Landslide susceptibility map of the Ambridge 7½-minute quadrangle, Allegheny County and vicinity, Pennsylvania

By J. S. Pomeroy

The purpose of this map is to identify areas with potential slope-stability problems significant to development. Essentially it is a guide to areas of past landslide and present landslide susceptibility. The map is not designed to replace detailed studies of specific sites by competent technical personnel. Rather, it delineates areas where such detailed studies are most vital to the safety and welfare of the general public. In these areas site examinations are necessary in order to seek firm evidence of the degree of difficulty that slope instability may pose to a contemplated land use, and so to define whether costs of hazard prevention are commensurate with the value of the contemplated use. Preparation of the map was sponsored by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC contract no. 74-31.

The map is based on an interpretation of large-scale (1:12,000) aerial photographs (series GS-VDGY) taken on April 14, 1973. As noted on the map, the extreme northwest corner of the quadrangle was not photographed; that area therefore was not studied. About one week of field work during Fall 1973 supplemented the aerial photograph interpretations.

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OPEN FILE MAP 74-76
This map is preliminary and has not been edited for conformity with Geological Survey standards or nomenclature.

Information from soil surveys by the Soil Conservation Service (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1973) was integrated with data from an early geologic map (Munn, 1911) and other reports listed in the references.

Large recent landslides are readily seen on aerial photographs. The aerial photographs also are an excellent means of locating ancient slump benches and the hummocky areas at the bases of slopes so indicative of landslide-prone areas. In addition, arcuate scars at the heads of slide areas are well displayed on aerial photographs. In contrast, on topographic maps the contour interval and the configuration of the contours alone are not sufficiently detailed to allow for the delineation of many landslide-prone areas.

Many landslides in the Ambridge quadrangle are too small to be identified with certainty by aerial photo study alone. The smaller landslides shown on the map were identified and plotted by direct field observations. This map does not purport to show all recent landslides, because most slides are so small that they could not be shown at the scale of the map. Such a thorough landslide inventory would require many weeks or months of effort in the quadrangle.

The rocks exposed in the Ambridge quadrangle are more or less flat-lying shales, mudstones, sandstones, siltstones, and minor coal beds and limestones of the Conemaugh Group of Pennsylvanian age. Of these, nonbedded red mudstone and related residual and colluvial soils are particularly susceptible to landsliding. Most areas with moderate to severe slope stability problems are underlain by the principal red mudstone horizon, the "Pittsburgh redbeds," which ranges from 20 feet (6.1 m) to 65 feet (19.8 m) thick north of the Ohio River (Winters, 1969).

It can be inferred that most slopes in the quadrangle are relatively stable under natural conditions, but, as is shown on the map, many slopes are sensitive and their natural equilibrium can be readily upset. By far, the greatest number of landslides in the region occur when a slope is oversteepened, overloaded, or otherwise modified by man in the course of development of housing, roads, pipelines, and other features. The largely prehistoric slump benches probably were formed under extremes of climate no longer characteristic of the area. Relatively recent landslides on natural, undisturbed slopes largely are caused by unusual conditions, such as extremely heavy and prolonged rainfall.

A classic example of a combination of unusually heavy rainfall and man's modification of a sensitive slope is clearly documented by the Sewickly Water Works landslide of April 21, 1940 (Ackenheil, 1954). Overloading of the "Pittsburgh redbed" slope with quarry waste was compounded by an unusually high amount of precipitation for that day as well as for the previous week and month. The combined surcharging caused a slide which affected an estimated 350,000 cubic yards of material and ruined a reservoir (Ackenheil, 1954, pl. 1).

The delineation of probable older landslide areas should prove useful in light of the experience expensively acquired by highway construction personnel in the routing of Interstate 279 at the extreme southeast edge of the quadrangle. In studying this area, Hamel and Flint (1969) clearly demonstrated that recognition of ancient slump masses in advance of highway construction is of utmost importance. In fact, any type of man-induced earth distrubance can reactivate older slide areas if care is not exercised. Probable ancient landslides (slump benches) also have been delineated in the deep valleys west of the Interstate 279 area and elsewhere in the quadrangle.

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FACTORS AFFECTING LANDSLIDE SUSCEPTIBILITY IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

(to accompany U.S. Geological Survey open-file landslide-susceptibility maps of Allegheny County)

Significant factors bearing on landslide susceptibility include: (1) rock types; (2) nature of rock layering: (3) rock fracturing: (4) attitude of rock layers: (5) composition and thickness of soil cover: (6) permeability of rocks and soils: and (7) steepness of slopes.

1. Rock types.--Outcropping rocks are largely sandstone, siltstone, shale (or claystone), and limestone. Coal, though only a relatively small part of the total rock volume, is widespread and significant. Sandstone and limestone commonly are harder, more resistant to weathering, than are siltstone and shale. This differential weathering explains why sandstone and limestone crop out on many slopes as ledges and cliffs, whereas siltstone and shale are rarely well exposed except in cut banks of streams, in other very steep natural slopes, and in manmade exposures such as highway cuts.

2. Rock layering.--The rocks form layers commonly 1 to 10 ft thick, but in places layers exceed 30 ft. For example, a 2-ft layer of limestone may rest on 7 ft of shale which in turn rests on a sandstone layer 10 ft thick. It is also common to find that a layer of shale as thin as 1 inch lies between two layers of sandstone each many feet thick. If a shale layer is decomposed to some depth by weathering, then overlying hard rock is less firmly supported and tends to move down slope in response to gravity.

Some rock layers are continuous over a number of miles, but most sandstone layers, for example, probably grade laterally into another rock type, perhaps siltstone, in shorter distances, and some conspicuous lateral changes are seen within a single outcrop.

3. Rock fractures.--Two types of rock fracture occur: faults, fractures along which rocks on one side are offset from rocks on the other side; and joints, fractures, some tight, some open, along which little or no evidence of movement can be seen. Faults are relatively rare in Allegheny County. The harder rock layers, sandstone and limestone, are well jointed in outcrop, with joints commonly open and one to several feet apart. Joints also occur in siltstone and shale layers but the joints are chiefly tight rather than open. Most joints are more or less perpendicular to the plane of layering.

Joints contribute to landslide susceptibility, for if rock layers were not jointed, their tendency to fail when underlying rocks are removed would be less. Joints are also an important factor in rock permeability.

4. Attitude of rock layering.--In Allegheny County, most rock layers dip at such small angles that their attitudes can best be measured in feet per mile rather than in degrees or in percent of grade. In some areas, layers dip more than 200 ft per mile (about 2° or 4 percent grade), but most layers have gentler dips, and locally they are horizontal. In Allegheny County, rock attitude is most critical to landsliding on overdip slopes, where rock layers dip in the same general direction as the slopes but at lesser angles than the slopes.

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5. Soil cover.--Soils are composed chiefly of fine-grained mineral constituents derived from rock decomposition during weathering. However, soil means different things to different people. For example, to a soil scientist, soil supports plant life and has undergone near-surface zonation resulting from the interaction of climate and living matter, conditioned by slope and relief. An agricultural soil rarely is more than 6 ft deep and may rest on and be developed from a parent material that is itself decomposed rock. In contrast, to an engineer, soil includes all unconsolidated material above hard bedrock, and so includes the parent material of many agricultural soils. Only where depth to bedrock is relatively shallow will there be virtual agreement between a soil scientist and an engineer as to thickness and composition of a soil. For present purposes, soil is used in the engineering sense; it applies not only to material resulting from rock weathering in place, but also to masses of fragmented and decomposed rock particles that have been transported and redeposited elsewhere. Examples of transported soils are colluvium and alluvial terrace deposits, both of which can be subject to landsliding.

In Allegheny County, soils of the hill tops are relatively thin, less than 6 ft thick in many areas. Soils of hill slopes are absent where bedrock crops out, are relatively thin on many upper slopes, and are made up of more than 20 ft of colluvium near and at the base of many slopes. Valley-bottom soils generally have nearly level surfaces and so are not a significant factor in most landsliding; they may exceed 100 ft in thickness.

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Most soils contain a large proportion of silt and clay, some soils are composed entirely of clay, and others are relatively coarse grained, containing large proportions of sand and rock fragments. The composition of a soil reflects the composition of the rock from which the soil was derived, for a sandstone will weather to a sandy soil, a shale to a clayey soil, and hard blocky rocks may weather to a rocky soil. Because soils result from weathering of rock particles, they commonly are finer grained near the surface than they are at depth. Most soils are loose to moderately cohesive. They will not stand long on steep slopes, and are subject to landsliding if affected by undercutting, overloading, or other processes. Clayey soils when dry commonly are friable and relatively low in weight per unit volume. When wetted, clay soils retain water and so become heavier, become plastic, and depending on their mineral composition may become very slippery.

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7. Steepness of slopes.--Allegheny County is a land of hills and ridges each of which is more or less the same height as its neighbor. Separating these hills are valleys through which streams and rivers flow at levels commonly 300 to 400 ft and locally more than 600 ft below adjacent ridge crests. The valley walls are relatively steep; slopes of 25 percent (about 14°) or greater occupy more than one-tenth of the area. This large incidence of steep natural slopes is a leading factor in the prevalence of landslides.

Relative importance of factors.--All of the above factors are interrelated. At a given place one factor may be the chief control of landslide susceptibility, whereas at another place the same factor may be less important than others. For example, where a major stream is undercutting its bank, oversteepening will occur and slope failure ultimately will ensue, whether the bank material is rock or soil; where a thick soil cover becomes saturated with water, failure may occur even on relatively gentle slopes. Some reverse-dip slopes, contrary to what might be expected, can be consistent landslide hazards because of natural or manmade steepness or excessive rock fracturing; some over-dip slopes, on the other hand may be less susceptible to landsliding because only one type of rock is present.

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Credits.--This text is abstracted with minor changes from Briggs (1974). The following illustrations are adapted with minor modifications from Nilsen (1972), Eckel (1958), and from the pioneering text by Sharpe (1938). They illustrate nomenclature of landslides, types of landslides found in Allegheny County, and features of creep, which is a widespread feature of Allegheny County slopes.

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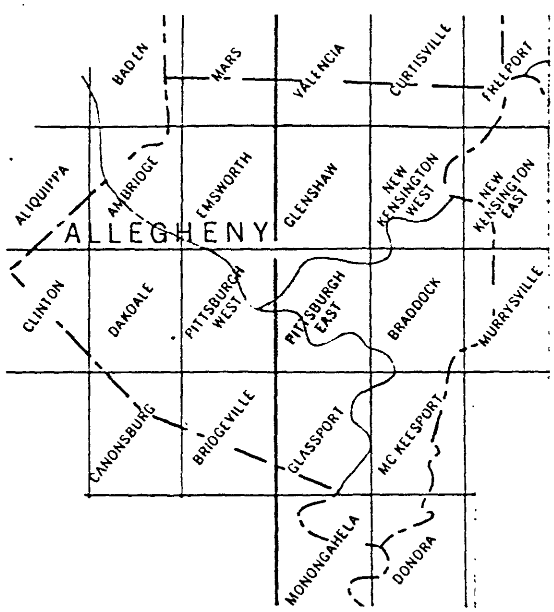
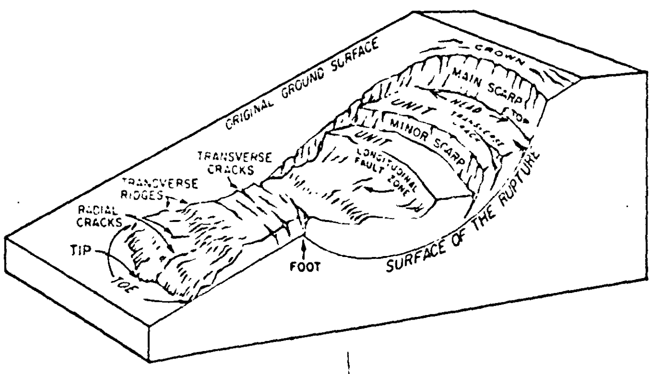
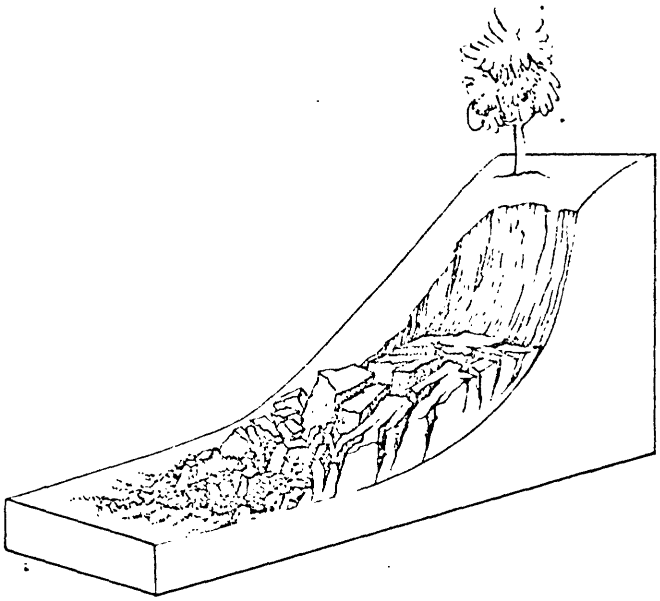


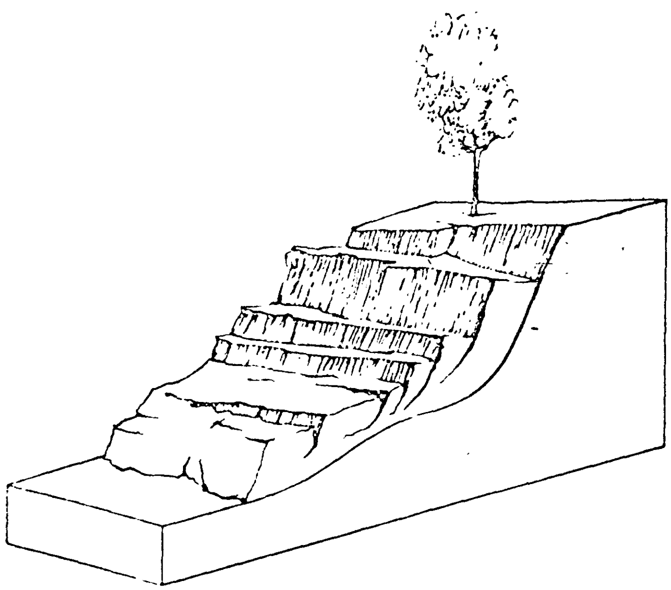
Index to 7½' quadrangle maps
of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania



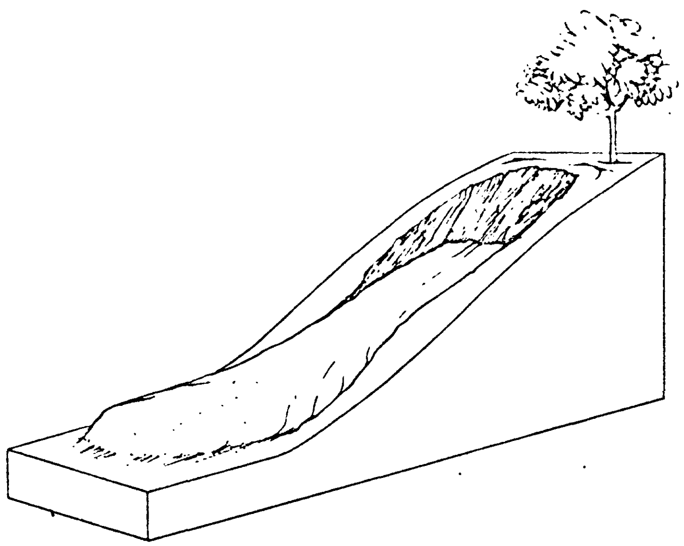
Nomenclature of parts of a landslide (from Eckel, 1958):



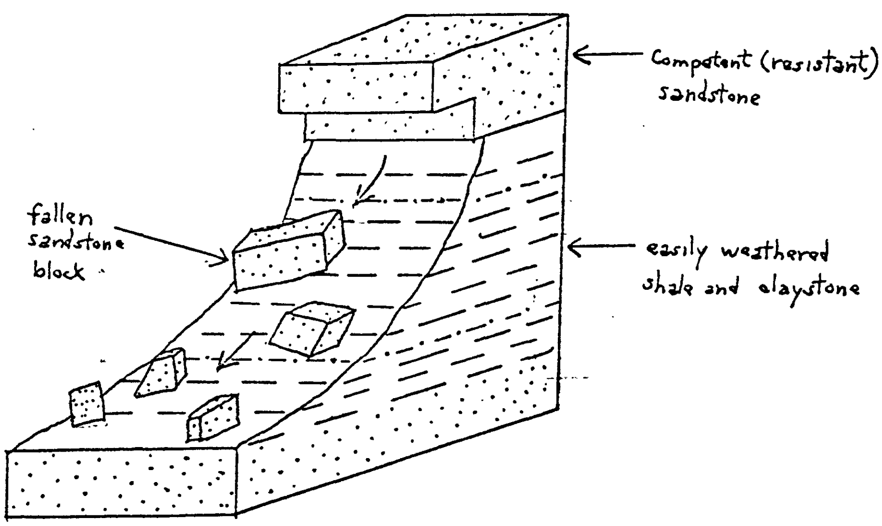
Debris slide: incoherent or broken masses of rock and other debris that move downslope by sliding on a surface that underlies the deposit.



Slump: coherent or intact masses that move downslope by rotational slip on surfaces that underlie as well as penetrate the landslide deposit.



Earthflow: colluvial materials that move downslope in a manner similar to a viscous fluid.



ROCKFALL