

## Half-Gallon Challenge at the Halfway Point

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Figure 1: Pole Steeple Overlook

Imagine setting off on a six month challenge to hike the entire [Appalachian Trail](#) (AT), approximately 2,180 miles from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Katahdin, Maine. Arriving in Pennsylvania, you're dirty, hot, exhausted, and sore, but at least you've made plenty of friends along the way to help ease the mental strain of getting through this marathon endeavor. Far from the start, but nowhere near the end, you come to a renovated, three-story stone grist mill built in 1760 in [Pine Grove Furnace State Park](#). This marks the halfway point! To celebrate, you participate in the thru-hiker tradition of attempting the "half-gallon challenge"...eating half a gallon of ice cream purchased from the nearby Pine Grove general store in a single sitting. It doesn't make the remaining distance any shorter, but at least it takes your mind off things while you savor the sweet, sugary moment.





*Figure 2: Halfway point on the AT*

The Appalachian Trail Museum opened in the historic stone grist mill at Pine Grove Furnace State Park in 2010 to tell stories of the founding, construction, preservation, maintenance, protection, and enjoyment of the AT. During my visit, I learned about inspirational people such as Earl V. Shaffer, who became the first AT thru-hiker in 1948. I also read about Emma "Grandma" Gatewood, who, in 1955 at the age of 67, became the first solo woman thru-hiker and later the first person to hike the AT more than once, completing it three times

by 1964. I thought about what drives these determined people to accomplish their goals as I set out to do some exploring in Pine Grove Furnace State Park.



Figure 3: AT Museum

Just outside the museum, I paused at several historic structures, the most impressive being Pine Grove Furnace. Built in 1764 along Mountain Creek and in operation until 1895, it produced stoves, fireplace backs, iron kettles, and possibly munitions during the American Revolution.

I've hiked in this area several times, dating back to 2008. Sometimes I've headed south of the furnace and the halfway point on the AT into [Michaux State Forest](#), which surrounds the state park. Winter ice views in this area are stunning, but walking can be treacherous. I suggest wearing or at least bringing crampons to avoid falls.





*Figure 4: Frozen wonderland*

My favorite hike in the park is a 4.1-mile circuit called Pole Steeple Loop that starts near Laurel Lake at the [Pole Steeple Trail parking lot](#). Heading south on the rocky, blue-blazed Pole Steeple Trail, I climbed about 544 feet over 0.7 mile to the Pole Steeple Overlook, a quartzite rock outcropping, where I could see the entire park. The view was spectacular but on October 3, 2020, the fall colors hadn't quite set in.

Continuing south for about another 0.3 mile, I came to the white-blazed AT. This section lies north of the halfway point. I followed the trail west for 1.4 miles and saw plenty of mountain laurel, club moss, milkweed bugs, and mushrooms that reminded me of snickerdoodles.



Figure 5: "Snickerdoodle" mushrooms

Just before Mountain Creek, I turned north on the yellow-blazed Mountain Creek Trail, following it and Old Railroad Bed Road for 1.7 miles back to the start. Walking among tall thickets of rhododendron along the creek, I occasionally glimpsed fall-blooming witch hazel, used by many cultures for treating skin conditions and other ailments, and as a dowsing rod for finding water. However, my best find of the day was a northern water snake - its pale eyes signaling it was getting ready to shed its skin.





*Figure 6: Northern water snake preparing to shed*

Near a spring on Old Railroad Bed Road, I found a self-heal flower (*Prunella vulgaris*). Its common name is associated with its use as a remedy for throat ailments.



Figure 7: Self-heal flower

Another hike I did in the park took me 2.1 miles on the Koppenhaver Trail and parts of the Cumberland County Biker/Hiker Trail which overlaps with the AT, north of the halfway point. For this route, I started at the [Fuller Lake Day Use Area](#) then headed southeast. Crossing a bridge over Mountain Creek, I stopped at Fuller Beach, where folks can sun themselves on the sand or swim in the lake. Nearby, the AT crosses as an incongruous paved connector - not keeping with the rustic nature of the rest of the trail, but thankfully demarcated by the usual white blazes.

During my walk, I passed Joe Pye weed, eastern hemlock, invasive Japanese barberry, mullein, and chicory. But the most unusual things I encountered were old concrete structures...remnants of an amusement park and summer camp. The South Mountain Mining & Iron Company needed to increase income from the South Mountain Railroad that connected Carlisle with Pine Grove Furnace. One thing they considered was to expand ridership, but how could they get people to take a train into the mountains? An amusement park! In 1878, the iron company built an attraction on 30 acres of land next to Mountain Creek. The park was free but people paid for the train ride to get there. Attracting more than 20,000 people annually, it had bowling alleys, a



water-powered merry-go-round, a bicycle race track, a rifle shooting range, a restaurant, a dance pavilion, and other attractions. It ceased operation in 1900 and later became a summer camp for children from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.



*Figure 8: Concrete structure remnant from amusement park*

The iron smelting operation and amusement park are now part of the distant past, their remnants surrounded by an extensive restored forest through which runs the AT. Whether you're a thru-hiker or just out for a short walk, you can thank the 6,000+ volunteers who contribute more than 200,000 hours annually to maintain the AT. Initially completed in 1937, it is the brainchild of Benton MacKaye, also known as the father of the AT. When asked what he thought was the main purpose of the trail, he replied, "To walk. To see. And to see what you see." For the thru-hikers, perhaps eating a half-gallon of ice cream at the halfway point should also be mentioned.

For more information, see

- [Appalachian Trail Museum](#)
- [Appalachian Trail Conservancy](#)
- [Potomac Appalachian Trail Club](#)
- [Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources - Pine Grove Furnace State Park](#)
- [Wikipedia - Witch Hazel](#)
- [Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center - Prunella vulgaris](#)
- [Cumberland County Biker/Hiker Trail](#)
- [Friends of Pine Grove Furnace](#)