States at this time was also in the process of expanding and adding on new territories and states, in a sense living out manifest destiny.

Oldest/Largest Businesses Today

Of course one of the largest and oldest businesses in Altoona is the railroad. Although, as aforementioned, Altoona no longer produces trains many people living in this area are still employed in the railroad industry, mainly to repair and maintain locomotives. Locomotives are still a major way of transporting goods throughout the United States and the Horseshoe Curve is still put to good use, averaging about fifty trains a



day rumbling over its tracks. Another prominent business is Boyer's Candies, which was founded in Altoona in the year 1936. This company's signature product is the Mallo Cup which can be found in stores virtually all throughout Altoona and the surrounding areas. There is also the historical Mishler Theatre which opened in 1906. The Mishler was in operation until about the 1940s when it closed down for a short period, eventually reopening in 1969. It has been putting on plays and hosting symphony orchestras ever since. There are also other large businesses in Altoona, one of the main employment opportunities is the health care industry, but the majority of them are chain restaurants and shopping malls.

City Government



Altoona City Hall

Altoona, as of two weeks ago, changed its

form of government to the Home Rule Charter form of government. The Home Rule Charter is a type of government where the city essentially becomes its own little self-government. This system of government shifts much of the power from the state legislature to the local community. A charter for this type of government is drawn up and can be amended by the voters through referendum; the charter is essentially a local constitution. The Altoona council now has six council members and a mayor. The mayor and council members are all elected to serve for four years. The new meeting times of the council can be found in this PDF:

<http://www.altoonapa.gov/Lists/City%20of%20Altoona%20Announcements/Attachments/475/Council%20Meeting%20Schedule%202015.pdf>

Historical Attractions/Festivals/Town Events

Altoona has several different annual festivals including the Tour de Toona, which is a prelude to the Tour de France, the Native American Pow wow, Summer Thunder, "Harvestfest", Italian Food & Heritage Festival, and many more! These festivals aren't listed on Altoona's city government website but the events can be found on <http://www.pennsylvania-mountains-of-attractions.com/PA-festivals.html> . As stated before, the Horseshoe Curve was not only an important part of the railroad but it was an amazing engineering feat that made Altoona famous. If you'd like to learn more about the Horseshoe Curve and the railroads in Altoona the Pennsylvania Altoona Railroaders Memorial Museum is a wonderful place to receive detailed information on

Fort Roberdeau



this subject. Another popular historical attraction is Fort Roberdeau. Although the original fort fell apart long ago this reproduction of the mid-18th Century fort is definitely worth visiting if you want to get a good idea of what the pre-Altoona area was like.

Where to Stay if Visiting Altoona

There are nine inns and three motels in Altoona so don't feel as if there will be lack of accommodations. Several of Altoona's inns are conveniently located off Interstate 99 N so you can easily find them and make reservations. Almost all of these inns have Internet access, TV, indoor pools, and other such modern conveniences. If you would prefer a rustic Bed and Breakfast that is dedicated to Appalachian culture then the nearest B&B would be the Allegheny Street Bed and Breakfast. This B&B is located in Hollidaysburg, which is only about six miles away from Altoona. This B&B doesn't have television but it does have Internet



Allegheny St. Bed & Breakfast access and the most extensive collection of mountain dulcimers in the country. You can get more information about modern hotels on this website. <http://www.altoonapa.gov/Pages/Lodging.aspx> . If you would prefer the Bed and Breakfast you can find more information about it on this website dedicated to finding B&Bs: <http://www.bedandbreakfast.com/pa-hollidaysburg-alleghenystreetbedandbreakfast.html#details>

Why Do I Want to Visit this Town?

Altoona has long been the historical and cultural center of the Appalachian Mountain region in Southwestern Pennsylvania. It is not only a beautiful city nestled in the heart of the mountains but it also holds a portion of Pennsylvania history. I myself have visited almost the entire Altoona area and have found it to be one of the most fascinating and memorable journeys through the history of my state and indeed some of the history of my country. When you travel to Altoona and visit the many historical landmarks and experience the events that this town has to offer it really makes you appreciate the Allegheny Mountain area and the role it played in shaping Pennsylvania's history.

Links You May Wish to Visit

<http://www.altoonapa.gov/Pages/Home.aspx>

<http://www.pennsylvania-mountains-of-attractions.com/PA-festivals.html>

<http://ilovealtoona.com/>

Altoona, Pennsylvania

U.S. History Section III

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