

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ROADS & BRIDGES,
CATALOOCHEE VALLEY ROAD
Cataloochee Valley
Gatlinburg Vicinity
Sevier County
Tennessee

HAER NO. TN-35-F

HAER
TENN
78-GAT.V
6F-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park,
North Carolina, near Cataloochee Valley

Date of Construction: ca. 1825 (improvement construction by
NPS 1930s-50s)

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: Various private and public contractors

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

Significance: The transportation system of Great Smoky
Mountains is representative of NPS park
road design and landscape planning
throughout the country. Much of the
construction work was undertaken by the
Civilian Conservation Corps during the
1930s. Once established, this road
system provided access to the first
national park in the southern portion of
the United States as well as links to
the Blue Ridge Parkway and Shenandoah
National Park.

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; Clingmans Dome Road, TN-35-B; Little River Road, TN-35-C; Cades Cove and Laurel Creek Roads, TN-35-D; Foothills Parkway, TN-35-E; 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

Motorists visiting the Cataloochee area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park enter the park via Route 284, a winding dirt mountain road which crosses the Cataloochee Divide at Cove Creek Gap. This point is the park entrance, and from here, Route 284 descends around sharp, blind turns for 1.7 miles, where it meets the east end of the Cataloochee Valley Road, which travels west into the valley via a modern, paved roadway.

The sharp contrast between the Cataloochee Valley Road and Route 284 is the result of plans to construct a new access road into this part of the park in the 1960s and 1970s. In anticipation of a modern road that would take visitors from Interstate 40 to Cataloochee, the Park Service widened and paved the road through the valley. However, after opposition from area residents to this new road, the plans were canceled and this section of paved road sits in the park, oddly connected to other areas by an unpaved mountain road.

At the intersection of Route 284 and the Cataloochee Valley Road, Route 284 continues in a northerly direction through the park and the Cataloochee Valley Road heads west into the valley.

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To the east, an unused and overgrown section of the paved valley road is visible, which continues for 0.6 mile to the park boundary. It was at this point that the new access road was to have entered the park.

The Cataloochee Valley Road descends into Cataloochee Valley along a mountain ridge on its south side. A parking area and overlook are located on the north side of the road at 0.2 mile, offering a spectacular view north and west into the park. The road crosses Cataloochee Creek via a large, modern concrete and steel bridge at 2.7 miles.

After crossing Cataloochee Creek, the road is level as it travels across the valley floor. Just over the bridge, a dirt road, which is a fork of Route 284, travels along the creek to the north, where it meets the other fork of the road. A parking lot is located on the south side of the Cataloochee Valley Road at 2.8 miles. Here, motorists can pick-up an interpretive booklet for an auto tour of the Cataloochee Valley. The Cataloochee campground is south of the road at 3 miles.

The vegetation along the side of the Cataloochee Valley Road begins to give way to open fields after 3.3 miles. The landscape

is managed in this fashion to remind park visitors that this was once a settled area with many farms. By 3.8 miles, the area around the road reveals a wide valley surrounded by high ridges.

The paved section of the Cataloochee Valley Road ends at 4.5 miles, where the road continues west into the valley covered with gravel. In addition, Palmer Chapel, one of several buildings preserved in the valley to interpret the former settlement, is located on the south side of the road in this area. At 4.6 miles, the Pretty Hollow Gap Trail travels away from the road to the northwest and a horse trail runs to the south along the bank of Cataloochee Creek. These, and several other trails in the valley, are evidence of the extensive system of wagon roads which linked the homes and farms in the Cataloochee community.

The road crosses Palmer Creek via a small wood bridge at 4.6 miles. On the west side of the creek, off to the side of the road, is the Beech Grove School. Another remnant of the Cataloochee community, the Caldwell Place, and its adjacent barn, are located along the road at 5.1 miles. The Cataloochee Valley Road ends at a small parking area at 5.5 miles, where the Rough Fork Trail continues deeper into the valley to the southwest.

Pre-Park Trails and Roads in Cataloochee

Long before white settlers arrived in the Cataloochee Valley, Indians traveled across this part of the Great Smoky Mountains. In the Cataloochee area, the Cherokee used the so-called Cataloochee Trail, which connected the area around present-day Cosby, Tennessee with Cove Creek Gap in North Carolina. A branch of this footpath followed Cataloochee Creek into the Cataloochee Valley.¹

After whites began settling in the region in the early nineteenth century, they improved these footpaths to accommodate wagons. Around 1825, residents of Jonathan Creek, North Carolina widened and graded the Cataloochee Trail from the Jonathan Creek Valley over the mountains into Cataloochee Valley, and called the road the Cataloochee Turnpike. Rates to take packhorses, cattle, and hogs over the turnpike, and the absence of rates for wagons, indicated that this was intended to be a "stock driver's road" to take herd of animals over the mountains.² In 1851, the North

¹ Lambert, "The Pioneer History of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park," 8.

² Peter Shelburne Givens, "Cataloochee and the Establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park," masters thesis, Western

Carolina legislature authorized the continuation of the Cataloochee Turnpike through Mount Sterling Gap and past Big Creek to the state line with Tennessee at Davenport Gap. This extension of the road was completed in 1860, and followed the route of the Cherokee's Cataloochee Trail. Today, Tennessee Route 32 and Route 284 in North Carolina follow the nineteenth century Cataloochee Turnpike.³

As the Cataloochee Turnpike was developed, allowing farmers in the area the opportunity to travel to and from market, a community evolved in Cataloochee Valley and the neighboring area around Little Cataloochee Creek. Wagon roads, many of which are today hiking trails, branched off from the main road through the valley. By the early twentieth century, Cataloochee had 1,200 residents, and was the largest community in what is today Great Smoky Mountains National Park.⁴

Carolina University, Cullowhee, North Carolina, 1978, 44.

³ Ibid, 45-47.

⁴ Great Smoky Mountains Natural History Association, "Cataloochee: Auto Tour," an interpretive booklet, 1 & 6.

As part of the effort to establish the park in the 1920s and 1930s, the residents of Cataloochee sold their homes to North Carolina in order for the state to turn the land over to the federal government. Some residents looked upon this as an opportunity to obtain cash, which was often hard to come by in rural areas, while others were bitter at being forced out of their homes. Most of the nearly 200 buildings in Cataloochee were removed by the Park Service, but several were left in order to interpret the lives of the residents for park visitors.

The CCC in Cataloochee Valley

Following the establishment of Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934, the CCC began to improve the Cataloochee Valley Road. The enrollees began work in March 1935 in order to provide access to a CCC camp in the valley.⁵

The improvement of the Cataloochee Valley Road continued into 1936, when plans were made to change its location from the "old mountain road" which ran along Cataloochee Creek to a higher

⁵ Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1935; GSMNP.

location.⁶ The CCC continued making improvements in Cataloochee for the next several years,⁷ but the relocation of what was referred to as the "Cataloochee meadows road," to reflect its new location, was not begun until March 1941.⁸

The enrollees continued working on the Cataloochee Valley Road until the CCC camp in Cataloochee was abandoned in May 1942 when the CCC program came to a close across the country.⁹ The relocation of the road was about 90 percent complete,¹⁰ and was probably completed by Park Service forces. The old road has been converted into a horse trail and is clearly visible on the north side of Cataloochee Creek.

The Cataloochee Valley Road in the Post-War Period

⁶ Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1936; GSMNP.

⁷ Superintendent's Monthly Report, December 1940; GSMNP.

⁸ Superintendent's Monthly Report, March 1941; GSMNP.
Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1941; GSMNP.

⁹ Superintendent's Monthly Report; May 1942; GSMNP.

¹⁰ Inventory and Inspection Report, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, 1950; Roads Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

Under Mission 66, visitor facilities in the Cataloochee Valley, a quiet corner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, were to be improved. Plans for Cataloochee, which began in 1956, included the construction of an eighty-five site campground in the eastern end of the valley, a forty site picnic area near the campground, and a new 3.6 mile entrance road to lead from Route 284 near the park boundary to the proposed campground.¹¹

Development of this magnitude did not occur during the Mission 66 period, but the improvement of the Cataloochee Valley Road was begun on September 11, 1964. A new bridge over Cataloochee Creek was completed in October 1965,¹² and the entire road was finished on October 20, 1966.¹³ (A 1968 report on this project stated that the new road was approximately 5 miles long and cost \$1.5 million to construct.¹⁴) However, guardrails had

¹¹ National Park Service, *Mission 66 Prospectus*, 1956; Foothills Parkway Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

¹² Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1965; GSMNP.

¹³ Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1966; GSMNP.

¹⁴ Background Book, Great Smoky Mountains National Park-Cataloochee, March 1968; Management, Box 2; Cataloochee, File 5; GSMNP.

not yet been installed on the road, and it was only open to the public when driving conditions were considered safe.¹⁵

Following the Mission 66 period, plans to expand facilities in Cataloochee continued, and included the construction of a scenic loop road similar to the one in Cades Cove. In March 1968, plans included an entrance station with parking for fifty cars, a visitor center with parking for 150 cars, a ranger station, a 13.5 mile long motor nature trail, a horse camp, an amphitheater, a 400 site picnic area, and a 600 site campground.¹⁶ Another plan, the "Cataloochee Concept Plan" from the 1960s or 1970s (the date is not legible) showed a new entrance road from Interstate 40 leading into the park north of the current entrance at Cove Creek Gap, intersecting with Route 284 at Sat Patch Gap, just west of the park boundary, then continuing into Cataloochee Valley. Crossing Cataloochee Creek, the road was to become an 11-mile, "one-way interpretive loop." From there, it would head west to Palmer Creek, then turn north

¹⁵ Superintendent' Monthly Report, December 1966; GSMNP.

¹⁶ Background Book, Great Smoky Mountains National Park-Cataloochee, March 1968; Management, Box 2; Cataloochee, File 5; GSMNP.

over a former road, the Little Cataloochee Trail, until it intersected again with Route 284. The road would then head south over Route 284 back to its starting point, east of Cataloochee Valley. The sections of Route 284 which were not used for the loop road were to be converted to truck trails for hiking and administrative uses.¹⁷

In anticipation of the development of Cataloochee, the same 5 mile stretch of the Cataloochee Valley Road which had been improved in 1964 and 1965, was paved in 1971 by the Stewart and Garland company of Robbinsville, North Carolina. In addition, a short spur from the intersection of this road with Route 284 was extended east to the park boundary where the new entrance road was to enter. This \$245,060 project began on June 2 and was completed on November 24.¹⁸ The park's budget did not provide enough funding to erect a guardrail on the road, and it was not

¹⁷ Cataloochee Concept Plan, date illegible; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

¹⁸ Monthly Progress Report, November 1971; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

opened to the public.¹⁹ In October 1973, guardrails were still missing and the road remained closed.²⁰

Planning for the construction of a loop road in Cataloochee and a new access road from Interstate 40 continued in 1974. At this time, "some type of people-moving device" was proposed to transport visitors around the loop road, and plans for the campground and picnic area had been scaled back.²¹ (At this time, a small campground with twenty-seven sites was located near the ranger station in Cataloochee Valley).

During the weekly meeting for park staff on June 18, 1974, it was reported that there was "[s]ome opposition" to the new access road which was to be built outside the park from the interstate to Cataloochee. However, this opposition was deemed to be "misleading" as it was "being generated by special interest groups."²² Who the staff was referring to as special interest

¹⁹ Route 14-Cataloochee Access Road Inside Park, March 25, 1971; Management, Box 2; Cataloochee, File 5; GSMNP.

²⁰ Staff Meeting Minutes, November 16, 1973; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

²¹ Staff Meeting Minutes, June 18, 1974; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

²² Ibid.

groups was not recorded, but most opposition came from the organization Save Cataloochee Valley. Made up primarily of people who lived outside the park near Cataloochee, this group feared that a new access road and increased development would spoil the remote character of this part of the park and the area around their homes. This organization was very vocal, and received a great deal of attention from the local press.

An environmental assessment on the proposed Cataloochee access road, which stated that it could be built, was issued by the Park Service on May 23, 1974. After a thirty day waiting period following the issuance of the assessment, invitations to bid on the contract for the road were sent out.²³ However, a legal suit by Save Cataloochee Valley to halt the road postponed awarding the contract.²⁴ In August, bids were "rejected due to current environmental litigation procedures."²⁵

²³ Staff Meeting Minutes, June 18, 1974; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

²⁴ Staff Meeting Minutes, August 20, 1974; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

²⁵ Monthly Progress Report, August 1974; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Litigation over the Cataloochee access road continued, and on February 5, 1975, the Committee to Save Cataloochee, a successor organization to Save Cataloochee Valley, and the Park Service, reached an agreement that "no further action shall be taken toward this road until an [environmental impact statement] has been completed...a public hearing will be held, and that this public comment will be considered as a decision is formulated."²⁶

In May 1976, the controversy over the construction of the Cataloochee access road was resolved in favor of the forces opposing it, as the Park Service's Southeast Regional Office recommended to Great Smoky Mountains National Park that funds set aside for the road be used instead for work on the Newfound Gap Road.²⁷

²⁶ Monthly Progress Report, February 1975; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

²⁷ Monthly Progress Report, May 1976; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

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David Haas, Photographer, 1996

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|-----------|---|
| TN-35-F-1 | END OF PAVED ROAD AND INTERSECTION WITH STATE ROUTE 284 LOOKING E. |
| TN-35-F-2 | OVERLOOK ON CATALOOCHEE VALLEY ROAD LOOKING NW. |
| TN-35-F-3 | VIEW OF CUT STONE RETAINING WALL LOOKING S. |
| TN-35-F-4 | VIEW OF VALLEY AND ROADWAY NEAR RANGER STATION LOOKING NE. |
| TN-35-F-5 | VIEW OF VALLEY AND ROADWAY LOOKING WSW. |
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HACK. No. TN-35-F-1



PLATE NO. TN-35-152



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PLASK. No. TW.35. (F-7)





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