

= Pithole , Pennsylvania =

Pithole , or Pithole City , is a ghost town in Cornplanter Township , Venango County in Pennsylvania , about 6 miles (9 @. @ 7 km) from Oil Creek State Park and the Drake Well Museum , the site of the first commercial oil well in the United States . Pithole 's sudden growth and equally rapid decline , as well as its status as a " proving ground " of sorts for the burgeoning petroleum industry , made it one of the most famous of oil boomtowns .

Oil strikes at nearby wells in January 1865 prompted a large influx of people to the area that would become Pithole , most of whom were land speculators . The town was laid out in May 1865 , and by December was incorporated with an approximate population of 20 @, @ 000 . At its peak , Pithole had at least 54 hotels , 3 churches , the third largest post office in Pennsylvania , a newspaper , a theater , a railroad , the world 's first pipeline and a red @-@ light district " the likes of Dodge City 's . " By 1866 , economic growth and oil production in Pithole had slowed . Oil strikes around other nearby communities and numerous fires drove residents away from Pithole and , by 1877 , the borough was unincorporated .

The site was cleared of overgrowth and was donated to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1961 . A visitor center , containing exhibits pertaining to the history of Pithole , was built in 1972 . Pithole was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 .

= = Etymology = =

The city of Pithole derived its name from its proximity to Pithole Creek , which flows through Venango County to the Allegheny River . The origin of the name " Pithole " itself , however , is a mystery . One origination theory is that early pioneers stumbled across strange fissures from which sulfurous fumes wafted . Such " pit @-@ holes " are found in the area where Pithole Creek empties into the Allegheny River , with some measuring 14 inches (36 cm) wide and 8 feet (2 m) long . Another possible explanation involves the discovery of ancient pits dug by early settlers , some 8 feet (2 m) wide and 12 feet (4 m) deep , that were cribbed with oil @-@ soaked timbers . These " pit @-@ holes " , found along Oil Creek and in Cornplanter Township , supposedly predate the Senecas who inhabited the area from the mid @-@ 17th to the late 18th century .

= = Geology = =

Most of the oil produced in northwestern Pennsylvania was formed in sandstone reservoir rocks at the boundary between the Mississippian and Devonian rock layers . Over time , the oil migrated toward the surface , became trapped beneath an impervious layer of caprock , and formed a reservoir . The presence of upwards @-@ curving folds in the caprock called anticlines , or sometimes an inversion of an anticline called a syncline , greatly varied the depth of the reservoirs , from around 4 @, @ 000 feet (1 @, @ 200 m) to just beneath the surface .

The majority of the oil wells in the vicinity of Pithole and the Oil Creek valley tapped into a sandstone formation known as the Venango Third sand . The Venango Third contained large volumes of oil under high pressure at only 450 to 550 feet (140 to 170 m) below ground level . Other oil @-@ producing formations in the area were " the Venango First and Second [sands] , the latter often prevailing after the Third sand was lost . " At Pithole , the " first sandstone was reached at 115 feet [35 m] , the second at 345 feet [105 m] , the third at 480 feet [146 m] , the fourth at 600 feet [183 m] , and the oil itself at 615 feet [187 m] " by the Frazier Well , according to a report by the Oil City Register . Inaccurate numbering of the layers by the drillers , however , put the Fourth sand above the real Third at 670 feet (200 m) .

= = Geography and climate = =

Pithole is located in northwestern Pennsylvania , 50 miles (80 km) southeast of Erie and 103 miles (166 km) north @-@ northeast of Pittsburgh . The nearest cities to Pithole are Titusville ,

approximately 8 miles (13 km) to the northwest , and Oil City , 9 miles (14 km) to the southwest . Pithole is located on Pithole Road (State Route 1006) , almost 4 miles (6 @. @ 4 km) southwest of Pennsylvania Route 36 and about 2 miles (3 @. @ 2 km) east Pennsylvania Route 227 .

Pithole was laid out with four primary east ? west streets : First , Second , Third and Fourth . Duncan , Mason , Prather , Brown and Holmden Streets traversed Pithole from north to south . Each street was 60 feet (18 m) wide , except for Duncan at 80 feet (24 m) . All five north ? south streets terminated at First Street ; Mason started at Third ; Prather and Brown started at Fourth . Duncan and Holmden Streets both began at a Y @-@ intersection with the road from Titusville . All four east ? west streets began at Duncan and ended at Holmden Street except for First , which extended to the Frazier Well .

July is the hottest month in Pithole , when the average high temperature is 81 ° F (27 ° C) and the average low is 57 ° F (14 ° C) . January is the coldest month with an average high of 32 ° F (0 ° C) and an average low of 13 ° F (? 11 ° C) . The average 44 inches (1 @, @ 118 mm) of precipitation a year wreaked havoc on Pithole 's many unpaved streets , especially the heavily traveled First and Holmden . Portions of First Street were planked or corduroyed in response to the resulting quagmire of mud that would often trap wagons and draft animals .

= = History = =

The area around Pithole , and modern @-@ day Venango County , was formerly inhabited by Eries , who were eventually wiped out by the Iroquois in 1653 . On October 23 , 1784 , the Iroquois , which included the Seneca , ceded the land to Pennsylvania in the Treaty of Fort Stanwix . Venango County was formed from portions of Allegheny and Lycoming counties on March 12 , 1800 . Cornplanter Township was settled in 1795 and was incorporated on November 28 , 1833 .

In 1859 , Edwin Drake successfully drilled the first oil well along the banks of Oil Creek , outside of Titusville in Crawford County . Within a half year , over 500 wells were built along Oil Creek , in the 16 @-@ mile (26 km) corridor from Titusville to the creek 's mouth at the Allegheny River in Oil City . Other wells were drilled down the Allegheny towards Franklin and upriver to Tionesta in Forest County . Pithole Creek did not attract the same attention from speculators and investors , who preferred to risk their money on the tried @-@ and @-@ true method of drilling on flatter terrain near large rivers like the Allegheny and Oil Creek , rather than gamble on rougher terrain . In January 1864 , Isaiah Frazier leased two tracts of land , totaling 35 acres (14 ha) , from Thomas Holmden , a farmer along Pithole Creek . Frazier , James Faulkner Jr . , Frederick W. Jones and J. Nelson Tappan formed the United States Petroleum Company in April 1864 and started drilling what was dubbed the United States Well , or Frazier Well , in June . On January 7 , 1865 , the Frazier Well struck oil .

= = = Boom = = =

Two weeks after the Frazier strike , the Twin Wells , just to the south of the Frazier Well , also struck oil . In May 1865 , A. P. Duncan and George C. Prather purchased the Holmden Farm , including the portions still leased to United States Petroleum , for \$ 25 @, @ 000 and a bonus of \$ 75 @, @ 000 . The wooded bluff overlooking the Frazier and Twin Wells was cleared and a town was laid out . The town was divided into 500 lots , which were put up for sale on May 24 . By July , the population was estimated to have been at least 2 @, @ 000 . The population of Pithole rose to 15 @, @ 000 people in September and 20 @, @ 000 by Christmas . Pithole was incorporated as a borough on November 30 , 1865 .

As many residents were temporary , Pithole had a total of 54 hotels ranging from simple rooming houses to luxury hotels like the Chase and Danforth Houses , or the Bonta House located in Prather City on the bluff on the opposite side of Pithole Creek . The Astor House , Pithole 's first hotel , was built in one day . Construction of the hotel was especially poor ; a lack of insulation and innumerable gaps in the walls made conditions in the hotel miserable during the winter . At one point , the Pithole Post Office , located on the first @-@ floor of the Chase House , was the third @-@ busiest in the

state of Pennsylvania , behind Philadelphia and Pittsburgh . Three different churches ? Catholic , Methodist and Presbyterian ? were constructed by their respective congregations . Pithole 's local newspaper , the Pithole Daily Record was started on September 5 , 1865 . The largest building in Pithole ? the three @-@ story , 1 @,@ 100 @-@ seat Murphy 's Theater ? opened on September 17 . Among all the glamour , " every other building [in Pithole] was a bar " . Prostitution was rampant in Pithole , with most of the brothels built along First Street . Although the borough council passed ordinances banning the sex trade and carried out raids in an attempt to enforce them , they had little impact .

As oil production increased through the success of wells like the Frazier , Twin , Pool , Grant , and the two Homestead Wells , transportation of the oil to the outside world was still reliant on teamsters . The teamsters were notorious for mistreatment of their horses , most of which lost their hair due to a buildup of oil and only had a lifespan of a few months in Pithole . The high mortality rate caused a horse shortage , with more having to be brought in by rail from Ohio and New York . Teamsters often refused to work on days when the roads were impassable or gouged the oil producers . Various investors , fed up with the teamsters , pooled resources and built a plank toll road from Pithole to Titusville . Samuel Van Sykle , an oil buyer also frustrated with the teamsters , designed the world 's first pipeline , which opened on October 9 , 1865 . The 2 @-@ inch @-@ diameter (51 mm) , 5 @.@ 5 @-@ mile @-@ long (8 @.@ 9 km) pipeline connected Pithole to the Oil Creek Railroad and was initially able to transport 81 barrels (13 m3) per hour operating with three steam engines , equivalent to 300 teams working a 10 @-@ hour shift . A fourth engine brought the pipeline 's maximum capacity to 2 @,@ 500 barrels (397 m3) a day . The Oil City and Pithole Railroad (OC & P) was opened on December 18 . A second railroad was partly built but never finished , and plans for other railroads never led to construction . Along with the pipeline , another innovation developed in Pithole was the railroad tank car , which was essentially two wooden tanks , each with a capacity of 80 barrels (13 m3) , mounted onto a flatcar .

= = = Bust = = =

In March 1866 , a chain of banks owned by Charles Vernon Culver , a financier and member of United States House of Representatives for Pennsylvania 's 20th congressional district , collapsed . This triggered a financial panic throughout the oil region , bursting the oil bubble . Speculators and potential investors stopped coming to Pithole and life in Pithole settled down . In the early morning of February 24 , a house caught fire and the flames were spread to other buildings by the wind . In two hours , most of Holmden Street , and parts of Brown and Second Streets , were reduced to smoldering ashes . The worst of multiple fires occurred on August 2 , burning down several city blocks and destroying 27 wells .

When many oil strikes occurred elsewhere in Venango County in 1867 , people left Pithole , often taking their houses and places of business with them or abandoning their property . By December 1866 , the population had dropped to 2 @,@ 000 . The newspaper was relocated to Petroleum Center in July 1868 , becoming the Petroleum Center Daily Record . Both the Chase House and Murphy 's Theater were sold in August 1868 and moved to Pleasantville . Prather and Duncan sold their interests in Pithole before the downturn ; Prather split an estimated \$ 3 million with his two brothers and moved to Meadville , while Duncan returned to Scotland with his fortune . The 1870 United States Census recorded the population of Pithole as only 237 . The borough charter of Pithole was officially annulled in August 1877 . The remains of the city were sold , in 1879 , back to Venango County for \$ 4 @.@ 37 . The Catholic church was dismantled and moved to Tionesta in 1886 ; the Methodist church was kept in " usable condition " through private donations before being taken down in the 1930s . A stone altar was erected and consecrated by the Methodist Episcopal Church on August 27 , 1959 , the centennial of the Drake Well strike .

= = Visitor center = =

The site was purchased in 1957 by James B. Stevenson , the publisher of the Titusville Herald ,

who later served as the chairman of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission from 1962 to 1971 . Stevenson cleared the brush from the site , and donated it to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1961 . Today , only a few foundations and mowed paths mark the buildings and former streets of Pithole . The site of Pithole was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on March 20 , 1973 . A walking tour of Pithole 's 84 @. @ 3 acres (34 @. @ 1 ha) of streets can be completed in 42 minutes . The visitor center was constructed in 1972 .

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission operates the visitor center as part of the nearby Drake Well Museum , adjacent to Oil Creek State Park , outside of Titusville . The visitor center contains several exhibits , including a scale model of the city at its peak , an oil @-@ transport wagon that is stuck in mud , and a small , informational theater . The visitor center is usually open , annually , from the Memorial Day weekend , at end of May , through Labor Day in September . The season is kicked off with the annual Wildcatter Day celebration featuring music , tours , demonstrations and other activities .