

Spanning the Gap

Climbing the Gap



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Recreation truly "spans the Gap", from diving to train wrecks on the river bottom to hiking to the top of Mt. Tammany or Mt. Minsi. One of the more demanding recreational activities, both mentally and physically, is *technical climbing*.

Climbing and the related sports of *rappelling* and *bouldering* are enjoyed on small cliffs and frozen waterfalls scattered throughout the park. The Gap's cliffs are composed of a pebble-like sandstone known as *Shawangunk Grit*, and this same rock forms two of the premier climbing areas in the Appalachians: the Shawangunk Cliffs of New Paltz NY, and Seneca Rocks WV. While the Gap may not be quite as popular, extensive opportunities for climbing still exist. Rock climbers generally prefer the middle sections of the largest cliffs of both Mt. Tammany NJ and Mt. Minsi PA. These two sections provide the steepest and longest *routes*, and have the least amount of vegetation and loose rock.



(Left) The best route up.

(Above) All important: A final check of the equipment, and that partner on the rope.

How does a climb go? Teams of two or more lug heavy packs of specialized gear up long *talus* slopes to attempt rock and ice climbs. These routes vary in difficulty from easy practice lines to first ascents. Reaching the base of a cliff, a pair of climbers ties themselves to different ends of the same rope. One then secures himself to a tree or other solid anchor. The other climbs the rock face using natural projections and cracks for hand and foot holds. Every ten feet or so this climber places *chocks* (pieces of variously shaped metal which wedge into cracks in the cliff), and threads the trailing rope through *carabiners* (metal rings with spring-loaded gates) attached to the chocks.

Meanwhile, the partner anchored to the tree *belays* the climber by sliding the rope, as it is needed, through a metal friction device. This belay device is also secured to the mountain. The combination of the rope threaded through the anchors and attached to the friction device allows the belayer to stop a fall before the climber falls too far, and/or strikes the rock face.

If correctly rigged, a fall can be as safe as (and quite similar to) a carnival ride. Even so, climbers try **not** to fall. A free fall starting at 150 feet above the ground, even for a distance of five feet, can wear on the nerves. When the climber reaches the summit, or runs out of rope, he in turn anchors himself to the mountain and belays his partner up the face. This second person removes all the equipment as he goes. Once on top, the pair will either hike down a trail or *rappel* (descend the rope -- *rappel* is a French word meaning *recall*.)



(Above) and (Below) Local Middle School students try out their stuff on Ricks Rocks in New Jersey.

Ice climbers are attracted to the steep river-facing slope of Mt. Tammany, as well as the main cliffs of Mt. Minsi. However, all the cliffs experience some level of activity. Climbers exploring less frequented areas have a fair chance of discovering equipment left by their predecessors decades ago. Little is known of these visitors, but stamped beneath the rust of their abandoned pitons and carabiners are names such as "St. Moser" and "Chamonix." (a town in the French Alps) In ice climbing, the footholds are substituted for by *crampons*, handholds by *ice axes*, and chocks by large *ice screws*.

Safe climbing requires knowledge and proper equipment. Climbers should wear helmets. Portions of cliffs contain loose debris. Other common, but minor, hazards include poison ivy encountered along the base of some cliffs, and wasps can be a nuisance at certain times of the year. Poisonous snakes are rarely encountered, but it is never advisable to stick one's hands and feet into rocky places without checking for "occupants" first.

Persons interested in trying the sport of climbing should do so only with proper gear and after receiving formal training. Climbing clubs and climbing schools are possible sources of instruction. Local sports shops can usually provide leads as to clubs and schools.

