

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ROADS & BRIDGES,  
CLINGMANS DOME ROAD  
(Forney Ridge road)  
Between Newfound Gap Road and Clingmans Dome  
Gatlinburg Vicinity  
Sevier County  
Tennessee

HAER NO. TN-35-B

HAER  
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78-147  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ROADS AND BRIDGES,  
CLINGMANS DOME ROAD  
HAER NO. TN-35-B

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Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park,  
North Carolina, between Newfound Gap  
Road and Clingmans Dome

Date of Construction: 1930s

Type of Structure: Roadway, Bridges, and Landscapes

Use: National Park Transportation System

Engineer: U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and National  
Park Service

Fabricator/Builder: Arundel Corporation

Owner: U.S. Department of the Interior,  
National Park Service, Great Smoky  
Mountains National Park

Significance: Clingmans Dome Road provides access to  
Clingmans Dome, the highest point in  
Great Smoky Mountains National Park at  
6,642'. The road follows the main ridge  
of the Smokies, offering views into the  
valleys of Deep and Noland creeks. The  
transportation system of Great Smoky  
Mountains is representative of NPS park  
road design and landscape planning  
throughout the country. Much of the  
work was undertaken by the Civilian  
Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

Project Information: Documentation was conducted during the  
summer of 1996 under the co-sponsorship  
of HABS/HAER, Great Smoky Mountains  
National Park, the National Park Service  
Roads and Parkway Program and funded  
through the Federal Lands Highway

Program. Measured drawings were produced by Edward Lupyak, field supervisor, Matthew Regnier, Karen Young, and Dorota Sikora (ICOMOS intern, Poland). The historical reports were prepared by Cornelius Maher and Michael Kelleher. See also drawings and histories on related structures: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, TN-35; Newfound Gap Road, TN-35-A; Little River Road, TN-35-C; Cades Cove and Laurel Creek Roads, TN-35-D; Foothills Parkway, TN-35-E; Cataloochee Valley Road, TN-35-F; Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, TN-35-G; Big Creek Road, TN-35-H; Northshore Road, TN-35-I; Cosby Park Road, TN-35-J; Deep Creek Road, TN-35-K; Greenbrier Road, TN-35-L; Heintooga Ridge and Balsam Mountain Roads, TN-35-M; Cataloochee Trail and Turnpike, TN-35-N; Rich Mountain Road, TN-35-O; Elkmont Road, TN-35-P; Loop Over Bridge, TN-35-Q; Smokemont Bridge, TN-35-R; Elkmont Vehicle Bridge, TN-35-S; and Luten Bridges, TN-35-T.

*Introduction*

Clingmans Dome Road is a 7-mile spur road from Newfound Gap to an observation tower on Clingmans Dome, the highest point in Great Smoky Mountains National Park at 6,642'. The road follows the main ridge of the Smokies, offering the motorist views to the south into the valleys of Deep and Noland creeks.

At 1.2 miles, the road crosses Indian Gap, which was the route of the original Indian footpath and then wagon road over the mountains prior to the construction of a road through Newfound Gap in the 1920s and 1930s. A parking lot is located here, providing access to the Road Prong Trail, which follows the route of this old road. The road also provides access to the Noland Divide and Forney Ridge trails, which are considered two of the most spectacular hikes in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, as they follow the crest of ridges for several miles into the wilderness in the southern section of the park.

The Clingmans Dome Road continues for 6.7 miles to Forney Ridge, where a large parking lot allows motorists to leave their cars for the short walk to the observation tower on Clingmans

Dome. From here, visitors have a panoramic view of the Great Smoky Mountains.

### *Planning the Skyway*

After the United States Congress authorized Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1926, residents and businesses in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina looked toward the park as a means to raise the prominence of their region and expand economic opportunities through increased tourism in the area. To facilitate these goals, civic organizations and "boosters" of the Smokies sought to influence the Park Service's plans for the park in order to have the development of roads and other facilities for visitors benefit neighboring communities. One such example is the effort of the Asheville, North Carolina Chamber of Commerce, which sought to have a skyline road, referred to as the "Skyway," built across the main ridge of the mountains in the park from the town of Mount Sterling, North Carolina on the park's northeastern boundary to Deals Gap on the

southwestern boundary.<sup>1</sup> Although the Chamber of Commerce argued that the Skyway would "bring in its unfolding the largest practicable service to the largest possible number of people," the fact that it also proposed that a road be built from Asheville directly to the east end of the Skyway, indicates the desire to increase tourism in Asheville.<sup>2</sup> The Park Service responded favorably to the Skyway proposal, and in July 1932, Park Superintendent Eakin announced that agency's support for the project.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Park Service publicly supported the Skyway, officials of the agency had misgivings about the project, particularly the eastern section of the road from the park boundary to the Newfound Gap Road, the north-south road which bisected the park. The area to the east of the road was considered to be the most pristine in the park, with the largest

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<sup>1</sup> J.R. Eakin, Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, to the Director, National Park Service, February 16, 1932; File 2; Box 310; Entry 7; RG 79 NA.

<sup>2</sup> "Planning for Park Highways," *Asheville Times*, 3 August 1932, 4; File 3; Box 310; Entry 7; RG 79 NA.

<sup>3</sup> "Plans 40-Mile 'Skyline Road' in Smoky Park," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, 29 July 1932, np.

areas of virgin forest which had been spared the heavy logging which had gone on to the west of the road. Writing on the issue of the Skyway in December 1932, Park Service Director Horace Albright stated: "We do know that the area from Indian Gap eastward...is absolutely wilderness, and the Director has already gone on record as saying that no road will ever go on the heights along the park line eastward of the gap...Westward, however, conditions are somewhat different."<sup>4</sup>

The decision not to build the eastern section of the Skyway must have been made soon after the July 1932 announcement of Park Service support for the project, because by the end of the summer, the BPR began to survey only the western section of the road. By September, the BPR had "flagged" what was referred to as the "Ridge Route" from Newfound Gap to a point 1.5 miles west of Indian Gap, where the road was to go through a tunnel in order to allow for a separation of the road and hiking trails. On

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<sup>4</sup> Horace Albright, Director, National Park Service, to Dr. V.E. Shelford, November 9, 1931; Roads-Protests, Folder 1; Box 311; Entry 7; RG 79 NA.

September 9, BPR engineer W.I. Lee and a crew of "[r]oadmen and axemen" began clearing the flagged area.<sup>5</sup>

In November and December 1932, Park Service and BPR officials inspected the area for the road from Newfound Gap to Deals Gap, with particular attention to the 7-mile section from Newfound Gap to Clingmans Dome, which was to be a major observation point in the park. More importantly, it was believed that the section to Clingmans Dome could be the only part of the Skyway which might actually be built because of the opposition to the road from wilderness enthusiasts who believed it would destroy the primeval character of the park.

Based upon observations made during the 1932 inspection, the Park Service became concerned that construction of the Skyway would create major scars on the highest, most visible mountains in the park. Roswell Ludgate, the park's landscape architect, suggested that scars could be minimized and concealed "by building long sections of retaining wall" in order to "reduce [the] deep fills" which would be necessary to construct the road. The increased cost for adopting this construction technique could

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<sup>5</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1932; GSMNP.



be "justified, not only because it is common practice in good modern park road construction, but also because it will serve to silence the objections which have been raised against" the Skyway. Ludgate continued, stating that "[w]ith proper design and sufficient funds, the entire road can be constructed as to be practically invisible from other points in the park."<sup>6</sup>

Roswell's superior, Park Service landscape architect Charles Peterson, recommended that the Skyway "should not be secondary in standards" and that the number of "benched" road sections should be reduced. In addition, the guardrail for the road would "look better" if made of "continuous cement rubble masonry," similar to the guardrail at the Nisqually entrance to Mount Rainier National Park, which is "continuous cement masonry architecturally divided into two heights." Further recommendations by Peterson included an observation tower at Clingmans Dome in order to allow park visitors to see over the spruce and fir trees on the peak, a "system of bracing" for trees along the road in order to avoid a

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<sup>6</sup> V. Roswell Ludgate, Assistant Landscape Architect, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, to J.R. Eakin, Superintendent, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, November 28, 1932; Design and Construction, Box 1; Newfound Gap- Clingmans Dome, Correspondence, 1932, File 2; GSMNP.

"blowdown" of those with weak root systems, a tunnel at Andrews Bald in order to continue the road west to Deals Gap, and the use of rock retaining walls to hold the fill on which the road will be placed, thereby allowing the "grade to be raised, the excavation to be decreased, and the long raw fills (like that at Newfound Gap) to be cut down as far as possible." Reducing the cut and landscape scarring along the road was important, as "the landscape interference of this road will have to be kept to a minimum because of the adverse criticism this road has already had." In fact, Peterson believed that the "crestline route may never be carried as far as Deals Gap," because "[c]onsiderable opposition" to the road "has already developed." Despite this fact, the road to Clingmans Dome or beyond "will be one of the most important objectives of the Park."<sup>7</sup> Park Service Director Albright approved of Peterson's recommendations, but left open

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Peterson, to The Director, December 2, 1932; Design and Construction, Box 1; Newfound Gap-Clingmans Dome, Correspondence, 1932, File 2; GSMNP.

"minor adjustments at the suggestion of other interested parties."<sup>8</sup>

The survey of the Skyway from Newfound Gap to Clingmans Dome was completed in December 1932, and included the topography for a parking area on Forney Ridge, from which visitors would have a short hike to the proposed observation tower on top of the dome.<sup>9</sup> The following month, January 1933, the design for the road to Clingmans Dome was completed. In the final design, a tunnel which was to have carried hiking trails over the road was eliminated, saving \$30,000. The project had been estimated at a cost of \$100,000 per mile, but had been reduced to \$60,000 per mile as a result of a suggestion from the Park Service's Landscape Division that "rock walls be used for retaining fills," thereby allowing the "grade to be raised with a resultant decrease in excavation quantities."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Horace Albright, Director, National Park Service, to Charles Peterson, December 14, 1932; Design and Construction, Box 1; Newfound Gap-Clingmans Dome, Correspondence, 1932, File 2; GSMNP.

<sup>9</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, December 1932; GSMNP.

<sup>10</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1933; GSMNP.

*Constructing the Clingmans Dome Road*

Clearing the route for the Clingmans Dome road was to cost \$370,000, and was planned for completion on September 30, 1933.<sup>11</sup> It is likely that the project was completed on time, because on October 23, 1933, the Arundel Corporation of Baltimore, Maryland began excavations for the 7.66-mile long road, which would have a 30' graded section and a 20' x 6" crushed stone surface.<sup>12</sup> The company's contract was for \$692,645, and was to be completed by June 30, 1935.<sup>13</sup> The Arundel Corporation was also the contractor for the construction of the parking area at Newfound Gap, as the Park Service and the BPR thought it best to have the same contractor working on these related areas.

Construction of the intersection of the Newfound Gap Road and the Skyway was completed in August 1934, by the use of two six hour shifts with an average of seventeen foreman and 400

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<sup>11</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1932; GSMNP.

<sup>12</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1933; GSMNP.

<sup>13</sup> Superintendent's monthly Report, December 1933; GSMNP.

laborers each day.<sup>14</sup> During construction, the retaining walls along the road were altered in two places because of rock slides, and the hand laid rock embankment was sloped and rounded rather than built straight in order to avoid further slides.<sup>15</sup> In building the parking area on Forney Ridge, the Arundel Corporation constructed the upper side first, which then provided the material for fill required for the placement of the lower side which was situated further down the ridge.<sup>16</sup>

During the construction of the parking area on Forney Ridge in 1934, the BPR and the contractor were faced with the need to dispose of excess fill created by excavations at the site. After reviewing the BPR's proposal to dispose of excess fill by using it to extend the circulating road around the parking area and create a turn-around, Arno Cammerer, the new Director of the Park Service, disapproved of the plan because "[t]here are a number of

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<sup>14</sup> Superintendent's Report, August 1934; GSMNP.

<sup>15</sup> W.I. Lee to V. Roswell Ludgate, September 24, 1934; Design and Construction, Box 1; Newfound Gap-Clingmans Dome, Correspondence, 1934, File 4; GSMNP.

<sup>16</sup> H.J. Spelman to Charles Peterson, March 15, 1933; Design and Construction, Box 1; Newfound Gap-Clingmans Dome, Correspondence, 1933, File 3; GSMNP.

factors which oppose any move to extend this road down the ridge to Deals Gap. In fact it would be extremely inadvisable for us to make any gesture in that direction at the present time."<sup>17</sup>

Although the Park Service and the BPR continued planning the Skyway from Newfound Gap to Deals Gap, opposition to the road was increasing. In 1934, Tennessee lawyer Harvey Broome met in Knoxville with wilderness advocates Benton Mackaye, considered to be the father of the Appalachian Trail, and Robert Marshall, the Director of Forestry for the federal Office of Indian Affairs, to plan a campaign of opposition to the Skyway based upon the need to preserve the wilderness in the western section of the park. The argument made against the Skyway by these wilderness enthusiasts was expressed in a 1934 letter from Marshall to his boss, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, in which Marshall stated: "A road down the whole southern portion of the Great Smokies might give from an hour to an hour and a half of driving to the average motorist, yet this invasion of the

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<sup>17</sup> Arno Cammerer to H.J. Spelman, May 7, 1935; Design and Construction, Box 1; Newfound Gap-Clingmans Dome, Correspondence, 1935, File 5; GSMNP.

primitive...would be the ruination of the finest area still left to the walker and camper in the Southeast."<sup>18</sup>

The ability of Broome, Mackaye, and Marshall to mobilize supporters of wilderness against the Skyway led the Park Service to abandon plans to continue the road west from Clingmans Dome to Deals Gap in 1935. Also that year, these three men joined with other wilderness enthusiasts to found the Wilderness Society, a national conservation organization dedicated to the preservation of wild lands in the United States.

The completion of the road to Clingmans Dome on November 22, 1935, prompted Superintendent Eakin to comment that the "job has been unusually well done and has attracted a great deal of favorable comment as to the high class work and unusually fine views offered."<sup>19</sup> The road was paved in 1940 by the Breslin Construction Company of Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Marshall, Director of Forestry, Office of Indian Affairs, to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, August 29, 1934; Roads-Protests, Folder 1; Box 311; Entry 7; RG 79 NA.

<sup>19</sup> Superintendent's monthly Report, November 1935; GSMNP.

<sup>20</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1940; GSMNP.

In May 1936, the CCC began to maintain the Clingmans Dome Road, and engaged in landscaping and sloping the banks on the side of the road to prevent erosion.<sup>21</sup> CCC enrollees also expanded the parking area at Forney Ridge, and using whole logs constructed a rustic style observation tower on top of Clingmans Dome.

No longer considered to be safe, the CCC's Clingmans Dome observation tower was razed on May 12, 1950.<sup>22</sup> However, a project to replace it did not develop until the Mission 66 period began. On April 6, 1959, the W.C. Norris company of Waynesville, North Carolina began construction of a new concrete tower,<sup>23</sup> which was completed in November 1960.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Blowdowns on the Clingmans Dome Road*

As a result of its location on an exposed ridge at an elevation over 6000', the Clingmans Dome Road has been the site

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<sup>21</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1936; GSMNP.

<sup>22</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1950; GSMNP.

<sup>23</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1959; GSMNP.

<sup>24</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 1960; GSMNP.



of regular blowdowns of trees by high winds. Landscape architect Charles Peterson warned of this problem in 1932, and recommended that measures be taken to protect the shallow root systems of the trees on the ridge. On May 14, 1940, Park Service foresters arrived in the park to inspect the Forney Ridge parking area because of recurrent blowdowns.<sup>25</sup>

Today, blowdowns along the Clingmans Dome Road are not a major problem for the Park Service. In place of blowdowns, the trees in the area are being killed by a combination of acid rain which weakens the trees and leads to their deaths by the balsam wooly aphid, a pest which is infesting balsam trees in the Smokies.

#### *Skiing at Indian Gap*

In addition being a destination for motorists, the Clingmans Dome Road has served as a downhill ski slope for park visitors. In the winter of 1939 to 1940, the first skiers used the area along the road at Indian Gap.<sup>26</sup> In response, the Park Service

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<sup>25</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1940; GSMNP.

<sup>26</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, February 1940; GSMNP.

constructed a ski slope at Indian Gap, which was opened on February 16, 1941. Approximately 3,000 people went skiing or sledding on the slope that month.<sup>27</sup> Information regarding how many ski runs the Park Service built at Indian Gap is not available, but a plan for the area from 1940 shows seven possible runs going off of the north and south sides of the Clingmans Dome Road at Indian Gap.<sup>28</sup> Although the construction of a ski area would appear to be incompatible with the preservation goal of a national park, several western parks have been the sites of much larger and more elaborate ski areas.

Today, the forest has grown in around the formerly clear area at Indian Gap where people skied in the 1940s. As a result, downhill skiers no longer use the road, but cross country skiers do utilize the road when it is covered with snow and closed to traffic.

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<sup>27</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, February 1941; GSMNP.

<sup>28</sup> Indian Gap Ski Runs, Branch of Plans and Design, National Park Service, March 4, 1940; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

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Gatlinburg Vicinity  
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Tennessee

David Haas, Photographer, 1996

TN-35-B-1	VIEW OF CLINGMANS DOME ROAD AT DAWN.
TN-35-B-2	CLINGMANS DOME ROAD, CURVE WITH ROCK CUT.
TN-35-B-3	CLINGMANS DOME ROAD, RIDGE VIEW.
TN-35-B-4	PULLOUT ON CLINGMANS DOME ROAD LOOKING S.
TN-35-B-5	ABANDONED MULE TRAIL TUNNEL. 1 MILE FROM INTERSECTION WITH NEWFOUND GAP ROAD LOOKING SSE.
TN-35-B-6	CRENULATED WALL ALONG CLINGMANS DOME ROAD LOOKING S.
TN-35-B-7	CLINGMANS DOME PARKING AREA LOOKING SSE.
TN-35-B-8	DETAIL OF CLINGMANS DOME PARKING AREA LOOKING NW.
TN-35-B-9	CLINGMANS DOME TRAIL HEAD AND COMFORT STATION LOOKING NNE.
TN-35-B-10	OBSERVATION TOWER ATOP CLINGMANS DOME LOOKING SE.



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Jack E. Boucher, photographer,

TN-35-B-11 (CT)	Observation tower atop Clingmans Dome looking SE
TN-35-B-12 (CT)	Observation tower atop Clingmans Dome



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