



The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad built its San Juan Extension to serve the silver mining districts of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado. The narrow gauge line was built westward from the now-abandoned D&RG (1876n) mainline at Cuchara Junction (south of Denver) and reached the town of La Veta, Colorado in 1876. In 1877, the D&RG crossed the Sangre de Cristo Mountains at La Veta Pass (this location) to enter the Rio Grande drainage and in 1878 reached Alamosa on the Rio Grande in the San Luis Valley. In 1881, the narrow gauge San Juan Extension was completed to Durango via Cumbres Pass and in 1882 reached its terminus at the silver mining center of Silverton.

In 1894, standard gauge rails were extended west from the D&RG mainline at Cuchara Junction to the town of La Veta. In 1899 a new, lower-grade route was completed over Veta Pass (no "La"), 9 miles south of the narrow gauge La Veta Pass and about 100 feet lower at 9,242 feet above sea level. The standard gauge rails were extended west through Alamosa then south to Antonito, Colorado, where the D&RG's standard-gauging program ended. The narrow gauge route over La Veta Pass (this location) was abandoned in 1900 and much of the track and the summit turntable were moved to the D&RG Crestone Branch (1900n), which was under construction at the time.

We will explore from east to west the abandoned grade of the narrow gauge D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) over La Veta Pass, starting with this southeastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 8 miles northwest of the town of La Veta. The 1899 standard gauge realignment over Veta Pass diverges from the 1878 alignment on the western outskirts of the town of La Veta (see La Veta geolink). This southeastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) is 6 miles northwest of the divergence point; the grade here is now a private road. The heavy vegetation on the right is South Abeyta Creek, which the railroad grade follows most of the way to La Veta Pass. The pass is 4.5 miles to the northwest as the crow flies, but the winding railroad route is more like 7 miles. The 1899 standard gauge route is 2 miles south of this location but is not accessible.



Northwestward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) 2.5 miles northwest of the previous location. The active highway in the upper right is U.S. Highway 160, which is the modern route over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The overgrown paved road just below the highway is an earlier version of U.S. Highway 160. The unpaved road in the foreground is an access road from the new highway. The dirt track in the left-central part of the photo is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) and the overgrown drainage to its left is South Abeyta Creek. The 1899 standard gauge route is 6.5 miles south (to the left) of this location but is not accessible.



Southeastward view a half mile northwest of the previous location. The unpaved road in the upper left is an access road from U.S. Highway 160. A partly overgrown cut grade is visible in the center of the photo; this grade is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n).



Northwestward view at the same location as previous. The partly overgrown cut grade that runs from the lower left edge of the photo to the Ponderosa Pine in the top center of the photo is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n). At the pine tree, the railroad grade merges with the unpaved road from U.S. Highway 160. From that point northwestward, the unpaved road (Forest Road 443) follows the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) all the way to La Veta Pass.



Eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n), now Forest Road 443, 1,300 feet northwest of the previous location. This is the first of two horseshoe bends needed for the climb up to La Veta Pass. This 180-degree curve involved a significant fill grade and a culvert (not visible here) to allow South Abeyta Creek to flow beneath it. The road with cars is U.S. Highway 160.



Westward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) at the same location as previous. This horseshoe bend changes the alignment from northwestward along South Abeyta Creek to southeastward to climb the slope on the west flank of the creek valley. In this view the grade changes from a fill grade over the creek to a cut grade to negotiate the slope (note the cut exposing red rock in the upper left).



Southward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) a few steps west of the previous location, just coming out of the horseshoe bend. Note the cut grade that carries the alignment south-southeastward to climb the slope on the west flank of the valley of South Abeyta Creek. The creek and the lower-elevation portion of the railroad grade (before the horseshoe bend) are parallel to and downslope to the left (east) of this view.



Southeastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) one mile south-southeast of the previous location. The curve in the distance is the second horseshoe bend.



Northwestward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n), now Forest Road 443, at the same location as previous. La Veta Pass is the low point in the distance.



Northwestward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) at La Veta Pass, 2 miles northwest of the previous location. Buildings and structures are preserved as the La Veta Pass-Uptop Historic District. The white building is the depot. The narrow gauge tracks ran where the road is now. The 1899 standard gauge crossing at Veta Pass is 7.5 miles south (to the left) of here and 100 feet lower. The U.S. Highway 160 crossing of the Sangre de Cristo drainage divide is 1.5 miles northeast of here at a summit that is also called "La Veta Pass."





Closer view of the La Veta Pass depot.





The remains of a turntable used to turn helper engines at the top of the grade. The turntable hardware was moved to the D&RG Crestone Branch (1900n).



"FROM THE MOUTH OF THE FALL TO THE SUMMIT IS
MEASURED IN MILES - FOURTEEN MILES;
MEASURED IN HOURS - THREE HOURS;
MEASURED IN SENSATIONS - THE LENGTH OF A DREAM."
said of VETAP Pass by Helen Hunt Jackson 1872



Building at La Veta Pass.





Eastward view of the turntable and, on the other side of forest road/narrow gauge railroad, the same building as in the previous photo.



Northeastward view 1.5 miles northwest of La Veta Pass (previous location). The road in the foreground leads to La Veta Pass and is on the grade of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n). The road in the center distance is U.S. Highway 160.



Southwestward view at the same location as previous. The road in the foreground is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n), now a forest road, that merges here with U.S. Highway 160. From here down to the San Luis Valley, the railroad grade is under U.S. Highway 160, both of which follow Sangre de Cristo Creek (which is a tributary of the Rio Grande).



Now we are 7.5 miles southwest of the previous location looking northeast. The track is the standard gauge D&RG San Juan Extension (1899). U.S. Highway 160 is barely visible above the RV and the SUV. As far as I can tell the narrow gauge D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) is still under the highway and the divergence point of the 1878 and 1899 routes is in this view but completely obliterated. The bridge crosses Wagon Creek, which flows into Sangre de Cristo Creek 100 yards northwest (to the left) of here. The standard gauge 1899 route follows Wagon Creek eastward (into the right distance) toward Veta Pass.



Southwestward view at the same location as previous. From here, the 1899 standard gauge tracks were laid on the grade of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n). This line and U.S. Highway 160 follow Sangre de Cristo Creek 10 miles down to the flat San Luis Valley at Fort Garland. From here we'll explore eastward, in the opposite direction, along the D&RG San Juan Extension (1899), which is the re-routed portion of the San Juan Extension.



Westward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1899) one mile east of the previous location. The abandoned D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n), now U.S. Highway 160, is 3 miles north (to the right) of this location.



Eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1899) at the same location as previous. Wagon Creek is out of view to the right (south).



About 3,000 feet northeast the previous location, a hopper car has derailed and others are stored on a siding on the D&RG San Juan Extension (1899).



Eastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1899), 2,000 feet east of the previous location and 2.3 miles east of the divergence point with the abandoned narrow gauge route. The bolted mainline is on the left and the partially overgrown siding (the same siding as in the previous photo) is on the right. Access east of here is blocked at a gate for a residential development.