



In 1880, a legal settlement with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe gave the Denver & Rio Grande 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 new Leadville mining area. The narrow gauge line reached Leadville via the Arkansas River in the same year of 1880. Also in 1880, the D&RG built a line west from Salida over Marshall Pass on the Continental Divide and in 1883 connected with the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad at aptly named Grand Junction, Colorado, completing a narrow gauge mainline to Utah. In 1887, the D&RG completed its narrow gauge Aspen Branch, which was built northward from the end of the Leadville Branch (1880n) over the Continental Divide at Tennessee Pass to the Colorado River at Dotsero, then west along the Colorado River to this location at Glenwood Springs, where the tracks arrived on October 5, 1887. The alignment then turned southeastward to follow the Roaring Fork River to the new mining center of Aspen, where the tracks arrived later in 1887.

Meanwhile, in 1883 the Colorado Midland Railway was founded to build a standard gauge line across the Rockies to compete with the narrow gauge D&RG. The CM plan was to link Colorado Springs with the mines of Leadville and with the national rail network at Ogden, Utah. In 1886, construction started on two segments of the route. One segment started at Colorado Springs (where it connected with the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific 1888) and headed west over Ute Pass then down to the Arkansas River, where it crossed the tracks of the Denver, South Park & Pacific (1882n) and turned north to follow the Arkansas River and parallel the Denver & Rio Grande Leadville Branch (1880n) to Leadville, where the CM arrived in 1887. The other segment started at Leadville, using both DSP&P and D&RG trains to haul CM rails to Leadville, where CM construction headed west over the Continental Divide at Hagerman Pass, then down to the Roaring Fork River at Basalt, Colorado. At Basalt construction headed in two directions: a branch line was built southeast along the Roaring Fork River and parallel to the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) to reach Aspen in early 1888, and a mainline was built northwest along the Roaring Fork River and parallel to the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) to reach Glenwood Springs (this location) on December 12, 1887, 2 months after the D&RG.

In 1888, the CM continued westward along the south bank of the Colorado River toward Utah for 10 miles, then crossed to the north side of the Colorado River to reach coal mines just west of New Castle. With the line only 12 miles west of Glenwood Springs the CM decided to not fund the route to Utah and the CM stopped building. The following year of 1889, D&RG built its own track westward from Glenwood Springs (this location). With the CM on the south bank, the D&RG Rifle Extension (1889n) crossed to the north side of the Colorado River at Glenwood Springs (this location) then proceeded west to New Castle, where it connected with the CM, and continued 15 miles west to the town of Rifle. In 1890, the CM and D&RGW cooperated to build a standard gauge line, the Rio Grande Joint Railway, along the Colorado River west from Rifle to Grand Junction (where the D&RG had met the D&RGW in 1883). The CM negotiated trackage rights over the newly standard-gauged D&RG Rifle Extension (1889n) between New Castle and Rifle and standard-gauge CM trains arrived in Grand Junction in late 1890. This connection completed the D&RG Tennessee Pass Route, which was standard gauged and supplanted the D&RG (1883n) Marshall Pass Route as the D&RG mainline across the Rockies. The Rio Grande Joint Railway (1890) connection also completed the CM's goal of reaching Ogden and the national rail network in Utah via the newly standard-gauged D&RGW (1883n).

In 1900, the D&RGW gained control of the CM, which was difficult to operate because it had little level track and crossed three summits with grades up to four percent. CM business dropped off toward the end of World War I so the CM ceased operations in 1919 and was scrapped in 1921. 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&RGW mainline. In 1967, the coming of Interstate 70 to the north bank of the Colorado River at Glenwood Springs forced the D&RGW to relocate its rails to the old CM (1888) grade on the south side of the Colorado River for 7 miles west from Glenwood Springs (this location) then crossed the river to rejoin the D&RG Rifle Extension (1889n). The portion of the D&RG Rifle Extension (1889n) between this point and Glenwood Springs was abandoned and is now beneath I-70.

We will explore Glenwood Springs from east to west, starting with this eastward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the Glenwood Springs Depot.



Westward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the Glenwood Springs Depot. The D&RGW built the Depot in 1904. The building is composed of brick and red sandstone, the entrance is flanked by medieval-inspired brick towers with pyramidal roofs, and the Glenwood Railroad Museum now occupies the former Ladies' Waiting Room. The Depot is served by several Amtrak trains, including the California Zephyr, which runs between Chicago and the San Francisco Bay Area, and also by Greyhound busses. According to the Amtrak Fact Sheet (Colorado), Fiscal Year 2016, Glenwood Springs was the second busiest of the nine Colorado stations served by Amtrak. The track on the right is the mainline and the track on the left is a siding that serves the Depot.



Northward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the same location as previous. The building in the left foreground is the Depot. The buildings across the tracks on the other side of the Colorado River are the Glenwood Hot Springs Resort, a world class hot spring resort that was built in anticipation of the railroad and opened in 1888.



Eastward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 500 feet west of the Glenwood Springs Depot, which is visible to the right of the tracks in the distance. The Colorado River is to the left of the tracks.



Westward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the same location as previous. This is the point at which the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) alignment turned southeastward (left) to follow the Roaring Fork River to Aspen. That turn is represented today by the east branch of a wye, which can be seen in the pavement in the upper left. In 1890, when the D&RGW and CM's Rio Grande Joint Railway (1890) completed a standard gauge mainline via Tennessee Pass, the line from Glenwood Springs (this location) to Aspen, i.e. the branch line that starts at the wye in this photo, became the new "Aspen Branch." From that time until 1967, the mainline seen here took a sharper right turn than now to cross to the north side of the Colorado River; this was the starting point of the D&RG Rifle Extension (1889n). The connection with the Aspen Branch was standard gauged and its connection to the mainline was a single switch to a curve that is now the east branch of the current wye (the track in the upper left). In 1967, to make way for the I-70, the mainline was straightened, as seen here, to connect to the abandoned CM (1888) grade on the other side of the Roaring Fork River and the single switch to the Aspen Branch was replaced with a complete wye. The west branch of the wye connects to the mainline in the distance but is not quite visible in this view.



Westward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) a few steps south of the previous location. The east branch of the wye for the line to Aspen is in the foreground and the mainline is in the upper right portion of the photo. In 1995, all operations ceased on the D&RG Aspen Branch and around 2006 the 42-mile grade from Glenwood Springs (this location) to Aspen was converted into a rail-to-trail called the "Rio Grande Trail" in honor of the D&RG. Tracks remain only at the wye, which as seen here is now completely detached from the mainline.



Northeastward view of the east branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 150 feet southwest of the previous location. The mainline is visible in the distance and beyond that, on the other side of the Colorado River (which is not visible here), is the I-70 overpass. Prior to 1967 the mainline in this view turned northward -- that was the start of the D&RG Rifle Extension (1889n) -- to cross the Colorado River, but the alignment was moved to its current location in 1967 to make way for I-70.





Southwestward view of the east branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the same location as previous. Note the foundation a trackside facility at the far right.



Southwestward view of the east branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 100 feet southwest of the previous location, where the line splits into three tracks.



Southwestward view of the east branch of the wye a few steps from the previous location, where the remnants of a track are in the foreground and one track splits into two in the upper left.



Southeastward view of the east branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 100 feet southwest of the previous location, where there are three tracks.



Northwestward view of the three tracks of the east branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) a few steps from the previous location.



Northwestward view of the east branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 100 feet southwest of the previous location, where there are now four tracks.



Southwestward view of the east branch of the wye 500 feet southwest of the previous location, where the tracks converge. Note the pile of ties removed from the already-abandoned trackage of the wye.



Southward view 300 feet southwest of the previous location. The tracks in the foreground are on the east branch of the wye and converge to a single track at this location. The overgrown track on the right is the west branch of the wye.





Northward view 100 feet south of the previous location. The track in the foreground is the east branch of the wye where it converges to a single track (the same switch as in the previous photo). The overgrown track on the left is the west branch of the wye.



Southward view 100 feet south of the previous location at the south tip of the wye, where the east and west branches of the wye converge to the single track to Aspen. The fenced trail to the right is the Rio Grande Trail. At this point and for 1,500 feet to the north to the Colorado River, the Rio Grande Trail is not on the railroad grade (to avoid the wye).



Northward view up the tip of the wye a few steps south of the previous location. This is the only switch still present anywhere on the wye.



Southward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the same location as previous. The fenced Rio Grande Trail parallels the tracks.



Westward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 100 feet south of the previous location. The Rio Grande Trail is just beyond the tracks and the Roaring Fork River is just beyond the trail. Just beyond the park on the other side of the river is Midland Avenue, which is built on the grade of the Colorado Midland (1888). The CM alignment followed the west bank of the Roaring Fork River into Glenwood Springs.



Southwestward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) and Rio Grande Trail 400 feet south of the previous location.



Northward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) and Rio Grande Trail 1,000 feet south of the previous location. The tracks have been cut for installation of a utility vault.



Westward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) and Rio Grande Trail at the same location as previous. The cut tracks and utility vault are in the lower left of this photo.





Northward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) and Rio Grande Trail one mile south of the previous location.



Southward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) and Rio Grande Trail at the same location as previous. This is where the tracks end and, across the street, the trail is on the railroad grade.



Southward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) and Rio Grande Trail 100 feet south of the previous location. The tracks in the roadbed are still in place and are the southernmost tracks. Across the street, the Rio Grande Trail is on the railroad grade and continues to be from here to Aspen.



Now we are back at the tip of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) so we can explore the west branch of the wye. There is 1.3 miles of track still in place between here and the end of track (previous location), which was left in place for car storage after abandonment of the line to Aspen around 2006. We are looking south; the east branch of the wye is on the left and the west branch is on the right.



Northward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 200 feet north of the tip of the wye (previous location). The track in the foreground is the west branch of the wye and the track on the far right is the east branch; the two tracks have been virtually parallel from the tip of the wye (previous location) to here. A crossover track connects the two branches of the wye.



Northward view of the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) 300 feet north of the previous location and 500 feet north of the tip of the wye. The track in the foreground is the east branch of the wye (which we've already explored) and the track on the far left is the west branch. The two tracks are cut by the grade for 8th Street, which is about 5 feet lower than the railroad grade.



Southward view of the west branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) across 8th Street from the previous location. A 1927 topo map shows a branch line that started at the north end of the current west branch of the wye, which at the time was the mainline to Aspen, that branched southwestward on the current alignment of 8th Street and continued west over the Roaring Fork River to the CM (1888) alignment, where a half mile of track was in place apparently for D&RG car storage. A 1961 topo map shows that branch line replaced by the current 8th Street, seen here. The east branch of the wye (this location) was built in 1967 and apparently had a level grade crossing of 8th Street, which was apparently regraded and cut the tracks during the 1995-2006 abandonment of the Aspen Branch.



Northward view of the west branch of the wye for the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) at the same location as previous. The bridge carries the grade over 7th Street.





Southeastward view of the west branch of the wye 200 feet north of the previous location. The east branch of the wye is barely visible just in front of the parked cars in the distance. The road between the two branches of the wye at this location is 7th Street.



Northward view of the west branch of the wye 100 feet north of the previous location.



Northwestward view of the west branch of the wye 200 feet northwest of the previous location. The mainline in the distance is the 1967 realignment of the D&RG (1889n) to connect the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) to the abandoned CM (1888) grade. The 1967 realignment involved about one mile of new right-of way to connect the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) to the CM (1888) and is not shown separately on the Southwest Railroad History Map.



Northwestward view of the west branch of the wye 150 feet northwest of the previous location. All the ties are still present but the rails have been removed from the switch to the 1967 mainline.



Westward view of the 1967 realignment to connect the D&RG Aspen Branch (1887n) to the CM (1888). The bridge carries the tracks over the Roaring Fork River, which flows into the Colorado River in the upper right of the photo. Just on this side of the bridge are two long ties that once served as the base of a switch to connect the west branch of the wye to the bolted-rail siding. The welded-track mainline is on the right and an additional siding splits off the mainline on the other side of the bridge. It is hard to tell exactly where the 1967 realignment intersects the original CM (1888) grade.