

CUMBERLAND VIADUCT

The series of concrete-clad arches which form the prominent railroad viaduct defines Cumberland's North End. Each day, several hundreds of motorists, traveling along North Centre and North Mechanic streets, pass beneath this looming structure. And every day, railroad trains, most often carrying many tons of coal, cross over Wills Creek and the North End of town by means of this long bridge while en-route to their ultimate destinations many miles east of Cumberland. Going in the opposite direction are several trains of empty coal hoppers, returning to the numerous coal mines of western Maryland and West Virginia.

This utilitarian structure has been part of the Cumberland environment for over a hundred and seventy years. The viaduct was built by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad sometime between 1849 and 1851, making this bridge at Mile Post 179.1 contemporaneous to the tan sandstone Emanuel Episcopal Church, with its lofty spire punctuating the sky at the west end of Baltimore Street. The purpose of the viaduct was to convey the B&O Railroad's double tracks over the town and the creek as part of its main line linking Baltimore and Washington with the Ohio River and later Cincinnati and Saint Louis.

The earliest known description of this railroad bridge comes from pages 305-6 of the 1855 book, *Rambles in the Path of the Steam Horse*, by Ele Bowen: "The viaduct over Wills Creek is a magnificent piece of architecture. The arches, of which there are fourteen, are each fifty feet span, and thirteen feet rise. The brick-work resting on the stone [piers] formed a solid compact body; and upon this, two tracks are laid down. The interior brick-work is covered with cement, which protects it from the action of the weather. The height of the viaduct above the creek is about thirty-five feet [later sources say twenty-eight feet]."

The Cumberland Viaduct measures between 850 and 900 feet in length, depending on whether the elevated approach structures are included. The abutments and piers were built of roughly cut sandstone; the fourteen elliptical arches were constructed of brick, similar to the 1845 quadruple arch brick bridge over Wills Creek at the western end of the Narrows, which was dismantled in 1997. The northeast end of the viaduct has a pronounced curve eastward above the streets of Cumberland, while the southwest end continues straight over Wills Creek and what would later be the double tracks of the Western Maryland Railway. The Cumberland Viaduct is the longest masonry bridge on the B&O Railroad's original 379-mile long mainline tracks between Baltimore and the Ohio River at Wheeling.

During the passing years, the viaduct has weathered frequent floods of Wills Creek, and increasing tonnage of trains crossing over it. In 1909, about sixty years after it was built, this bridge had a major overhaul when the entire brick and stone structure was clad in concrete. Then in 1997, the viaduct experienced a significant alteration when it was reduced to being only a single track. Regardless of these changes, the Cumberland Viaduct continues to carry frequent trains across the North End of town and above Wills Creek.

