



Picturesque America; or, the land we live in

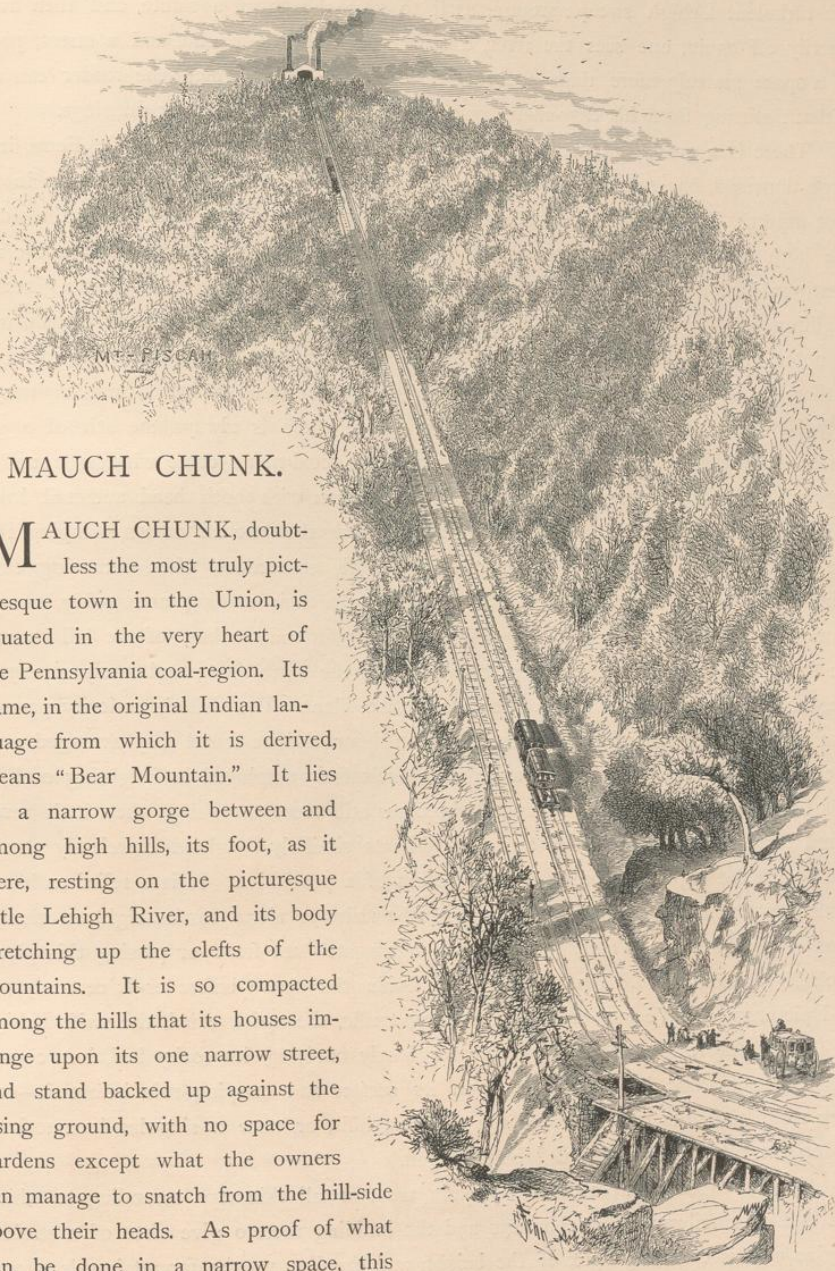
a delineation by pen and pencil of the mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, water-falls, shores, cañons, valleys, cities, and other picturesque features of our country ; with illustrations on steel and wood, by eminent American artists

Bryant, William Cullen

New York, 1872

Mauch Chunk.

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MT. FISCAN

MAUCH CHUNK.

MAUCH CHUNK, doubtless the most truly picturesque town in the Union, is situated in the very heart of the Pennsylvania coal-region. Its name, in the original Indian language from which it is derived, means "Bear Mountain." It lies in a narrow gorge between and among high hills, its foot, as it were, resting on the picturesque little Lehigh River, and its body stretching up the clefts of the mountains. It is so compacted among the hills that its houses impinge upon its one narrow street, and stand backed up against the rising ground, with no space for gardens except what the owners can manage to snatch from the hill-side above their heads. As proof of what can be done in a narrow space, this

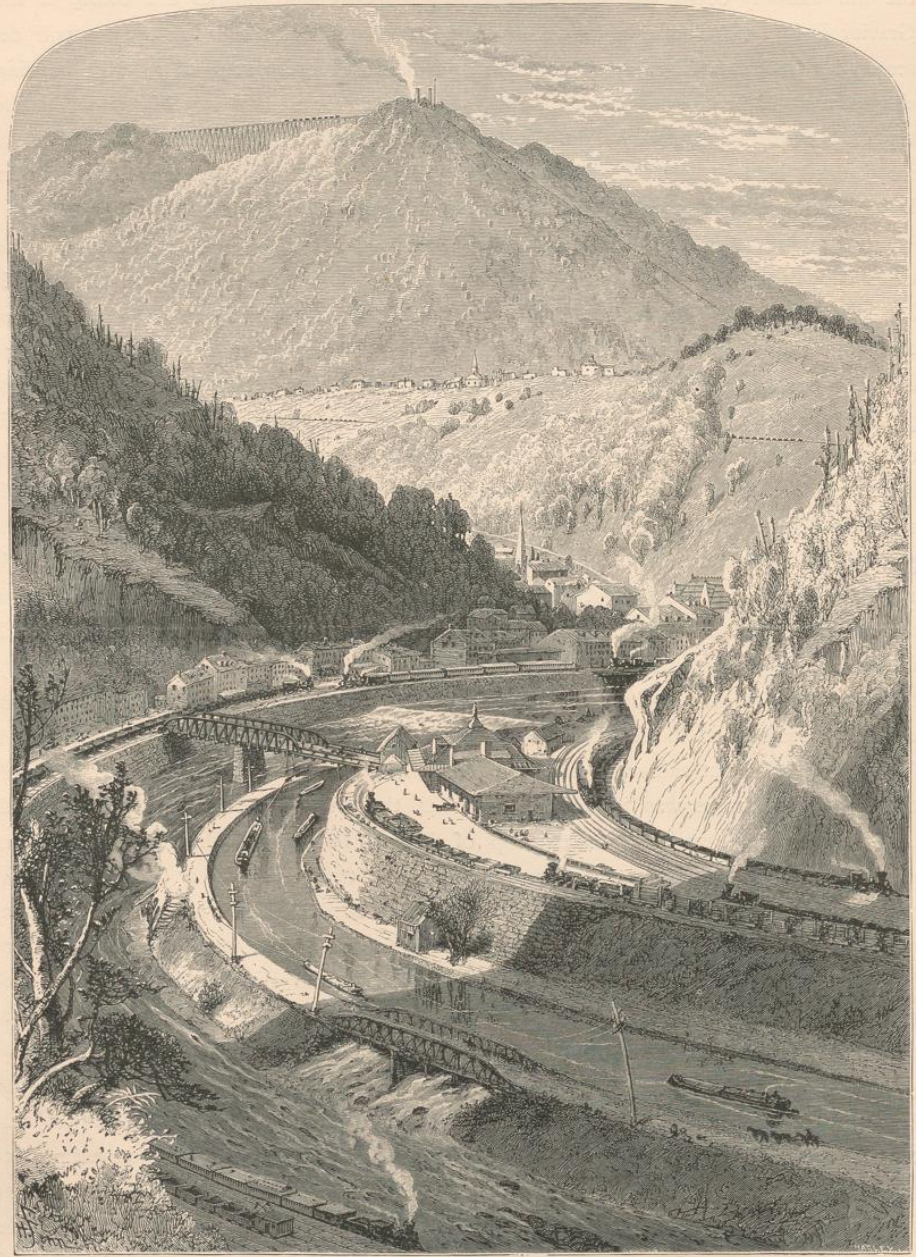
quaint and really Swiss-like village affords a capital example. In one portion, just where the turbulent Lehigh sweeps around, as if to give the town a salute, and then rushes merrily off again, one sees the river, a canal, two railways, a road, and a street, packed in a space scarcely more than a stone's-throw wide—all of which the reader can note, without stirring from his easy-chair, by a glance at Mr. Fenn's larger drawings.

There is a great deal in knowing how to find the picturesque, and Mr. Fenn, in his large drawings, has selected points of view that present the hills and the town in their best aspect. The first of these views is taken from the road that runs along the side of the high hill just below the town. In the second illustration, one can discern the road, faintly marked, ascending obliquely the distant hill. From this road the picture gives just a glimpse of the receding town to the left; shows in the distance Mount Pisgah, which is not a volcano, notwithstanding the smoke that seems to issue from its apex; and gathers at the feet of the spectator hurrying river, busy canal, railways, and highway, as they lie crowded between the steep hills. Here there is always the stir of a great traffic. Ceaselessly day and night the long, black coal-trains come winding round the base of the hills, like so many huge anacondas, often with both head and tail lost to the eye, the locomotive reaching out of sight before the last car comes swinging round the curve. These trains are of marvellous length, sometimes, when returning empty, numbering over two hundred cars. So continuous is their coming and going, sweeping now around the foot of the hill opposite, and now around the base of the hill on which we stand, that usually several trains are visible at the same time; and rarely at any moment is the whistle or the puff of the locomotive silent. The writer's curiosity prompted him to keep a record of passing trains for an hour, and he found they averaged one in every two minutes. These trains are almost exclusively employed in freighting coal; and this immense traffic in black diamonds becomes still more surprising when it is remembered that, in addition to the trains, canal-boats similarly freighted ceaselessly pass the town with the regularity, order, and succession of a procession. It is a relief to have recourse to figures, and to learn that one of the railways alone carries eighteen thousand tons of coal weekly. Treble this, and the aggregate sent from or passing this place is probably approximated. Up here on the hill-side the scene before us is certainly novel and picturesque. We may watch the stirring traffic, the quiet canal, the swift Lehigh—sometimes only the small thread of a river barely covering its rocky bed, but occasionally a roaring flood bringing ruins upon its surface and carrying ruin before it—or we may study the tints and forms of the receding hills, or note a singular locomotion far up on the sides of the distant Mount Pisgah.

On the highest part of this mountain are two tall chimneys, ascending to which is the line of a railway. The chimneys and the building thereto give note of a stationary engine at this crowning apex of the height, and the line up the mountain-side shows us where the famous Mount-Pisgah inclined plane ascends to its top. The line crossing

the hill half-way down, and just below Upper Mauch Chunk, marks the course of the Gravity Railway, one of the marvels of the place. If the reader pleases, we will descend our mountain-highway, picturesque and beautiful every step of it, with beetling cliffs above and precipitous reaches below, and prepare for an odd sort of journey to the top of Mount Pisgah, and, by the Gravity Road, to the coal-mines beyond. But, before we proceed, let us understand where we are going and what we shall see a little better by consulting a brief page of history and a few facts of description.

The mines which supply the principal traffic of Mauch Chunk are situated nine miles back from the river, on Sharp and Black Mountains, and in Panther-Creek Valley, lying between. The first anthracite coal was discovered on Sharp Mountain, sometimes known as Summit Hill, by a hunter named Ginter, in 1791. The hard anthracite, however, was at first called "black-stone," and its combustible quality denied. Experiments with it were made in Philadelphia, and it was gravely asserted that this hard, rocky substance, which resembled coal, only *served to put the fire out!* Experiments, however, at a later date, must have satisfied those concerned that anthracite coal, if slower to ignite than bituminous, yet possesses decided combustible qualities, for companies were formed to work the mines on Sharp Mountain. It was not, however, until 1820 that shipments became at all regular or noteworthy. Coal was brought from the mines, slowly and wearisomely, by wagons, until 1827, when a track was constructed, with a falling grade, from Summit Hill to the Lehigh, by which cars were run down by their own gravity—hence the name Gravity Road. The cars were drawn back by mules, which, of course, had to be sent down on cars with each train. This method continued for a long time; but the traffic at last so increased that a more expeditious return of the cars to the mines was needed, and in 1844 the plan of a back-track was arranged. An inclined plane was laid to the top of Mount Pisgah, up which the empty cars were elevated by means of a stationary engine; the track, then, by a downward grade, the cars moving by force of their own weight, reached the foot of Mount Jefferson, up which they ascended by another plane—the power a stationary engine—and then, by another downward grade, reached summit Hill. From Summit Hill the cars descended to the mines in the valley, by what was called the Switch-back, a term now often given to the entire road, but which at present has no correct application to any part of it. The Switch-back was a means of descending the side of the mountain by lines such as we familiarly call zigzag. The car ran swiftly along the side of the hill on a falling grade until reaching the terminus of the track, where its momentum carried it up an artificial hillock until its speed was arrested. Here it was switched upon another track, and it rushed back again along the side of the hill upon a falling grade until, reaching another terminus, it was once more switched back upon a third track, and so on by a series of inclined planes the valley was reached. Great speed was attained on the Switch-back, the rate often reaching sixty miles an hour, and a pleasure-car was



MAUCH CHUNK AND MOUNT PISGAH



MAUCH CHUNK, FROM FOOT OF MOUNT PISGAH.

attached at certain hours for visitors. This is all changed now, the cars reaching the valley by a longer but circuitous route. The cars are returned to Summit Hill by means of inclined planes and stationary engines; and from the Summit to the Lehigh, a distance of nine miles, the gravity-impelled cars dash at a rapid rate with their spoils from the heart of the mountain.

In the first of our larger illustrations, the Mount-Pisgah inclined plane and a portion of the Gravity Road, as already mentioned, may be seen. The cars which we observe on the grade may be discovered at their terminus in the engraving given below. Here they rattle down into huge coal-boxes, into which their contents are dumped



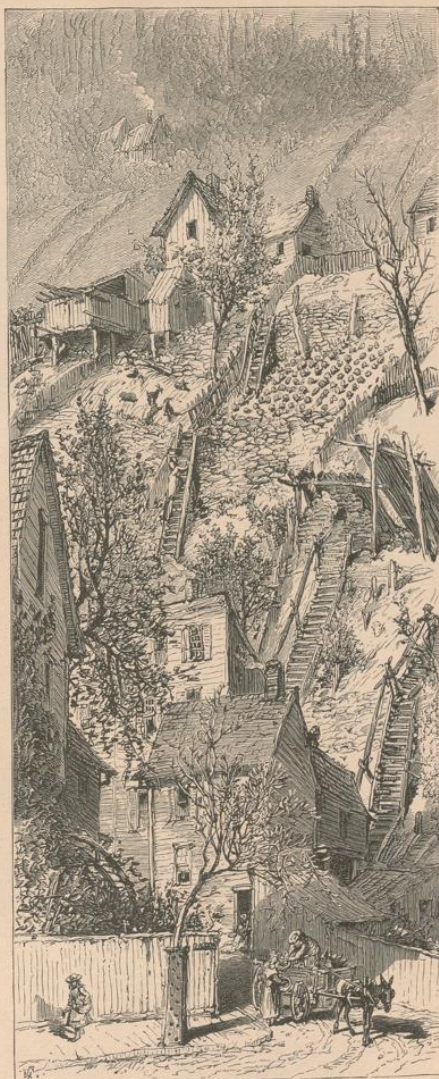
Canal-boats receiving Coal.

and shot into the waiting canal-boats, which are always gathered here by hundreds in picturesque confusion.

After this brief glance at the origin and use of this singular road, we may undertake with greater satisfaction a jaunt over its long circuit of twenty-five miles.

An omnibus, at stated hours, conveys the curious passengers from the Mansion House to the foot of the inclined plane. It rattles through the town's single street, diverges into the road that ascends the hill, and, after a journey that the impatient traveller imagines must have already gotten him to the top, draws up at the foot of the famous plane, which, if our description has not adequately depicted to the mind's-eye of the reader, the initial illustration will bring before him accurately and clearly. It

may be mentioned here that the length of this plane is twenty-three hundred and twenty-two feet, and its elevation six hundred and sixty-four feet. At its foot we find a very small passenger-car—a diminutive, undergrown little vehicle, designed to hold ten passengers—in which we may enter. The plane appears, when standing at its foot, to reach almost perpendicularly up into the air; and when at last the ascent begins, one feels as if he were drawn up into the clouds, and naturally commences to speculate with what terrible swiftness the car would shoot down the plane if it should get loose. The little hand-book for travellers, however, which every inquiring and right-minded passenger is sure to possess, gives assurance that this is impossible. Behind the miniature carriage is what is called a safety-car. From this car extends an arm over a ratchet-rail, laid between the tracks. Should an accident occur either to the car or to the gearing, this arm, the moment a downward movement begins, inevitably falls into the notch of the ratchet-rail, and, being too strong to break, the train is at once brought to a stand-still. It is frightful-looking, notwithstanding this assurance and one discovers that his imagination takes a strange pleasure in depicting the terrible whirl through space and the horrible splintering upon the rocks, should it please Fate to give the pleasure-trip a tragical turn. As the car ascends, the view enlarges; and, when the height is reached, a splendid prospect opens to the delighted visitor.



A Mauch-Chunk Highway.

What follows may now easily be conceived, by means of the description of the road already given. The car runs easily and swiftly along, without other force than its

own weight, the road being through beautiful woodland-scenery. As we draw near the mines, large villages appear, occupied principally by the miners, and at Summit Hill is a hotel, church, and other evidences of civilization. The huge structures, called coal-breakers, at the mouths of the mines, form new, striking, and picturesque objects, and immense piles of *débris*, accumulated in excavating for the black wealth below, look like small mountains. Near abandoned mines, these vast heaps give indications of a new soil gathering on their surface. Bushes and small evergreen trees have already managed to find sufficient nurture amid the slate and coal-dust for their roots. The leaves from these growths will add soil to the surface, and in time there can be no doubt that, what are now unsightly masses of *débris*, will be covered with grass and trees, affording possibly a new puzzle for the geologist of a thousand years hence.

The circuit completed, we leave the car well up Mount Pisgah, and descend the mountain-road to the village. The roofs show far down below us among the trees, and the houses, hugged in close by the hills, are grouped in most picturesque form. It is the most novel and striking approach to a town that can be imagined. As we near the houses they seem so directly beneath that we wonder if a slip would not precipitate us down a chimney, or impale us on a steeple. The second of our larger illustrations shows the scene as we near the town from this approach. There is a church-roof below the point of view, and a row of houses in the middle ground on the hill-side, and a new, picturesque church, set up by the architect just where it would add most to the beauty and effectiveness of the picture.

A tunnel is now constructing through the mountain, which will bring the mines in direct communication with canal and river, without plane or grades. This will simplify the business of the mines, no doubt, but the Mount-Pisgah plane and the Gravity Road have always been among the most novel and interesting features of the place, and their loss will be deplored by tourists.

The street-scenes in Mauch Chunk are quaint enough. They are literally highways. As there is no room for gardens or out-buildings back of the houses, they are built up above them, and are reached by ladders. It is not uncommon, in the ruder parts of the town, to see a pigsty, up above the house-top, reached by a ladder; another ladder extending above this to a potato or cabbage patch, and another leading to the family oven, presiding over the strange group with suitable honor and dignity.

A visit to Mauch Chunk makes a pleasant summer-trip; but in October, when all the superb hills that encircle the quaint town are in the full glow of their autumn tints, the innumerable mountain-excursions that then may be taken, which, in summer, would be too fatiguing, enhance greatly the pleasure of the visit.