



Colorado's Royal Gorge has a width of 50 feet at its base and a few hundred feet at its top, and a depth of 1,250 feet. The narrow, steep gorge formed because of the very hard Fremont Peak Granite through which the Arkansas River cut the gorge. The Royal Gorge formed when the Arkansas River captured the upper Rio Grande and diverted it to the present Arkansas River. Poncha Pass is a "wind gap" that was once the Rio Grande, but then dried up when the Rio Grande upstream of the pass was diverted to the Arkansas River several million years ago.

Fast forward to 1872, when the fledgling Denver & Rio Grande Railroad built its first stretch of track, a narrow gauge line south from Denver to Pueblo, Colorado, along the east side of the Rocky Mountain front, then west to Florence and another 5 miles south to coal mines around Coal Creek. This initial track connected the railroad to a source of revenue and fuel while it pushed south from Pueblo toward the Rio Grande. In 1874, with local cash and land grant incentives, the D&RG extended the track 10 miles west from Florence to Canon City at the mouth of the Royal Gorge. The last 8 miles of the earlier route, from Florence south to the Coal Creek, became a coal branch of the mainline to Canon City. Construction up the Arkansas River stalled at Canon City while the D&RG pursued its primary goal to reach the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

Meanwhile, in 1879, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, through its subsidiary the Pueblo & Arkansas Valley Railroad, leased the D&RG track from Pueblo to Canon City and from there built westward through the Royal Gorge toward the booming lead and silver mining district around Leadville. The P&AV completed 22 miles of track through the Royal Gorge (known at the time as the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas) from Canon City to Texas Creek (the P&AV is not shown separately on the Southwest map, but is the eastern 22 miles of the D&RG Leadville Branch on the map). P&AV construction then stopped when the Treaty of Boston was signed. Under the treaty, the P&AV track through the gorge was sold to the D&RG, which extended it another 90 to Leadville in 1880. In exchange, the AT&SF got the Raton Pass Route to the Rio Grande.

The Royal Gorge line remained narrow gauge until 1888, when it became one of the first D&RG routes converted to dual gauge. In 1934, the D&RG's Dotsero Cutoff was completed and the Tennessee Pass Route was supplanted by the Moffat Tunnel Route as the D&RG mainline. The Marshall Pass Route was abandoned in 1955, and in 1997, one year after the Union Pacific acquired the Southern Pacific and its D&RG properties, the last train went over Tennessee Pass. The spectacular 12-mile line through the gorge, seen in this photo, is still plied by excursion trains.

In 1929, Canon City built the Royal Gorge Bridge for automobile travel, which at 955 feet above the river held the record of highest bridge in the world until 2001. The bridge is now used for recreation, as U.S. Highway 50 was rerouted off the bridge. The railroad track barely visible at the bottom of the gorge is the D&RG Royal Gorge Route, originally graded in 1879 by the AT&SF-controlled P&AV.



Closer view of the D&RG line through Royal Gorge, first built as a narrow gauge line in 1879 and converted to dual gauge in 1888.



Another view of the D&RG line through Royal Gorge.



D&RG #499 on display at Royal Gorge Bridge Park.