



In 1888, the narrow gauge Aspen & Western Railroad was built southward from a connection with the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Aspen Branch (1887n) at Carbondale, Colorado, to reach coal deposits. The line ran southwest along the Crystal River then west along Thompson Creek to a coal mine at Willow Park, a total of 13 miles. The railroad's owners realized by early 1889 that the veins were too poor for commercial extraction. In 1892, the line was sold to the new Crystal River Railway and subsequently scrapped. The CR Railway's goal was to tap coal from around Redstone with the possibility of reaching marble and metallic ore deposits farther south. The narrow gauge CR Railway used the first 3 miles of the A&W (1888n) right-of-way from Carbondale and south along the Crystal River past Thompson Creek towards a mine and coke oven facility under construction at Redstone. In 1893, the tracks had reached a point 12 miles south of Carbondale and 5 miles shy of Redstone when construction was put halted due to the Silver Crash of 1893. The CR Railway never made a revenue run. Despite the lack of operations, the route was converted to standard gauge around 1896.

In 1898, the CR Railway was purchased by the newly-incorporated Crystal River Railroad. The standard gauge CR Railroad started where the CR Railway (1893n) left off (milepost 12) and continued south through Redstone and in 1899 reached its terminus 4 miles south of Redstone, giving a total length of 21 miles. In 1900, the CR Railroad built its narrow gauge Coalbasin Branch west from the standard gauge line at Redstone 6 miles (as the crow flies) up Coal Creek (a tributary of the Crystal River) to the mine at Coalbasin (not shown separately on the Southwest Railroad History Map). In 1906, the new Crystal River & San Juan Railroad extended the CR Railroad (1899) 7 miles along the Crystal River to the mining center of Marble. The CR&SJ interchanged all traffic with the CR Railroad at Redstone, using 4 miles of trackage rights south of Redstone until 1910, when the CR&SJ obtained trackage rights all the way to Carbondale. Also in 1910, two short railroads, a mile or two each, were built from the CR&SJ (1906) end-of-track at Marble to quarries above Marble: the Treasury Mountain Railroad and the Colorado Yule Marble Electric Railroad (not shown separately on the Southwest Railroad History Map). In 1917, the CR&SJ suspended operations due to a shutdown of the marble finishing plant in Marble, leaving only the CR Railroad operating from Redstone north to Carbondale. In 1919, the CR Railroad ceased operations and sat idle until 1921 when it was leased to the CR&SJ in anticipation of the marble works re-opening the following year. Operations continued for nearly two decades, hauling marble, livestock, and supplies. However, with the cessation of marble production in 1941, the entire line down to Carbondale and all the branch lines were completely removed and the steel used to support the war effort. Interestingly, marble for both the Lincoln Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier came from Marble and was hauled over the CR&SJ.

Northward view of the CR Railway (1893n) 8 miles south of Carbondale and 5 miles south of the intersection with the A&W (1888n) grade. The line was standard-gauged in 1896 and was abandoned in 1943. The Crystal River is on the left.



Southward view of the CR Railway (1893n) at the same location as previous. The alignment was regraded to make a road.



Southeastward view of the CR Railroad (1899), which is the fill grade on the other side of the Crystal River, 4 miles south of the previous location and just south of the “milepost 12” terminus of the CR Railway (1893n).



Northward view of the CR Railroad (1899), now a gravel road, 2 miles south of the previous location and 1.5 miles north of Redstone.



In 1882, John Cleveland Osgood was sent by the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad to conduct a survey of Colorado's coal resources and found that the Crystal River Valley's coal deposits were ideal for coking. The best deposits were around Redstone (this location) and by the end of 1899, with railroad service in place, Redstone was the largest coking facility in the state with 249 ovens and a work force that accounted for 10% of all Colorado's workers at the time. In 1900, the CR Railroad built its narrow gauge Coalbasin Branch west from the standard gauge line at Redstone (this location) 12 rail miles (6 miles as the crow flies) up Coal Creek (not shown separately on the Southwest Railroad History Map) to the new mining town of Coalbasin, where the coal was most desirable for coking due to its purity and low ash content. Carloads of coal descended 2,200 feet from Coalbasin to Redstone (this location), where coal was coked and transferred to standard gauge cars bound for Carbondale and other destinations. By 1909 all mining and coking operations ended and Redstone was largely abandoned. At the outset of World War II, the community's population was down to 14 and the ovens' steel supports along with the railroads' rails were scrapped for the war effort. Today, the ovens are preserved by the Redstone Coke Oven Historic District.

Northward view of some of the coke ovens at Redstone. I could find no maps showing the mainline route or the locations or number of sidings of the CR Railroad (1899), but it is obvious that the curvature of the lines of ovens is parallel to the curvature of the railroad alignment to match a bend in the Crystal River. It is all but certain that the mainline or a siding ran between the ovens and followed the curvature of the cleared area in the foreground and into the center distance. I could find no evidence on the ground, in satellite imagery, or on historical maps to indicate the starting point or location of the CR Railroad's narrow gauge Coalbasin Branch (1900n)(not shown separately on the Southwest Railroad History Map).

The town of Coalbasin, at 10,000 feet, boasted a surgeon, a pit boss, a clerk, an agent for the railroad, and a telegraph operator, all employees of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. A company store, clubhouse, and a boarding house served the community.

Access to mine and camp was by a remarkable narrow gauge rail spur, known as "the high line" which climbed 12 miles on an average grade of 4½% around numerous 40° curves.



Northward view of some of the coke ovens a few steps east of the previous location, showing the other side of the ovens on the right side of the previous photo. The walking path on the right parallels and could be on the alignment of the mainline or a siding of the CR Railroad (1899).



Southward view at the same location as previous. The snow-capped peak in the left distance is 12,721-foot Chair Mountain, which looms over Marble and the CR&SJ (1906) end-of-track at the headwaters of the Crystal River.

These ovens comprise part of the Redstone Coke Ovens Historic District, where men at the turn of the century "coke" some of the country's finest metallurgical coal, turning the coal into coke, or pure carbon. Brought by narrow gauge railroad from the mines above Redstone at Coalbasin, the coal was loaded into the top of the 249 beehive-shaped ovens. Redstone colliers cooked the coal for two days then shipped it to Colorado Fuel and Iron in Pueblo, Colorado, the biggest steel mill west of the Mississippi. There, the Redstone coke, limestone and iron ore were dumped into blast furnaces to create steel, which made the locomotives, steel rails and barbed wire that settled the American West.

REDSTONE COKE OVENS

BUILT 1899-1903 REDSTONE, CO

1882	1899	1900	1903	1909	1942	1958 TO 1961	1961 TO 1989	1990	2010
Coke Oven project is proposed	mine begins construction	first shipment of coal arrives	209 ovens completed	cooking operations suspended	iron rails and door frames removed for the war effort	Mid-Continent Resources modify structures and restitute ovens	visitor overlook built to show restored coke ovens and retaining walls, furnaces' sections and decay	listed in "National Register of Historic Places"	ovens undergo stabilization, and walls preserved to encourage visitors

WHERE THE MEN HEATED COAL INTO PURE CARBON

While you explore the Coke Oven site, keep an eye out for symbolic markers. These have been placed at key locations to emphasize important aspects including significant historic and structural elements, as well as preservation modifications and vegetation.

- RAILROAD & TRANSPORTATION**
"Lumpy cars" ran along the top of the ovens to unload raw coal. Coke was raked out of the front and loaded into railroad cars for transport.
- NATIVE VEGETATION**
In an ongoing management plan, invasive species are removed to reduce degradation and native shrubs and grasses are reestablished to stabilize the site.
- ARCHITECTURE**
Three ovens have been completely reconstructed to illustrate the original design and operating condition.
- STRUCTURAL MATERIALS**
Ovens were constructed with "finbrick" and insulated with clay and loam. Iron was used for the door frames.
- PRESERVATION MODIFICATIONS**
Stabilization construction has been done to prevent further deterioration and safety hazards and is consistent with historic materials and practices. Contemporary techniques have been minimally integrated, and only where necessary.

FROM THE GROUND UP
The town of Redstone existed because of its coke ovens. Founded at the turn of the 20th century, Redstone was the vision and venture of one man, the "Fuel King of the West," John Cleveland Osgood. It was a company town, constructed solely to house the men who worked the ovens and their families. In addition to 84 residential cottages, Osgood built a bachelor's hotel (now the Redstone Inn), a theater, hospital, and clubhouse as well as Cleveholm Manor, now known as the Redstone Castle.

A NEW LIFE
Now owned by Blinn County, the coke ovens themselves are the only remnants of the coking operation at Redstone. The site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. In 2010, 3 ovens were carefully restored back to their 1903 appearance, a project that received stabilization treatments, while the remainder left to ruin.

THE STORY CONTINUES
With its celebrated past, Redstone is proud to represent the historic development of the industrial West. Today Redstone is home to artists, galleries, restaurants, lodging and residences of every kind. This year-round population is eager to preserve the stories of Redstone's colorful past, embracing its historic role as the "Hub of the Rockies."

The restoration of the site in 2014 was made possible by grants from "Blinn County's Park Space and the Blinn and Colorado County Historical Trust. The preservation project was part of the Blinn County Community Development Corporation, U.S. Dept. of the Interior Firewise America program and the Blinn State Natural Park.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE COKE OVENS AND TOWN OF REDSTONE? VISIT THE HISTORIC REDSTONE MUSEUM LOCATED AT THE PARK IN THE CENTER OF TOWN.