

Trail directions

Five miles in and back

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 Wild & Scenic River and the Longest free-flowing river in MA, all within the state's largest road less wilderness.

This historical and environmental experience is 90% within the town of Middlefield and Hampshire County, with more in Chester, Hampden County and Becket, Berkshire County.

The trail is accessed from Herbert Cross Road 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. The Bancroft Arch, the only other bridge completely within the boundary of a single town is at the end of the trail in Middlefield.

The double and the Bancroft Arch blanket the historic district. The Bancroft Arch can be accessed via Town Hill Rd. It is completely in Middlefield due to the fact that it spans Factory Brook, and not the Westfield River. From Chester west, The Westfield River is the boundary between Becket and Middlefield. Refer to Herbert Cross Rd and continue west.

This hike is one of escalating excitement. 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 the 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 also 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. There is a foot path at the end of the arch that takes you to the opposite side.

Continue westward along the abandoned rail bed, the traveler will encounter on the left, a massive retaining wall constructed by the same immigrant stonemasons who built the Arches. Thus extends down about 50 feet to the river bank and keep the right of way from collapsing into the river, Plus the wall has an intrinsic splendor all its own. This known as "the cut".

After negotiating a 60 foot deep hand-hewn cut through the rock you will notice concrete blocks on each side of the trail. These were bases for semaphore signals placed here around 1900, and represent modern times. then the trail begins 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 feet

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 ancestors the great cathedrals of the Old World. Take the footpath down to the water.

Ascending back to the former track gradient, continue for another mile and to the end of the trail at the kiosk. You are on the approach of long gone Arch, probably a result of the railroad bypass project. Through the trees on the opposite bank you will be rewarded with a unique view of the interior design of those majestic structures. A more modern concrete arch bridge stands to the left of this one, Here the trail ends.

Return the way you came in

Entering the active CSX rule 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 frills when it hole in the wrong direction Closer inspection will reveal it still embedded in the rock.

Stones used in the arch support structures were all cut from Chester Blue granite quarried elsewhere. Some of the quarrying occurred along Town Hill Rd, about a mile north of the Bancroft Arch.