



In 1880, a legal settlement with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe gave the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad the right-of-way to build west from Pueblo up the Royal Gorge of the Arkansas River, which provided a steady grade to the Continental Divide and, co-incidentally, to the Leadville mining area, which had just been discovered the year before and had no rail service. The D&RG Leadville Branch was completed in 1880 and at the same time the D&RG started its mainline west over Marshall Pass through Gunnison in 1881 and through this location in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River in 1882 to connect with the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad at aptly names Grand Junction, Colorado, completing a narrow gauge mainline to Utah in 1883. Around 1890 the D&RG connected to Grand Junction (with help from the Colorado Midland) via standard gauge tracks over Tennessee Pass, supplanting the narrow gauge Marshall Pass Route (including this location) as the D&RG mainline across the Rockies. In 1934, the D&RGW's Dotsero Cutoff was completed and the Tennessee Pass Route was supplanted by the Moffat Tunnel Route (Denver, Northwestern and Pacific 1913) as the D&RG mainline. The narrow gauge Marshall Pass Route west of Poncha Springs, including this location 30 miles west of Gunnison, was abandoned in 1955.

Among the engineering challenges faced during building of the D&RG (1883n) mainline was the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River. To avoid the most difficult part of the canyon, the route west of Gunnison follows Cimarron Creek out of the canyon up to more level ground, then on to Grand Junction, Colorado. This narrow gauge crossing of Cimarron Creek is the last remaining trestle along the Black Canyon of the Gunnison route. This trestle was constructed in 1895, replacing the original wooden Howe truss trestle built in 1882.





The extreme steepness and depth of the Black Canyon formed as the result of several geologic processes acting together. The Precambrian gneiss and schist and lighter pegmatite dikes seen on the steep walls of the Black Canyon formed 1.7 billion years ago. The entire area underwent uplift and erosion during the Laramide orogeny between 70 and 40 million years ago, creating the subdued topography of the rim. Later, from 26 to 35 million years ago, volcanism occurred in the area, burying the subdued topography of the rim in several thousand feet of volcanic ash. About 15 million years ago, the ancient Gunnison River drained the nearby mountains and carved through the relatively soft volcanic deposits and became entrenched. With the Gunnison River's course entrenched in the volcanic deposits, a broad uplift in the area 2 to 3 million years ago caused the river to cut to the bottom of the volcanic deposits and into the Precambrian rocks. The entrenched river was unable to change its course and began scouring through the hard older rocks. The extreme hardness of the gneiss, schist and pegmatite minimized lateral erosion and created the steep walls seen today – no place for a railroad. The volcanic deposits have mostly eroded away, leaving the subdued topography of the rim on hard rock.