

## ***A HIKE ALONG THE KEYSTONE ARCH BRIDGES TRAIL***

The KAB Trail not only takes one to the first series of stone arch railroad bridges built in America but tracks the first National Wild & Scenic River and the longest stretch of free-flowing river in MA, all within the states' largest roadless wilderness.

This unmatched historic and environmental experience is 90% within the town of Middlefield and Hampshire County, with portions in Chester; Hampden County and Becket; Berkshire County.

The trail is accessed from Herbert Cross Rd, off Middlefield Rd. in Chester. Park by the kiosk and begin walking. At the bottom of the hill, bear to the left, following Babcock Brook to its confluence with the Westfield River. Looming above you will be the 45-foot-high double arch bridge. This bridge is wholly within the boundaries of Chester/Hampden Co. It is still in use and shares a unique 5 keystone cluster feature with the Bancroft Arch, the only other bridge completely within the boundary of a single town and the only other example still crossed by trains.

The double and the Bancroft Arches bracket the historic district. The Bancroft Arch is not on the trail, but can be accessed via Town Hill Rd. It is completely in Middlefield since it spans Factory Brook, and not the Westfield River. From Chester west, The Westfield River is the boundary between Becket and Middlefield, causing the remaining Arches to be half in each town and county. Return to Herbert Cross Rd. and continue west.

This hike is one of escalating returns. The farther you go; the spans are subsequently higher, larger and more inspiring than those that came before. We strongly recommend utilizing the ancillary trails at each bridge to descend to the river level. Only by looking up at them can their true majesty be fully appreciated. In about a mile, you will intersect with an abandoned section of the original 1841 alignment, circumvented in 1910 to ease a sharp curve preceding this portion of the route and adding a third track. A left will take you to the top of the 65-foot arch. You will see the present-day CSX line on the other side of the valley.

Continuing westward along the abandoned roadbed, the traveler will encounter on the left, a massive retaining wall constructed by the same immigrant stonemasons who built the Arches. This extends down about 50 feet to the riverbank and keeps the right of way from collapsing into the river. This wall has an intrinsic splendor all its own.

While negotiating a 60-foot-deep hand-hewn cut through the mountainside, look for the long concave marks in the rock. These were made by the two-man churn drills. One held the 5 ft. long iron drill and turned it a quarter turn between sledgehammer blows by the second worker. A bit farther along you will notice concrete blocks on each side of the trail. These were bases for semaphore signals placed here around 1900 and represent the

most modern upgrades before this segment was cast off. The woods begin to open to the sky as you come onto the 70-foot-high Arch. This bridge sports massive wing walls, some gently curving through the forest for up to 300 ft.

Observation of this bridge from water level is a must. It is truly the crescendo of the hike. This is a breathtaking structure, brilliantly revealing its ancestry in the great cathedrals of the Old World.

Ascending back to the former track gradient, continue for another ¼ mile westward, and carefully work your way to the edge of the 70 foot drop off where the trail leads to the left and the CSX active rail line. You are on the approach of a long gone Arch, probably removed during the railroad bypass project. Through the trees on the opposite bank, you will be rewarded with a unique view of the interior design of these majestic structures. A more modern concrete arch bridge stands to the left of this ruin. Here the trail ends.

Return the way you came in. Entering the active CSX rail line is illegal and dangerous. After re-crossing the 70-foot Arch, leave the trail and venture into the woods on your left. You will notice that the hillside has been hollowed out where tons of schist was quarried to construct wing walls and any structure components that did not require cutting, as did the stones used in the arch structures. You will find a massive boulder the immigrant workmen were attempting to split with feather drills, when it broke in the wrong direction. Closer inspection will reveal a drill still embedded in the rock.

Stones used in the arch support structures were all cut from Chester Blue granite quarried elsewhere. Some of this quarrying occurred along Town Hill Rd., about a mile north of the Bancroft Arch. Careful examination of the hillside there will reveal it to be, a mountain of rip rap.