

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Line

AND/OR COMMON Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Line

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER from Durango to Silverton

CITY, TOWN	Durango	___ VICINITY OF	___ NOT FOR PUBLICATION	CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
STATE	Colorado	CODE	08	3rd
		COUNTY	La Plata	CODE
				067

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME President, Denver, Rio Grande Western Railroad

STREET & NUMBER 115 Arapaho Street

CITY, TOWN Denver VICINITY OF STATE Colorado

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE, COUNTY CLERK, La Plata County  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

STREET & NUMBER 1060 2nd Avenue

CITY, TOWN Durango STATE Colorado

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE Historic American Engineering Record

DATE  FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS 1100 L Street NW.

CITY, TOWN Washington STATE D.C. 20240

## 7 DESCRIPTION

### CONDITION

EXCELLENT  
 GOOD  
 FAIR

DETERIORATED  
 RUINS  
 UNEXPOSED

### CHECK ONE

UNALTERED  
 ALTERED

### CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE  
 MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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#### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Durango-Silverton Stretch of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad was inaugurated in 1880. Planned by General William Jackson Palmer, the original line ran from Denver south through San Luis Park to the Conejos River west to Durango and north the 45 mile stretch to Silverton. By July 1882, the line had reached its destination, Silverton.

Construction began on the Durango-Silverton Connection shortly after the lines arrival at Durango. The first section of the line had traversed the rather level lands of southern Colorado, however, this section proved much different. Silverton with its rich deposits of ore had always been the ultimate objective. However, the Rockies stood as a formidable adversary. Men had to be lowered over cliffs or scale mountain sides to locate and construct the line which runs through some of the most scenic lands in Colorado along the Animas River. From Durango the line runs northward twisting through the mountains along ledges to its destination. Over the 45 mile distance elevation rises over 2,500 feet.

At Silverton was constructed a one-story framed depot. The building sits adjacent to the single railroad track which now runs for tourist purposes from the depot to the center of Silverton. The building has a gable roof which runs the length of the building. On the west side of the structure is the platform which likewise stretches the length of the building. No longer in use the Silverton Station has been given to the Silverton Historical Society and plans call for its use as a museum of history for San Juan County.

At the other end of the line stands the Durango Station and yard. As this is the beginning point of the present tourist run of the Durango-Silverton (the line only operates for 4 months of the year from late June through September), this station is kept in good condition and wears a fresh coat of paint each year. The station is a one-story frame structure with a two-story central pavilion. There is a bay entrance on the east side of the building. The building has a gabled roofline which tops both wings and runs north-south. There is also a gabled roofline on the central two-story pavilion which runs east-west. Directly west of the building is the platform from which the train is boarded for the excursion to Silverton.

The yards at Durango are used to maintain and store the cars and locomotives employed on the Silverton run. To the west of the station are the yards with tracks and switching points. Also on these grounds are the roundhouse turntable, car barn, and sand house. There is a turnaround loop track which has replaced the original wye. All these structures and the historic equipment *and rolling stock* are original and date to the 1880's and are part of the national historic landmark.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES 1882

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Gen. William J. Palmer

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Stretch of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad System is one of the last vestiges of the development of the vast resources of the west through the advent of a working rail system. Completed in July of 1882, the Durango-Silverton was the main artery for the removal of ore from the mines of the San Juan. Moreover, it was the main source of transportation and support for the community of Silverton until the late thirties with the construction of a highway network through the Rockies.

The importance of rail transportation throughout the history of the development of the west, in particular the mining settlements of Colorado, is run by the network of rails which were the source of success and actual existence to numerous communities including Cripple Creek, Leadville, Georgetown and Telluride. Because of the difficulty in traversing the dangerous cliffs of the Rockies, the narrow gauge assumes a specific significance in providing both fast and safe transportation of people and property. Furthermore, the narrow gauge was cheaper to build and could be installed faster than a wider road.

The Durango-Silverton is now operated as a tourist line and is only opened during the summer months. It has become one of the major tourist attractions of western Colorado.

## HISTORY

General William Jackson Palmer, noted soldier of the Civil War, had dreamed of a western railroad which would run north-south, hopefully, from Colorado to Mexico. These plans were thwarted by the encroaching grasps of the Santa Fe Railroad and Union Pacific. After much litigation Palmer was granted permission to build his railroad in Colorado and to proceed as far as Santa Fe, New Mexico. As a result of the "Bastan Treaty" his designs were given up on Mexico. Efforts were then placed on the development of the system in Colorado and stretching into Utah.

Against the trend across the nation which lead toward standardization, Palmer went forward with his plans for a narrow gauge system. There were some practical reasons for this decision. It was the opinion, which has worked especially in the steep mountains of Colorado, that the narrow gauge system could go farther and faster, for less and, because in mountains there

(Continued)

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See Continuation Sheet)

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY \_\_\_\_\_

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,3	274600	4087600	B	1,3	245000	4117900
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C	1,3	242900	4118200	D	1,3	263000	4189400
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

(See Continuation Sheet)

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	Colorado	CODE	08	COUNTY	La Plata	CODE	067
STATE	Colorado	CODE	08	COUNTY	San Juan	CODE	111

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE  
Joseph S. Mendinghall, Historian

ORGANIZATION  
Historic Sites Survey, National Park Service

DATE  
5/7/76

STREET & NUMBER  
1100 L Street NW.

TELEPHONE  
202-523-5464

CITY OR TOWN  
Washington

STATE  
D.C. 20240

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL  STATE  LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE  
Landmark Designated: 7-4-61  
date

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Boundary Certified: *Corneilus W. Thorne* 6-10-76  
DATE Chief Hist. & date

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
ATTEST:

DATE Arch. Surveys

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE Boundary Affirmed:  
Acting *[Signature]*  
Director, OAHF date

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Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Line

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could be less cutting and filling, construction cost would be much less. Also the safety factor played an important point in the decision.

The 45 mile stretch of the three foot gauge of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railway running from Durango to Silverton, Colorado, is one of the few surviving narrow gauge railroads in the United States. The narrow gauge railroad, particularly the Denver and Rio Grande, played a very significant role in the development of the Rocky Mountain Region and a less important part in the development of the remainder of the United States. Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, well-known railroad authorities, wrote regarding the Durango and Silverton line of the Denver and Rio Grande:

On none of the Rio Grande's narrow gauge runs was romance more conspicuously part of the conductor's wheel report than the still-operating forty-five mile Silverton branch. So strong a hold did the route above the yawning Canyon of Animas River (named the Rio de los Animas Perdidas a full century earlier by good Father Escalante), have on the popular imagination of nearly three full generations of Western and railroad minded Americans that passenger service over its forty-five miles of breath-taking right of way survived when all other narrow gauge passenger routes were abandoned. As this is being written in the year 1958, the Silverton Train is the only regularly scheduled narrow gauge passenger operation anywhere in the United States and, as a tourist attraction, it is a predominant factor in the vital economy of both Durango and Silverton.\*

The present standard gauge of 4 feet and 8 1/2 inches was the distance at which the chariot wheels of imperial Rome were set apart. The wagon roads of England remained the same measure after the Romans had gone. When the first iron rails were built in that country they were also spaced like the Roman chariot wheels.

The early rails of the United States varied from 2 to 6 feet. The tracks of most narrow gauge railroads were 3 feet 6 inches and 3 feet apart. According to Stewart H. Holbrook:

In 1876 there were 81 narrow gauge railroads in operation in 26 states. Pennsylvania had 11, California 8, Utah 6, Ohio 5; 4 each in Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, Iowa, Nevada and Illinois; 3 in Mississippi, 3 in Texas and the others scattered over fifteen other states.\*\*

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In 1889 there were 274 railroads out of a total of 1,675 in the United States that were operating on tracks of less than the standard gauge of four feet by eight and a half inches. Of these, there were 234 companies or 6% of the total railroads, in the country, operating 9,485 miles of narrow gauge railroads of a total of 157,759 miles in the country. In that same year there were a total of 1,030 companies operating 114,148 miles, or 72.41% of railroads on standard gauge tracks. At that time the Denver and Rio Grande was operating some 1,545 miles of railroad.

To the railroad builders, particularly in the Rocky Mountains, in the late 19th century the narrow gauge offered very definite advantages. The promoters of the Denver and Rio Grande pointed out that the narrow gauge system would be constructed at 37% less than a broad gauge line could over the same territory. They also pointed out that narrow gauge railroads varying from two feet to three and one half feet were in operation in Wales, Russia, Norway, Sweden, United States, South America and Queensland. The proponents of the narrow gauge railroad pointed out also that these railroads could use sharper curves, necessitated by rugged terrain without sacrificing safety. They were more efficient since they required lighter equipment for each ton of pay load. Rails were also lighter and fuel efficiency better in spite of the heavier grades encountered. On the other hand, the narrow gauge also had definite disadvantages. The added expense of reloading freight from standard to narrow gauge cars finally compelled many narrow gauge lines to rebuild. However, as a result of their advantages over the standard gauge railroad the narrow gauge lines continued to hold their own for many years where local traffic in rough country could provide revenue to operate them. They were finally superseded by the automobile, good roads and more flexible ways of hauling freight on short runs. At the present time only relatively short sections of the Denver and Rio Grande Western remain to show the glamour of the Western narrow gauge system.

\* Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, Narrow Gauge in the Rockies (Berkeley, 1958), 28.

\*\*Stewart H. Holbrook, Story of American Railroads (New York, 1947), 360.

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Holbrook, Stewart H., Story of America Railroads (New York, 1947).

Levy, Benjamin, Denver and Rio Grande Railroad: The San Juan Extension--  
Alamasa to Silverton, National Park Service Feasibility Study,  
October 1, 1967.

Preliminary Report, Narrow Gauge Railroad, Colorado, Boundary Studies,  
Region Two, February 20, 1959.

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The boundary of the Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Line encompasses three distinct elements: (1) the line or its right-of-way; (2) the Silverton Depot (historic northern terminus); (3) the Durango yards. The boundary of the Line is the right-of-way between Durango and Silverton as shown on the accompanying USGS map, entitled Durango, Colorado Quadrangle, scale 1:250,000, dated 1945. At the terminus at Silverton 30 feet beyond the historic Silverton Depot, the boundary diverts from the right-of-way and encompasses the Silverton depot at a distance of 30 feet so as to form a right rectangle of sides parallel to the walls of the depot. The boundary of the Line at the Durango yards is as follows referring to the accompanying map entitled "City of Durango, Department of Public Works, Engineering Division" dated April 1, 1973, last dated revision March 17, 1976. As shown by the red line on the above mentioned map, the boundary diverts from the right-of-way of the railroad at a point where the east edge of the right-of-way intersects with the south curblin extended of 6th Street; thence, in a straight line southeast to the northwest corner of block 20; thence, south along the west edge of block 20; thence east along the south edge of lot 4, block 20 to its intersection with the west edge of lot 3, block 20; thence south along said edge; thence east along the south edge of lot 3, block 20 to the southeast corner of lot 3, block 20; thence, in a straight line to the northwest corner of block 11; thence southwest and southeast along the western edges of block 11; thence from the southwest corner of block 11 in a straight line southeast to the west corner of block 2; thence along the southwest edge of block 2 to its south corner; thence, in a straight line to the northwest corner of block 02; thence along the southwest edge of block 02 to its south corner; thence due west to the east shoreline of the Animas River; thence generally north and west along that shoreline to its intersection with U.S. Route 160; thence east, northeast along the south and east right-of-way of U.S. Route 160 to its merging with the south curb of 6th Street; thence along the south curblin of 6th Street east to its intersection with the west right-of-way of the railroad at which point the boundary proceeds along the right-of-way to Silverton, around the Silverton depot and returns along the right-of-way to the point of beginning.