

GREGORY BUTTES STONE STEPS
East slope of Gregory Buttes
Gregory
Gregory County
South Dakota

HALS SD-5
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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GREGORY BUTTES STONE STEPS

HALS NO. SD-5

Location: East slope of Gregory Buttes, Gregory, Gregory County, South Dakota

Lat: 43.239809, Long: -99.434841 (top of steps, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: The Gregory Buttes Stone Steps represent a unique Works Projects Administration (WPA) landscape project in South Dakota. The cut stone steps represent a typical WPA use of materials and their dry-stacked courses a typical WPA technique. The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) also planted trees on the buttes and in the neighboring park at the same time as the WPA project. The projects combine to represent an intact New Deal era landscape.

Description: The Gregory Buttes are located on the western edge of town and border the municipal park. They are a rise in elevation from the surrounding terrain. The buttes are covered with native grasses, plants, and a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees.

There are two buttes with a saddle in between them. The northern butte has a large municipal water tank on top while the southern butte has an observation area and veterans memorial. The stone steps climb the eastern side of the buttes, taking advantage of the natural terrain to reduce steepness. The path takes advantage of natural slope contours and terminates near the observation area on the southern butte.

There are 110 steps laid on the side of the buttes. Some of the steps are a single stone while others are multiple stones laid together. Risers are fairly standardized at around 6". Treads vary depending on stone size and terrain, but average around 12".

There is a wood bench at the base of the steps. The trail begins by weaving through several coniferous trees at the base. It extends up the buttes through native prairie grasses, prickly-pear cactus, and yucca plants.

History: The WPA constructed the Gregory Stone Buttes in 1936. Local laborer, Leland McIntyre, was working for the CCC in 1936 planting trees on the buttes and throughout the neighboring city park. McIntyre recalled the WPA laid the steps at the same time his CCC crew was planting trees. McIntyre carved his name into one of the steps at this time. The historic petroglyph remains today (2014).

It is not known which WPA work order the stairs were constructed under. In

June of 1936, the WPA drilled a new well on top of the buttes. The project cost \$3,035. It is not known if the steps were constructed as part of that project, but they would have provided access to the steep buttes.

Construction of the steps cannot be confirmed in surviving WPA records. Some records list “park improvement projects” in Gregory, but the microfilm is not readable. Other records are too vague to help researchers, indexed with titles such as “provide employment for the needy.”

McIntyre’s account, the workmanship of the steps, and records indicating that the WPA was working on the buttes in 1936 all point to the WPA as the builders of the steps.

Some of the trees on the buttes and the conjoining area between the buttes and the park may date from the CCC era. Since it is known the CCC was planting trees on and around the buttes in 1936, it’s probable some of these remain and contribute to the feeling and association of the landscape.

The WPA

The WPA became the centerpiece of the “Second New Deal.” Money to fund it was appropriated in April of 1935 through the Emergency Appropriations Act. The WPA came into existence on 6 May 1935 through Executive Order. It was created as the Works *Progress* Administration, but the name was changed to Works *Projects* Administration in 1939. It would become the best known of all New Deal Era programs.

The WPA was a work-relief program sponsored by counties, cities, and towns. Regional offices linked states to the central administration and each state had an administrator responsible for projects within its jurisdiction. Many states also had district offices.

Two fundamental circumstances qualified workers for employment – need and employability. Potential workers needed to be healthy and physically able to perform tasks. They also needed to demonstrate the need for employment. This was done via a means test similar to one developed earlier under the Federal Emergency Relief Act. Wages were paid on a fixed monthly basis and workers were paid even if time on the project was lost to weather or factors out of their control. WPA workers were allowed 120 to 140 hour per month.

WPA workers were required to accept private-sector employment if it became available. They also couldn’t work for the WPA for more than 18 continuous months. Once 18 months were up, they were dropped from the rolls and had to wait 30 days before being reassigned to another project. Since there was often many workers waiting for assignment, it often took several months to reenlist with the WPA. Pay averaged below that attainable in the private sector and

many families still accepted other forms of relief.

Construction projects accounted for approximately 75 percent of the money spent through the WPA. Projects were divided into seven categories: municipal engineering projects, airport projects, public buildings, highway/road work, conservation projects, engineering survey projects, and disaster/emergency activities.

The WPA employed 8.5 million people nationwide and expended \$10,750,501,000 during an eight-year period. State and local sponsors contributed another 2.8 billion.

At the peak of employment in 1936, South Dakota had 49,469 workers on the WPA roles. South Dakotans earned over \$52 million working for the WPA while the total amount of funds expended on WPA projects was \$61 million.

The CCC

The CCC was established in 1933 to enlist young men in forestry work, flood control, and similar conservation projects. President Roosevelt envisioned an “army” of workers tasked with improving public lands. Rather than establishing another bureaucracy, the CCC was placed under the four existing Departments of Labor, War, Interior, and Agriculture.

The Department of Labor screened the enrollees while the War Department provided medical exams, organized enrollees into companies, clothed and equipped the men, and physically conditioned the men. The Departments of Agriculture and Interior directed work projects in their associated areas of expertise.

Enrollees in the CCC were male citizens age 18-25. They were required to be out of work, out of school, unmarried, and capable of physical labor. They could enlist for six-month periods for a maximum of two years. Pay was \$30 a month, of which \$25 was sent home to their families. Enrollees worked a 40-hour week and had the option of attending educational and vocational training during their time off. More than 90 percent of enrollees participated in the education programs.

The CCC also employed “LEMs” or Local Experienced Men. These were skilled local workers who supervised the men. Exceptions outside the standard enrollment criteria were also made for the enrollment of Native American and World War I veterans.

Camps typically consisted of around 200 men, though some were smaller. Leland McIntyre was likely based out of Camp SCS-2 in Presho. This camp was under the Soil Conservation Service and performed dam building and tree

planting in the area. The camp at Presho existed from the spring of 1934 through the fall of 1938.

Between 1933 and 1942, 52 camps were in existence in South Dakota. The majority (29) were Forest Service Camps located in the Black Hills. However, the Soil Conservation Service supervised seven camps throughout the state that worked on conservation practices for controlling wind and water erosion. Practices such as terracing, pasture furrowing, counterering, rough tillaging, strip cropping, and tree planting.

South Dakota was one of six states that participated in the Great Plains Shelterbelt project. Five nurseries in the state raised 70 different varieties of trees and shrubs for the project. Over 41,500,000 trees were planted through this program in South Dakota.

The WPA and CCC frequently worked together on these programs. Because the Great Plains Shelterbelt project was conceived, at least in part, as a direct-relief program, WPA work crews were readily used where available in conjunction with CCC enrollees.

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South Dakota WPA Records. South Dakota State Archives. Roll 5921.

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Entry 2014 HALS Challenge: Documenting Landscapes of the New Deal



Gregory Buttes Stone Steps looking west at midway point (C.B. Nelson, 2014).



Gregory Buttes Stone Steps looking southwest (C.B. Nelson, 2014).



Gregory Buttes Stone Steps looking southwest (C.B. Nelson, 2014).



Base of Gregory Buttes Stone Steps looking east (C.B. Nelson, 2014).



View from the trees around base looking west (C.B. Nelson, 2014).



Typical section of bricks looking west
(C.B. Nelson, 2014).



Native fauna around stairs (C.B. Nelson).



View from midway point on stairs looking east towards city park
(C.B. Nelson).