

# Sequoia & Kings Canyon

NATIONAL PARKS CALIFORNIA



## The Generals Highway

*Improvement makes straight roads;  
but the crooked roads without  
improvement are roads  
of genius.* —William Blake



# M

ost roads are defined by their destinations. Not so the Generals Highway of Sequoia and Kings

Canyon National Parks. This 70-year-old thoroughfare leads to lofty places, but the road itself has become part of that destination; describing a journey to these parks is difficult without recalling the experience of the Generals Highway.

This ribbon of patched pavement carries you upward almost a mile in elevation. Its 23 switchbacks and 200 beautiful, twisting curves are nestled in the steep contours of the mountainside. Beginning in the foothills of Sequoia National Park, it winds through the largest stands of California's vanishing oak woodlands protected anywhere. It climbs through hot shrubby chaparral to the cool belt of evergreens where giant sequoias grow. Then, through gentler curves over numerous streams, it connects the General Sherman Tree with the General Grant Tree—thereby earning its name.

**I**n 1926 the first sixteen miles of the Generals Highway opened, linking a foothills wagon road to the Giant Forest. It saw its first pavement in 1929.

The thirty miles to Grant Grove opened in 1935, while the Civilian Conservation Corps of Great Depression days were building the rock guardwalls, drains, and watering stations that add so much history and character to the earlier stretch.

What should be done when a historic road like this, a road at home within a landscape, wears out? When the numbers and sizes of modern vehicles, undreamed of by its builders, can no longer safely travel on it?







One thing was clear—rebuilding this mountain road into a modern highway would destroy not only portions of the park, but the experience of driving through it. The historic Generals Highway known by millions of visitors would be no more.

A plan to repair the road was developed based on the original design of the Generals Highway—the road would continue to complement the landscape, not overwhelm it.

Engineers from the Federal Highway Administration, experts in road building, worked out the plan with the National Park Service, experts in conservation. A national park is not a typical construction site; valuable resources, both obvious and obscure, are protected by law. As a result, a project like this must guard against a wide variety of damage.

Roadsides disturbed by the project will be revegetated, but only with native plants of the area. Archeologists have surveyed the highway corridor to be sure that construction will not harm sites holding reminders of the park's first

#### SUWANEE CULVERT

The only true stone masonry arch in the parks, its rockwork supports the entire weight of the road over Suwanee Creek. Of its builder, nothing is known but a name: A. Pernu.

#### CLOVER CREEK BRIDGE

Built in 1931 of reinforced concrete, it is faced with a self-supporting facade of granite that was quarried nearby.

#### FOUR GUARDSMEN

Only the uphill lane was part of the original 1926 road. When it became too great a bottle neck for traffic, the downhill lane was added in 1938.

#### HOSPITAL ROCK

The CCC developed this turnout in 1934, complete with redwood car-watering stands with wrought-iron hooks, curved stairs to the pictographs, and a carved granite drinking fountain reflecting the Native American mortar holes nearby.

#### TUNNEL ROCK

Originally, the only road here was the bypass. The CCC dug the tunnel beneath the rock and faced the dirt wall with rock, finishing in 1938.

#### STONE GUTTERS

Drainage gutters and culverts along this stretch were built by the CCC in 1934. The local stone used is schist, a metamorphic rock.



inhabitants. Historic stonework, painstakingly laid down by the men of the CCC and the Civilian Public Service, will be rebuilt.

The project will reverse deterioration of the road and make it safer, but preserve its unique character.

Driving the steep Generals

Highway, like other famous roadways in national parks, will remain part of our experience here long into the future.

The

basic objectives of the project are straightforward:

The road will be resurfaced, with the old paving recycled into the new road base. The

road will be made at least 24 feet wide, rather than varying as it does

from 18 to 24 feet. Archeological features will be preserved; historic

structures will be preserved or rebuilt. Stone walls, not metal, will line the

road cuts. Power and telephone poles will be removed and the lines

placed underground. An advisory limit on

vehicle length has been applied, advising vehicles

longer than 22 feet to enter the parks via the gentler,

less-curving grade on Highway 180. Road work will

disrupt visitors as little as possible.

Careful reconstruction of 46 miles of historic road over difficult terrain will take a long time. It will be done in sections, every other year. It will be done slowly, as the original road was, but it will be done right.

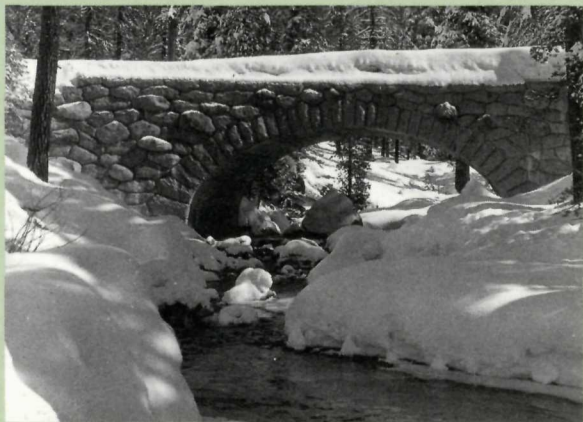
And yet the project should not greatly affect park visitors. Most work will be done on weekdays in fall, winter, and spring. Traffic delays will be kept to 20 minutes whenever possible. Your patience, when necessary, will be appreciated.

It is hard to find a more challenging—and beautiful—example of

what park roads are all about than the Generals Highway.

A good point was made in park brochures from the early years:

*“Park roads are for leisurely driving only. If you are in a hurry, you might do well to take another route now, and come back when you have more time.”*





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*The rehabilitation of the Generals Highway was made possible by the cooperation of the Federal Highways Administration. Their enthusiasm for the challenge of protecting park resources during this major construction project is greatly appreciated.*



This brochure was funded by the Sequoia Natural History Association.  
Printed on recycled paper.