

605

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

RECEIVED 2280

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

Nat. Register of Historic Places  
National Park Service

### 1. Name of Property

Historic name: Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Other names/site number: El Camino Real Highway; Scenic Highway; National Old Trails Road Highway; U.S. Highway 85  
Name of related multiple property listing: NA  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)


### 2. Location

Street & number: Starting roughly at 0.1 miles on Hill Street after its intersection with Moulton Avenue and continuing approximately 1.5 miles on Scenic Highway.  
City or town: Raton State: NM County: Colfax  
Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination     request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets     does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

    national   X   statewide     local  
Applicable National Register Criteria:  
  X   A     B   X   C     D

 <b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b> <u>Dr. Jeff Pappas, New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer</u> <b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b>	<u>7/29/15</u> <b>Date</b>
<p>In my opinion, the property <u>   </u> meets <u>   </u> does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<b>Signature of commenting official:</b> <hr/>	<b>Date</b> <hr/>
<b>Title :</b>	<b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b>

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:)

*Don Eason H. Beall*  
Signature of the Keeper

*9.17.15*  
Date of Action

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>12</u>	<u>4</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>12</u>	<u>4</u>	objects
		Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Transportation: road-related (vehicular)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Transportation: road-related (vehicular)

Recreation and Culture: outdoor recreation

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Other: paved two-lane road

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**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: N/A

### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

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### Summary Paragraph

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway consists of an approximately 1.5-mile section of varying asphalt and gravel-paved road that was once part of the primary highway linking New Mexico to Colorado from 1908 to 1942, starting with the first territorial highway, El Camino Real, and ending with U.S. Highway 85. The linear historic district begins at Hill Street, making a steep ascent up Goat Hill, and terminating after a nearly a 600-foot climb onto a ridge where it continues to Colorado. An approximately 0.4-mile long road, intersecting the highway near the base of the district, leads to a scenic overlook developed in the 1920s, and dominated by an illuminated sign spelling "RATON" in capital letters. The mountain road, first constructed by convict labor in 1908 and last modified in the 1920s, retains much of its original design, including rock cuts, striking hairpin turns, which have been captured in postcards, photographs and written descriptions of the period, and the overlook, all of which convey the theme of early automobile travel in New Mexico. This experience is enhanced by the vistas of Raton and the surrounding mesas and peaks rising above the plains. The Scenic Highway was last used as public highway in 1942.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

## Narrative Description

Raton Pass Scenic Highway is situated mostly within the city limits of Raton and approximately nine miles south of the New Mexico-Colorado border, in the north-central area of Colfax County, New Mexico. After ascending Goat Hill, a local geological landmark, it runs along a ridge on the west side of town, forming part of the Raton Basin, a large geological structure spanning the New Mexico-Colorado border, and once an area of intensive coal mining.

The ridge carrying the scenic highway folds into Raton Mesa, obscuring the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the west. To the east, across a valley, which includes the town of Raton, is a broad anticline populated with lava-capped mesas and buttes. Bartlett Mesa to the northeast and Johnson Mesa to the east are the most prominent. Between these formations and Raton is a narrow valley, referred to as Railroad Canyon, which, because of its advantage in grade, became a natural transportation corridor, starting with the Santa Fe Trail in 1821, and continuing with Interstate 25. The corridor that includes the scenic highway, the railroad, and the interstate is referred to as Raton Pass.

The historic district comprises the roadbed and features within the city of Raton's deeded 100-foot right-of-way. For most of its alignment, the highway is flanked by Climax Canyon Park, a city park offering nature trails and picnicking. The scenic overlook, Goat Hill Park, is also owned by the city.

The historic district begins at Hill Street, a paved residential road. The historic district starts at the end of the residential area, where the roadway narrows and maintains an undeveloped right-of-way. At the beginning, Hill Street takes a sharp U-shaped curve south to ascend the back of Goat Hill, a bald sandstone cliff seen above downtown Raton. The road is framed by a mixed growth of juniper, hawthorn, and Gambel oak and a sandstone ledge along its west side above a historic drainage ditch.

The modest ascent provides views of Raton's northside residential area and the back of Goat Hill. The road along this section is paved with modern asphalt and maintains an average width of 18 feet. Sections of earlier bituminous malpais macadam paving are exposed at its edge (photo 1). At approximately 0.2 miles, the scenic highway is intersected by a road to the east, which leads to Goat Hill Park, the historic scenic overlook, which offers views of Raton and the surrounding mesas and peaks (photo 2).

A looping, approximately 0.4-mile asphalt drive leads to the overlook. The site consists of a parking lot and three contributing structures: a concrete wall, the "RATON" sign, and a star that represents the "Star of Bethlehem." These structures enhance the city's visibility (photo 3).

Goat Hill served Sunday picnickers for years before it was formally developed in 1927, when the drive was built off the scenic highway. The overlook continued to develop the next year when a concrete protective barrier was erected. Approximately 250 feet long, 2 feet, 6 inches high, and 12 inches thick, the wall is constructed of four courses of board-formed concrete

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

resting on a rubble foundation (photo 4). It frames the outer (east) edge of the parking area and continues along the base of the RATON sign. The wall reveals historic inscriptions, the earliest observed from 1930.

The Raton sign, constructed in the 1930s, consists of the word "RATON" spelled in 18 foot high, off-white capital letters, making the entire structure about 60 feet in length (photo 5). Each letter is made of a metal frame, with its edges squared at the corners. The framework holds a Lucite-like material which is backlit by red lights for nighttime illumination. The word is set in a steel frame, which rests upon six cylindrical concrete footings. The sign is enclosed by a modern chain link fence topped with concertina wire, a similar protection measure that has been placed since the 1930s. In 1988, the sign was refurbished, with many of its deteriorated parts replaced, and reinstalled on new footings.

South of the Raton sign is a large five-pointed star mounted on a steel frame (photo 2). Called alternatively the "Star of Bethlehem" or "Christmas Star," it was erected in c.1937-1938 as a seasonal decoration and tourist beacon. It is constructed of steel members supported by three I-beams. The outline of the star is lit by 150 incandescent bulbs, which change in color with the season.

The park includes non-historic resources, such as the small metal communications shed, a steel picnic shelter (photo 6), and the 9/11 Memorial Flagpole, erected in 2002 (photo 2), all less than fifty years of age. These small structures do not detract from the historic resources in the park.

At the bottom of Goat Hill, the road changes from modern asphalt to a mixture of gravel and old road-surfacing material. It abruptly turns northwest to climb a thumb-shaped hairpin curve to gain elevation as the road rises to a ridge (photos 7-8, 14). From this point, the road maintains an average paving width of 25 feet.

Constructed as a "pioneer" highway, its cross section consists of only the sub base, paving, side ditch and rock cuts and embankments. Missing, as would be found on a modern highway, even a mountain grade, are shoulders, side and back slopes, and guard railings. The scenic highway was built primarily with convict labor with the goal of scenic quality over safety and transportation efficiency.

Continuing south, the highway ascends along the outer edge of the ridge. After roughly 0.4 miles an expansive vista across the plains to the southeast come into view. This vista is punctuated with isolated mesas and peaks, including Black, Round and Meloche mesas and the distant Laughlin Peak. Along this mostly straight climb, the west side is edged by rough-angled rock cuts towering above the road (photo 9); the east side is characterized by its sheer drop.

It is along this outer edge are sections of hand-built rock retaining wall constructed in the 1920s. The retaining walls were built in three sections and are made of several courses of dry-laid sandstone measuring on average 4 feet in height (photo 10). Along the downslope of this section

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

is a concrete guard post placed in 1908, during the highway's original construction (photo 10). A tapered, four-sided shaft, the post is made of early steel-rod reinforcement (photo 11).

After rounding the 7,161-foot ridge, the road switch to a northerly direction. At around 0.7 miles it cuts through an iridium layer, which is most evident above the ditch on the east side. The layer, which takes on a black coal-like appearance, marks the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary, and is thought by geologists, because of its high concentration of iridium, to be an anomaly created by a thin bed of kaolinitic clay mixed with a discontinuous shale and coal layer.<sup>1</sup>

The road continues for a short distance passing scenic overlook on the east side of the highway. The gravel parking lot includes picnic shelter of the same design as the one in Goat Hill Park. The view from the scenic pullout is toward the northeast and dominated by Bartlett Mesa, a northwest trending landform straddling the New Mexico-Colorado border. After the pullout, the road moves in a northerly direction, switching from the west to the east side of the ridge through a series of rock cuts.

Passing on the west are steep cuts, many with boulders showing evidence of dynamite drill scars dating to 1908 (photo 13). To the east, covering the embankment is a large-rock waste field. To save on hauling costs and to reinforce the embankment, the rock waste from the cuts was pushed over the side of the road. A breathtaking vista to the east includes the lower hairpin turns, Goat Hill, Raton, and, in the distance, Bartlett and Johnson mesas (photo 12). The dramatic vista was the subject of postcards and photographs, including one in a *National Geographic* article in 1929 in which the author incredulously claimed that with "good eyesight" five states—New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas—could be seen from the vantage."<sup>2</sup>

From this point, at roughly 0.9 miles, the road moves away from vistas and turns in a northwest direction to a forested area for its final climb to meet the top of the ridge dividing Coal and Railroad canyons. The highway decreases in grade and the road cuts lessen, changing from vertical rock walls to gentle slopes of exposed earth. The surrounding vegetation increases in density and height and includes a mixture of piñon, juniper and ponderosa pines. The scenic highway (and historic district boundary) terminates near the top of the ridge at approximately 1.5 miles, where it intersects with a small dirt road to the west leading to a picnic area.

Beyond the historic district boundary, the scenic highway continues for a mile, but changes in design and historical integrity. The road surface west of the boundary is characterized by a mixture of layers of broken asphalt and dirt track, with sections deeply rutted (photo 14). The roadway expands to accommodate numerous turnouts to private landholdings and is marred by a satellite antennae station situated within the right-of-way. After another mile, a gate marks the end of city ownership. The scenic highway continues as a primitive road for another seven miles to the New Mexico-Colorado border. Along this section is a Work Progress Administration-financed port-of-entry building, now under private ownership. Because of private ownership, the

<sup>1</sup> C. L. Pillmore, et al, "Geologic Framework of Nonmarine Cretaceous-Tertiary Boundary Sites, Raton Basin, New Mexico and Colorado," *Science, New Series*, Vol. 223, No. 4641 (Mar. 16, 1984), 1180-1183.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick, Simpich, "The Santa Fe Trail, Path to Empire," *National Geographic Magazine*, June, 1929, 246.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

roadway is fenced in several areas, preventing a continuous drive to the border. The highway terminates roughly two miles north of the state line at Interstate 25.

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway retains a high level of integrity. The design of the early mountain highway is intact, with few intrusions along the right-of-way. As a mountain grade, it has maintained its historic profile, including the hairpin curves, rock cuts and embankments. The alignment includes only a few surviving early corrugated-pipe culverts and rock retaining walls. Beyond Goat Hill Park, the pavement has been allowed to deteriorate since the 1940s, but there is sufficient surviving material to communicate its evolution from a pioneering mountain road to a designated U.S. Highway. The scenic highway's road features retain their historic integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. The few noncontributing structures do not significantly alter the setting, feeling, and associations of the road and its scenic views.

### Contributing and Noncontributing Resources

The 1.5-mile-long paved Scenic Highway, with its associated engineering features, such as rock cuts, is counted as one contributing structure.

Three corrugated-metal culverts are counted as three contributing structures

One concrete protective barrier is counted as one contributing structure.

Star of Bethlehem is counted as one contributing structure.

"RATON" sign is counted as one contributing structure.

One wood cribbing retaining wall is counted as one contributing structure.

Three retaining wall sections are counted as three contributing structures.

One concrete post (1908) is counted as one contributing structure.

Communications shed is counted as one noncontributing structure.

Two picnic shelters are counted as two noncontributing structures.

9/11 Memorial Flagpole is counted as one noncontributing structure.



Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Transportation

Engineering

Politics/Government

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1908 - 1942

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1908, 1920, 1927, 1942

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

New Mexico Territorial Penitentiary (1908)

New Mexico State Highway Department (1920, 1930)

Works Progress Administration.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway is a 1.5-mile-long road located in the city of Raton in Colfax County in northeast New Mexico. Situated in a narrow valley where the Great Plains meet the Rocky Mountains, Raton Pass has historically served as a primary gateway through the mountains into New Mexico. The road was built 1908 with convict labor and last modified in the 1920s. The highway acted as both a physical and symbolic gateway, from a land of shared history and cultural norms, to a “new country,” contrasted by its perceived foreignness. Raton, the self-proclaimed “Gateway City” nestled at the bottom of the pass, worked endlessly to promote its entry function, lobbying first to construct the highway, and using its own engineers to select an alignment for scenic advantage. The town constantly sought to improve the highway, and built Goat Hill Park above the city with scenic views to the east. With the creation of the numbered federal highway system in 1926, the scenic highway became part of U.S. Highway 85, stretching from Canada to Mexico. In 1942, U.S. 85 was realigned through the valley between Raton and Trinidad, Colorado. The Scenic Highway, which required longer travel times and more arduous, ceased to be used as public highway.

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway is eligible for listing at the state level of significance under National Register Criterion A in the area of transportation because it played an important role as New Mexico’s first automobile highway, its strategic position in plans to create the nation’s first cross-country road, and its function as a scenic and cultural gateway to the state. The Raton Pass Scenic Highway is eligible for listing at the state level of significance under National Register Criterion C in the area of engineering because it represents a significant early 20<sup>th</sup>-century engineering achievement in New Mexico with its steep ascents and descents made possible by double-horseshoe curves and rock cuts built by convict labor. The Raton Pass Scenic Highway is eligible for listing at the state level of significance under National Register Criterion C in the area of politics and government because the new road represents a significant investment by the state in providing a safe passage into New Mexico as a means to open the territory and state to automobile traffic and support local economies with money spent by visitors to the state.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway is eligible for listing at the state level of significance under National Register Criterion A in the area of transportation because it played an important role as New Mexico’s first automobile highway, its strategic position in plans to create the nation’s first cross-country road, and its function as a scenic and cultural gateway to the state. Transcontinental automobile traffic increased dramatically in 1915. By 1913, only 13 cars had crossed the continent. With the Panama-Pacific expositions in San Francisco on the horizon, a sudden rush to trek across the United States in automobiles ensued. The *Washington Post*

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

predicted 25,000 cars would make the journey to California.<sup>3</sup> The Scenic Highway was paved with asphalt in the early 1930s, making it among the asphalt-paved roads in New Mexico. The Scenic Highway, with its hairpin curves and scenic overlooks, served as the principal route between New Mexico and points north until 1942, when U.S. 85 was completed.

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway is eligible for listing at the state level of significance under National Register Criterion C in the area of engineering because it represents a significant early 20<sup>th</sup>-century engineering achievement in New Mexico with its steep ascents and descents made possible by double-horseshoe curves and rock cuts built by convict labor. Early builders overcame the limitations of manual tools and draught animals to build a modern highway with steep grades at high altitude.

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway is eligible for listing at the state level of significance under National Register Criterion A in the area of politics and government because the new road represents a significant investment by the state in providing a safe passage into New Mexico as a means to open the territory and state to the union and support local economies with money spent by visitors to the state. During the territorial period and early statehood, New Mexico made only nominal investments in its nascent network of primitive automobile roads. In 1908, with the support of the governor, 40 prisoners from the penitentiary in Santa Fe arrived in Raton for the purpose of constructing the Scenic Highway, which completed the following year. The highway received significant federal funding with the passage of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 and the Scenic Highway was the first highway to receive federal aid in New Mexico. Later, the Works Progress Administration built a port-of-call building along the highway on the New Mexico side of the border with Colorado. The Scenic Highway in Raton received its last maintenance in 1930, several years before the alternate U.S. 85 was completed.

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### **Developmental history/additional historic context information**

*Immediately on leaving Raton, the well graded road began a continuous ascent, with ever winding curves. The rapid puffs of our faithful engine became more distinct and, as the Frenchman remarked the air was scarce. –L.A. Bigger, Hutchison, Kansas, 1912*

### **Raton Pass – Historical Overview**

Raton Pass, a narrow north-south road flanked by mesas and mountains in a valley running from Raton to Trinidad, Colorado developed historically as a pathway between the edge of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Aside from its advantage of grade, the valley, watered by numerous snow-fed streams and rivers, provided forage and water for early travelers. Native American use of the pass is little documented, but it is thought to have been a hunting-and-trade route and possibly the emigration road for the Comanche when they separated from the

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<sup>3</sup> *Washington Post*, April 18, 1915, F13.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

Shoshone in southern Wyoming in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and migrated to the South Plains. The Comanche may have been the first to call the landmark at top of the pass, *Chuquirique*, which is thought to translate roughly as “rodent” for the landform’s shape, and later called by the Spanish, *Ratón Mesa*, a similar toponym for its mouse-like profile.<sup>4</sup>

The first documented Spanish use of the pass dates to 1719, when Governor Antonio Valverde y Cosío left Taos with a column of soldiers for Trinidad to investigate French predations in the area. The pass was used periodically for trade and emigration, but it would take nearly 100 years for it to gain steady commercial traffic, when merchant William Becknell selected the route as the entry into New Mexico for the Santa Fe Trail. The pass was called the Mountain Branch or Mountain Route and became part of an international commerce artery.

In 1846, General Stephen Watts Kearney and the Army of the West descended the pass en route to conquer New Mexico, subsequently changing its use from a road of international commerce to a road for freighting and delivery of military supplies to forts positioned along the trail.<sup>5</sup> That same year, Susan Shelby Magoffin, accompanying her husband, Samuel, on a trading trip to Santa Fe, took to the Santa Fe Trail, passing through Raton on August 13 through 18. She wrote in her journal that the “entrance of what is called the ‘Raton’ [was] a difficult pass of fifteen miles through the mountains... [A]lmost every fifty or hundreds yards there are large stones, or steep little hillocks, just the thing to bounce a wagon wheel up, unless there is the most careful driving.” Yet at their camp, on a hill near the pass, she found the area “surrounded by most magnificent scenery. On all sides are stupendous [*sic.*] mountains.”<sup>6</sup>

In the 1860s, Richens Lacy Wooton, a Virginia-born trader, commonly known as “Uncle Dick,” saw potential wealth in the pass. Wooton approached the Colorado and New Mexico territorial legislatures seeking a charter to build a toll road over the pass. In c.1865, he built a house at the top of the pass and started construction on his toll road, “cutting out hillsides, blasting ledges of rock, building bridges by the dozen, felling trees,” to create a mountain-scaling grade.<sup>7</sup> The completion of the toll road ushered in overland stage travel and mail delivery to New Mexico, starting with the Barlow & Sanderson Co. stage line and its larger Southern Overland Mail Coach network.

Wooton’s path through the pass, dictated by its surrounding geography, assumed importance in 1878, when the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway purchased the toll road to build a link in its network. Over 2,000 people celebrated the arrival of the first train arriving in Trinidad later that year, and within a few years, the railroad had made obsolete long-distance stage lines, such as the Mountain Branch.<sup>8</sup> The railroad dominated the pass for nearly 30 years until interest in building the territory’s first automobile highway challenged the supremacy of the railroad.

<sup>4</sup> F. Stanley, *Raton Chronicle*, 1948, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Simmons and Hall Jackson, *Following the Santa Fe Trail*, 2001, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in F. Stanley, 1948, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Morris F. Taylor, *First Mail Route West*, 1971, 185.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

## A New Camino Real

During the territorial period and early statehood, New Mexico made only nominal investments in its nascent network of primitive automobile roads. The gas-powered automobile, considered a novelty, didn't figure into the territory's railroad-dominated economy until the mid-1910s, when transcontinental tourists began arriving on cross-country treks. Then, New Mexico's low-elevation passes over the Rockies and the continental divide became strategic links in developing several national highway plans.

The first road to receive attention in New Mexico was the Camino Real, the historic trading route between Santa Fe and Mexico City. Because the historic *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* made a good colonial road, New Mexico's early highway boosters thought it could serve as an automobile highway, a highway from which all other roads would radiate.<sup>9</sup>

With the persuasion of New Mexico's good roads boosters, the road was renamed the New El Camino Real, and eventually El Camino Real Highway. Its northern terminus was expanded from Santa Fe to the Colorado border, and eventually extended, as a trans-regional road, from El Paso to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Yet, while the historic road came with a ready-made history and a rough-built path, it could not so easily be converted into the backbone of a road system, which the territory desired.

Limitations of topography, lack of funding and central planning, political frictions, intrastate competition, and the fact that the new Camino Real came with no promotional organization, stalled its reworking into a modern highway for several decades. Only with the federal government's assistance of millions of dollars in aid did the Camino Real highway come to pass.

The first effort to revive the new northern Camino Real for automobile use surfaced in 1903 when a group of Las Vegas, New Mexico boosters, including merchant Charles Ilfeld, Sheriff Cleofes Romero and architect Isaac Hamilton Rapp, promoted a legislative bill to create a public road between Santa Fe and Las Vegas. The road, titled the Scenic Highway, would connect the towns via an 8,000-foot mountain passage through the recently created Pecos Reserve (now Pecos Wilderness), an area of unspoiled natural beauty that its promoters considered equal to Yosemite and Yellowstone.<sup>10</sup> To get the territory to buy into the idea, they claimed the road would not only boost business in Santa Fe and Las Vegas, but would also "lead to building good roads in other parts of the territory," a common Good Roads Movement argument of the day.<sup>11</sup>

Their efforts paid off when the Thirty-Fifth Territorial Legislature, on March 14, 1903, passed the "Scenic Highway" bill with a \$5,000 appropriation to build the road using convict labor. While the Santa Fe-to-Las Vegas Scenic Highway, with its immense costs and geographical challenges, was never finished, the legislation articulated the need for a north-south highway

<sup>9</sup> John W. Murphey, "A New King's Highway," *Chronicles of the Trail*, 2011, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 12, 1903, 1

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

stitching together the territory and, in the process, created a convict labor program to build highways in New Mexico.

As the Scenic Highway project drained the territory's limited public roads fund, another idea emerged; one that could benefit a larger area and a larger population. D. C. Winters, a Las Vegas druggist and territorial council member, saw more progress to be made by building a north-south highway along the lines of two historic roads: El Camino Real and the Santa Fe Trail, thereby creating a north-south line between Raton and Anthony. The idea mirrored a similar project afoot in Colorado to build upon the Santa Fe Trail.

On February 9, 1905, a bill establishing the "El Camino Real" received approval at the Thirty-Sixth Territorial Legislature. The road would run between the New Mexico-Colorado border, "in a southerly direction and following the old Santa Fe Trail as nearly as practicable through the city of Raton," and continue in a southern trajectory to the Texas border at Anthony.<sup>12</sup> The legislation specified construction and maintenance, like that of the Scenic Highway, would be under the direction of the board of penitentiary commissioners and the superintendent of the penitentiary. The bill came with a paltry \$10,000 appropriation to construct the approximately 520-mile-long highway.

Construction of El Camino Real lapsed for several years, as money was directed mostly toward the geographically doomed section of highway between Santa Fe and Las Vegas. Three years later, frustrated at the lack of progress, members of Raton's newly formed Commercial Club, threatened to build its section of El Camino Real using county resources, foregoing the convict labor provided by the legislation. At the club's first organizational meeting on July 17, 1908, the newly designated officers appointed a committee to draft a resolution to be sent to Governor George C. Curry (1907-1910), asking that their portion of El Camino Real be "completed at once."<sup>13</sup> The resolution was followed by petitions and telegrams sent to the governor, resulting in a visit to Raton a week later by the governor, the supervisor of the state penitentiary, J. W. Green, and the first territorial engineer, Vernon L. Sullivan.

On July 25, the governor, his entourage, and members of the Commercial Club scouted possible routes for the new highway, selecting Goat Hill, a prominent geological landmark above the Raton commercial district, as the most logical route, given that, as described by the local newspaper, it would "ascend to the summit of the mountains as rapidly as possible so as to give the traveler the scenic advantage to be gained." The article stated further that "Switzerland cannot surpass in scenery and the grandeur of the views to be obtained across the divide north of Raton."<sup>14</sup> At the end of the day, Superintendent Green promised to start a force of convicts on the Raton segment "as soon as possible."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Article 9, *El Camino Real and Other State Highways*, 67-9-2, 1905.

<sup>13</sup> *Raton Range*, July 22, 1908, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Raton Range*, August 1, 1908, 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

The state engineer, however, did not select the Raton route. The position of state engineer had recently been created by the legislature and its duties mostly concerned irrigation projects and water leases. The selection and design of the Raton route instead was planned by John D. Merriweather, a 30-year-old railroad engineer and Raton resident employed by the Commercial Club. Before state highway departments were established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was common for railroad engineers, who understood grade and drainage, to design roads. As a Raton resident, Merriweather many may have chosen a route that best served town's immediate desire to attract tourists because the route didn't follow the established Santa Fe Trail alignment in the valley, but instead took a steep ascent selected up Goat Hill for its scenic beauty.

In a report to Governor Curry, State Engineer Sullivan acknowledged that the maximum 8% grade of Goat Hill "is rather higher than would be my desire but it was thought by the Engineer [Merriweather] while considering the cost of construction, that such a grade be allowed in certain places."<sup>16</sup> The territorial engineer, however, concluded that the "feasibility of the route selected and the cost of construction is without doubt exceptionally good considering the character of the natural conditions upon which the road traverses."<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, it was this severe grade and its hairpin curves, which would render the road obsolete for modern highway traffic.

## Convict Labor

On August 10, 1908, 40 prisoners dressed in blue overalls arrived in Raton, having been marched from the penitentiary in Santa Fe. Under the charge of Felipe Lopez, a captain of the penitentiary, and the watch of two guards, the convicts began work on the Goat Hill ascent the next day, supervised by members of the Commercial Club.

Typical images of convict labor road gangs, usually African Americans in striped prison clothing, chained together by manacles, breaking rocks under an unforgiving sun, was not practiced in New Mexico. Instead, convicts were used as "free" labor to make up for a shortfall in public spending. Because of the territory's limited taxable property, and with federal aid directed toward postal roads, money for road construction was scarce.

New Mexico was the first state to introduce the "honor system" of convict labor, in which prisoners were give a reduction in their sentence for "good behavior" time constructing highways.<sup>18</sup> Many states followed New Mexico's lead developing honor-system convict road programs. Convicts, argued James W. Abbott, a representative of the federal Office of Public Road Inquiries, covering the New Mexico territory, "were a great potential force now idle or misdirected in our penitentiaries, which must be utilized in building improved highways." Based on his visit to the Scenic Highway near Las Vegas, he found the New Mexico treatment opposite

<sup>16</sup> Vernon Sullivan, "Brief Report of the State Engineer to the Governor of New Mexico on the Raton-Trinidad Highway," September 9, 1908, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Wilmot, Sydney, "Use of Convict Labor for Highway Construction in the North," In *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York, Good Roads and Convict Labor*, Academy of Political Science, New York, Columbia University, Volume IV, January 1914, Number 2, 23.



Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

of the “man with a rifle on his shoulder standing guard over convicts building roads in North Carolina.”<sup>19</sup> Under the system, the state provided the prisoners and supervision, while the individual counties supplied the equipment and the expenses for the camps. In the 1910s, four camps of 30 convicts each were active in New Mexico.

The convicts working on the Goat Hill segment were mostly short-termers, but included two men, J. C. Chavez and J. B. Romero, who had each served 14 years of a life sentence.<sup>20</sup> As an incentive, Governor Curry promised to pardon all of the convicts when the project reached the Colorado line. One convict, Adolfo Crespino, was pardoned just three months into the project.

The convicts worked an eight-hour day, with Saturday afternoon and Sunday off. According to a newspaper account, they lived in a camp of “seven large, clean white tents... [that] were built of rough boards and plenty of clean, comfortable bedding.”<sup>21</sup> The convicts indicated to the reporter that they were “well fed on clean, wholesome and substantial food, consisting of beef every day, bacon, potatoes, onions, beans, rice, tea, coffee, sugar, biscuits and baker’s bread.”<sup>22</sup> They were allowed to make crafts, including horsehair bridles, human hair watch chains, and quirts, which they traded amongst themselves or sold to locals. On one occasion, convicts were permitted to attend a circus in Raton, with their admission paid for by the Commercial Club.

But their work was tough. The first stretch, the winding 8% grade up and around Goat Hill included blasting away large chunks of mountainside. Once the rock was cleared, they used it to build fill sections or pushed it over edge to strengthen the embankment. On the steep side hills, the convicts built substantial rock retaining walls. Concrete posts and iron chains were installed to protect motorists along these sections. Aside from the use of dynamite and drills, all work was done by hand, involving only picks and shovels. Another crew of convicts worked at clearing and grubbing the road north of Goat Hill (beyond the historic district). This section, because of its lesser grade, was built with mule-powered scrapers and graders. Two months into the project the prisoners had completed nearly 4,600 feet of construction, covering the most difficult section of road.

In April 1909, M. N. Mikesell, a Springer resident and traveling salesman, driving his new Buick, was the first person take to the new highway. According the Raton newspaper, the passenger and his chauffeur reported the road to be “in the finest condition most of the way but in many places where it had not been completed some dangerous jump offs of several feet made autoing very exciting.”<sup>23</sup> The highway to the Colorado line was completed later that year, using only the convict labor and \$4,000 in workforce and expenses, which were contributed by Colfax County.

<sup>19</sup> James W. Abbott, “The Las Vegas-Santa Fe Scenic Highway” *Good Roads Magazine* 6, January-December, 1905, 351.

<sup>20</sup> *Raton Range*, September 5, 1908, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Raton Range*, October 10, 1908, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Raton Range*, April 23, 1909, 5.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

## Raton Pass Scenic Highway

With the faltering construction of the Scenic Highway between Santa Fe and Las Vegas, which was never completed, Raton took hold of the name of the early initiative. Responding to a *Santa Fe New Mexican* editorial that found the Santa Fe to Las Vegas section in “an inexcusably unfinished condition,” the local Raton weekly responded, “Raton has no such wail, Her part of the Scenic route will be done on schedule time.”<sup>24</sup> From this point, the name Scenic Highway came to represent the mountainous road linking Raton to Trinidad, Colorado, and was promoted as the Raton Pass Scenic Highway.

In 1909, as the Scenic Highway was completed, Raton found itself at the center of national attention, as early automobile highway “pathfinders” sought to locate a route for the first transcontinental highway. In the summer and fall of 1910, pathfinders, including A. L. Westgard, a Norwegian-born road scout representing the Touring Club of America; Charles J. Glidden, a Boston-based promoter associated with the Automobile Association of America; Thomas W. Wilby, a special agent for the Office of Public Roads; and Charles H. Bigelow, a Los Angeles-based independent racecar driver, crisscrossed the country, following established trails with the goal of, as stated by Bigelow, “creating a great national highway.”<sup>25</sup> Arriving in Raton on June 3, 1910, in his *Mercer*, the local newspaper mistook Bigelow’s appearance and prematurely declared, “Raton on Transcontinental Road.”<sup>26</sup>

As the result of the pathfinding tours, two routes were recommended: a northern route from New York to San Francisco, following for some distance the Oregon Trail, and a southern route from New York to Los Angeles, patching together alignments of the historic National Road, Santa Fe Trail, and other historic roads, including Raton Pass.<sup>27</sup> Mapping his recommendations, Bigelow found the old Santa Fe Trail to be the most logical path between Chicago and Los Angeles. Before embarking on the trip, Bigelow commented, “There would be no better route than the old emigrant trail [Santa Fe Trail]. This is the most direct route to Los Angeles. It crosses the Rocky Mountains at the nearest point to Los Angeles and by building such a road all travel by automobile would be brought through this city.”<sup>28</sup>

Westgard, a more experienced route-finder, also passed through Raton during his fall tour, and recommended the Santa Trail as well, dubbing his alignment the Trail to Sunset. The Trail of Sunset promised, as he wrote, was the shortest path to Los Angeles, and as reported in the *Washington Post*, would become “a new mecca for tourist ... in the magnificent scenery of the wilds of Arizona and New Mexico.”<sup>29</sup>

Other highway scouts preferred the northern route, and there followed a competition that played out in newspapers and magazines from 1910 through 1912. The rough contours of these

<sup>24</sup> *Raton Range*, December 4, 1908, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1910, VII2.

<sup>26</sup> *Raton Range*, June 4, 1910, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Bert C. Smith, *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1911, VII8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Washington Post*, December 11, 1910, E 14.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

projected routes would later inform the development of the first private national highways in the fall of 1912. These included the Lincoln Highway, which followed the northern route, and the National Old Trails Road, which traced the southern route.

But even before these routes were formalized, Raton's Scenic Highway was stigmatized, as described in a 1911 *Los Angeles Times* account, as a "dangerous mountain pass."<sup>30</sup> In 1912, to combat this perception, the *Raton Range* declared in a headline that it objected "most strenuously ... to lies about our Scenic Highway," concluding, the road "has never been impassable on account of snow."<sup>31</sup> This perception of the pass, and Raton's effort to change it, would dominate the highway's narrative until it no longer served as a public road.

On April 12, 1912, prior to the first National Old Trails Road convention in Kansas City, Missouri, where the official route would be selected, the *Raton Range* blazed across its front page in a headline that it was "Now Or Never," with accompanying editorial "behoove[ing] Raton and every town in the State to line up now, for it's now or never to settle once and for all the ocean and ocean route for auto travel."<sup>32</sup>

The National Old Trails convention selected the Scenic Highway as its alignment into New Mexico, and then followed several other national named highway trails, including the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway, the Colorado to Gulf Coast Highway, and the New Santa Fe Trail. Of the greatest impact locally and nationally, was the National Old Trails Road, linking New York City and Los Angeles.

### **The Road to the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, 1915**

Transcontinental automobile traffic increased dramatically in 1915. By 1913, only 13 cars had crossed the continent. With the Panama-Pacific expositions in California on the horizon, a sudden rush to trek across the United States in automobiles ensued. The *Washington Post* predicted 25,000 cars would make the journey to California.<sup>33</sup> The competing transcontinental auto trail associations each promised the best route to the Pacific, and newspapers and highway magazines published their own recommendations on roads to California.

A. L. Westgard, the early pathfinder, wrote an article for *Motor* magazine, in which he provided an analysis of each route. Westgard asked first-time transcontinentalists, as they were then known, "to remove from his heart all fear of danger, insurmountable obstacles or serious discomforts," assuring them that "they no longer exist."<sup>34</sup> Of all the highways, Westgard gave the highest marks to the National Old Trails Road, for its "surface conditions, scenery, historic interest [and] hotel accommodations." Of the Raton Pass Scenic Highway, Westgard wrote:

<sup>30</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1911, VII8.

<sup>31</sup> *Raton Range*, October 15, 1912, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Raton Range*, April 12, 1912, 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Washington Post*, April 18, 1915, F13.

<sup>34</sup> A. L. Westgard, "Motor Routes to the California Expositions," *Motor Magazine*, March 1915, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/westgard.cfm>

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

“Should the tourist be fortunate enough to see a sunset while descending the mountain, he will always remember its significance.”<sup>35</sup>

Thousands of cross-country tourists selected the National Old Trails Road as their primary route to California. Raton, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and nearly all towns along its path in New Mexico experienced considerable increase in tourist trade. Throughout the summer and fall of 1915, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* published almost on a daily basis a record of tourists arriving in town en route to California or returning East. Tourists were quoted frequently as to their experience of the road. Their comments ran from the prosaic, such as how much it cost per day to travel, to glowing impressions of the Southwest.

The allure of New Mexico figured heavily in the tourists' selection of the National Old Trails Road over the Lincoln Highway to the north.<sup>36</sup> Robert Laurence, of Bellaire, Ohio, returning home with his family on the National Old Trails Road, called the trip between Los Angeles and Santa Fe “the most picturesque between the two oceans,” warning that people who took their trips abroad instead of exploring the Southwest “were making a big mistake.”<sup>37</sup> Raton Pass, as a geographical landmark and gateway to the Southwest, figured frequently into travelers' accounts. But most often it was in relation to the perceived treacherous condition of road, which many, after driving the “dreaded pass,” as recalled in an article in the *Bakersfield Californian*, found it “not as difficult as pointed point out.”<sup>38</sup> But only a month before this account, 75 Raton citizens, including businessmen and laborers, were called upon, as reported by the newspaper, to volunteer “filling ruts and chuck holes... putting the Scenic in the best possible condition.”<sup>39</sup>

Travelers over the Scenic Highway in 1915 included Emily Post, who was writing a serialized travelogue for *Collier's* magazine. Traveling with her son and a chauffeur, she considered the pass with trepidation, inquiring at a café in Trinidad of its condition. The stranger, after disparaging Raton as only “a Santa Fe Roundhouse and a bunch of bunch of cottages,” went on to say: “I guess the best thing you can do is let your chauffer take the automobile down, and you walk behind and carry a wreath.”<sup>40</sup>

For many fellow travelers, the road down Raton Pass possessed the potential of terror, but also, as found by Emily Post, a “gateway of the land of adventure, where cowboys, prairie schooners, and Indians may still possibly be found!”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the highway was a portal into the mythic West, a place first promoted by the railroads, and later experienced more deeply with the freedom of privately owned automobiles. The descent into Raton opened to Easterners both

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Many tourists drove the Lincoln Highway to Colorado, turning south to take the National Old Trails Road all the way to California.

<sup>37</sup> *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Sept. 8, 1915, n. pag.

<sup>38</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, July 23, 1915, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Raton Range*, June 11, 1915, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 137;138.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

Western landscapes and the perceived exotic cultures of the cowboy, Native Americans, and Hispanos.

### Finance and Construction of the Scenic Highway

Statehood in 1912 brought new financing tools and organization to road-building in New Mexico. Under Governor William C. McDonald's administration (1912-1917), a State Highway Commission was formed as well as a County Roads Board to work with state officials to build highways. Importantly, the first State Legislature passed a bond for highway construction; a bill allowing counties to authorize their own road bonds, and an act creating a \$10.00 road tax.

The state's first dedicated highway engineer, James A. French, a civil engineer with railroad and reclamation project experience, created New Mexico's original highway network, with El Camino Real given the designation State Road No. 1. A June 4, 1914 editorial in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* announced unequivocally, "From all angles, [Camino Real] is the most important highway we have — the truth of the road system, the main channel of business, the great central artery of commerce and pleasure, the oldest and greatest highway in the United States."<sup>42</sup>

Real change came to El Camino Real, and by connection the Raton Scenic Pass Highway, with the passage of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916. Up until the Act, the federal government demonstrated little interest in funding interstate highway construction. The Act distributed funds on a formula based on a state's population, land mass and existing road network, with state's requiring to pay 50% of a project's cost. To receive aid, states were required to organize a non-partisan highway commission and possess technical expertise to prepare surveys, plans, and project specifications for review by the Bureau of Public Roads.

Raton Pass was the first highway to receive federal aid in New Mexico. French, at the helm of the newly formed New Mexico State Highway Department, applied for \$39,469.37 in federal aid to improve the highway from the New Mexico-Colorado border to the town Cimarron, a construction project initially thought to cost only \$78,838.75. Federal Aid Project 1 was approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on December 27, 1917. But given the difficulties in building the Goat Hill segment, the New Mexico Highway Department petitioned the USDA in 1919 to divide the project into two sections, with the 9.7-mile segment from Raton to the Colorado line to be designated separately as Section A. The request was approved and the project opened for bids twice, with the Odell Bros. Contracting Company of Raton, winning the contract with a low bid of \$127,608.18 on June 11, 1919. Due to a miscalculation on the availability of road-surfacing material, the state requested a nearly 70% increase in federal aid to cover the miscalculation, and another 10% added for engineering and contingencies.<sup>43</sup>

The goal of the FAP-1-A was to increase safety and driver control along the Goat Hill segment. Major work included removing rock slides, replacing some of the convict-built retaining walls,

<sup>42</sup> *Santa Fe New Mexican*, June 4, 1914, 2.

<sup>43</sup> L. A. Gillett, letter to M. S. Wheeler, Bureau of Public Roads, June 26, 1919, TS.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

and more significantly, realigning curves from a straight to a super-elevated design. Super-elevation placed the highest point of the curve on the outside of the road, so the road sloped inward toward the mountain. Increasing super-elevation was important as it prevented automobiles from drifting over the embankment. Work included laying a six-inch course of malpaís (volcanic rock) hauled from a deposit two miles from the project.

Unlike earlier the territorial work on the Scenic Highway, work was performed by paid laborers, earning per day between \$4.25, for laborers, and \$13.00 for horse-team operators.<sup>44</sup> Construction equipment had evolved from picks and shovels, to horse-powered trucks, crushers, dump wagons, and steam-powered rollers. In May 1920, according to an inspection report, 26 laborers, a foreman, five members of the contracting firm, and 30 animals made up the project work force.<sup>45</sup>

The Bureau of Public Roads exercised oversight of the project because of the federal aid, which was typical of highway projects of this period. On several occasions, the Bureau's regional engineer asked for changes to material or design, including increasing the width and surfacing of curves with 45-degree angles. The subject became a point of contention between the state and federal engineers. (Their compromise may have resulted in the premature disintegration of the highway paving two years later.)

Work started on June 17, 1919 and was completed on August 10, 1920, at total cost of \$153,695.22, with the state paying \$13,326.24 over their required 50% match. The local newspaper boldly claimed the highway now ranked "second to none in the United States both from a construction and scenic viewpoint.... [and] is nearly as impervious to the elements as it was possible to make."<sup>46</sup>

### **The Scenic Highway Road Becomes a U.S. Highway**

During the mid-1920s, in an attempt to resolve the confusion over hundreds of named auto trails, many claiming the same alignment, a Joint Board on Interstate Highways was appointed by the Bureau of Public Roads to organize a uniform network of numbered multi-state highways.

Initially the board excluded New Mexico's Camino Real in a plan to create a north-south highway connecting Canada to Mexico. The New Mexico State Highway Commission protested the exclusion, claiming the "Camino Real... is the most direct route from the Canadian border to

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<sup>44</sup> "Final statement expenditure work on Proj. 1-A Month of August [1920]." FAP-1-A Project Correspondence File, New Mexico Department of Transportation.

<sup>45</sup> "Inspection Report", United Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Public Roads, May 10, 1920. FAP-1-A Project Correspondence File, New Mexico Department of Transportation.

<sup>46</sup> *Raton Range*, August 13, 1920, 1.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

the Mexican border.”<sup>47</sup> Reconsidering, the board included it in the final projected alignment of U.S. Highway 85, a 1,582-mile interstate between Las Cruces and Ambrose, North Dakota.<sup>48</sup>

Numbered designated highways came with requirements in regard to road design, width, grade, and safety. An August 17, 1926 memorandum from H. P. Martin, a highway engineer with the Bureau of Public Roads, advised the state highway department on Raton Pass, which needed to be widened to a 24-foot roadway to meet federal standards. Martin found the existing road in “unsatisfactory condition due to the large oversize, chuck holes and general rough conditioning of surfacing on [the] entire [highway].”<sup>49</sup> In order not to lose federal aid, the state responded that it would widen the highway and correct its dangerous curves.

In fear the highway would be re-routed, Raton sought the governor’s help to improve the road. Much like Raton’s courting of Governor Curry 20 years earlier, local promoters invited newly elected Governor Richard C. Dillon (1927-1931) and his wife, and the state engineer, W. C. Davidson, to visit Raton. On March 25, 1927, a “large delegation of Raton citizens” escorted them on a trip over the scenic highway with a stop at Goat Hill, later providing “royal entertainment” at a public reception at the Elks club.<sup>50</sup>

The gambit worked. A few days later, the governor stated, “It would be a shame to abandon the present route, and I am in accord with the wishes of the Raton people that it be preserved.... Coming into the state over this pass, tourists get a true impression of what New Mexico is.”<sup>51</sup> Within a week, a state highway department crew was surveying the hill, as the newspaper described, “to eliminate several of the objectionable grades and curves.”<sup>52</sup> However, by August, the highway department’s location engineer was surveying a new road with a “six percent grade... [to] conform to the requirements of the Bureau of Public Roads.”<sup>53</sup>

The Raton Pass Scenic Highway got its final improvement in 1930. Because of its heavy grades and sharp curves, specifically at Goat Hill, it was selected by the state highway department for a “study of possible surfacing materials,” and may have been a way to appease Raton citizens.<sup>54</sup> The experiment consisted of three sections paved with either pre-mixed oil aggregate or compacted penetrating macadam, an older surfacing technique dating the 1820s, but in this application the stone fragments were bonded by a bituminous material. The short, 1.85-mile project was broken into three separate contracts, each with a different contractor. The experiment represented some of the first applications of asphalt paving in New Mexico because the majority of the state’s highways were surfaced with either gravel or crushed rock.

<sup>47</sup> New Mexico State Highway Commission, “Minutes, 1926-28,” 114-115.

<sup>48</sup> The termini and the highway’s mileage reflect the original designation for U.S. Highway 85. The highway’s mileage and termini changed over the years to include at one point El Paso as its southern terminus.

<sup>49</sup> H.P. Martin, letter to New Mexico State Highway Department, August 17, 1926. TS. FAP-1-A Project Correspondence File, New Mexico Department of Transportation.

<sup>50</sup> *Raton Daily Range*, March 25, 1927, 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Raton Daily Range*, March 31, 1927, 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Raton Daily Range*, April 1927, 1.

<sup>53</sup> “F.A.P No. 1-A, Colfax County, *New Mexico Highway Journal*, August, 1927, n. pag.

<sup>54</sup> “Experimental Sections on Goat Hill,” *New Mexico Highway Journal*, January, 1930, 20.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

The study, however, was a failure because during the paving, which took place in November and December, moisture had seeped below the surface, which, as described in a state highway department correspondence to the American Bituminous Company, the supplier of the material, led to a “great deal of failure . . . due to [the] subgrade, which absorbed moisture and retained such moisture in a frozen condition through the entire winter,” which then disintegrated during spring thaw.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the failed experiment, with the completion of Goat Hill and several other federal aid projects on U.S. Highway 85, the early Territorial vision of linking the northern to southern New Mexico had finally come to fruition. By 1932, El Camino Real, from the Colorado to Texas, was a thoroughly modern highway that, except for the Scenic Highway section, met the federal highway standards of the day.

To celebrate its completion, then-Governor Arthur Seligman (1931-1933) and his chauffeur made a 520-mile, border-to-border inspection tour of the “backbone highway of New Mexico” on September 3, 1932. With only 12 miles still in need of surfacing, Governor Seligman reported, “one can comfortably, rapidly and easily drive from Raton Pass on the northern border of the State, down the famous Camino Real, throughout its entire length of 520 miles to Anthony on the southern border, 21 miles north of El Paso, between sunrise and sunset.”<sup>56</sup>

### Goat Hill Park

From the beginning, Raton realized it had an asset being located at the bottom of the pass. The city, through its publicity bureau and the chamber of commerce, local booster clubs, and the newspapers worked endlessly to promote Raton as the “gateway” to New Mexico. The Raton Tourist Bureau in 1929 calculated that each tourist that stopped in town contributed \$8 to the city’s economy.<sup>57</sup>

The need to entice tourists was reflected in the chamber of commerce’s annual promotional budget, which included money set aside for publication of brochures, memberships in highway associations, attendance at highway conventions, the purchase and distribution of maps, and in 1930, the novel ideal of placing “girls . . . stationed at strategic points in the . . . information bureaus, A.A.A. offices, or chamber of commerce offices, to direct tourist to northern New Mexico as a playground of summer months.”<sup>58</sup>

But the pass continued to be a stigma for its reputation as being dangerous. For example, in May 1936, 150 people became stranded on the pass during a freak summer blizzard, which made national news.<sup>59</sup> The Raton newspapers did much to combat this misperception, issuing articles

<sup>55</sup> New Mexico State Highway Department, letter to Vernon D. Summerfield, July 27, 1931. TS. FAP-1-A Project Correspondence File, New Mexico Department of Transportation.

<sup>56</sup> Arthur Seligman, “El Camino Real (The King’s Highway),” *New Mexico Magazine*. October 1932, 11.

<sup>57</sup> *Raton Range*, December 31, 1929, 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Raton Range*, November 19, 1929, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Corsicana Sun*, May 9, 1936, 1.



Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

against claims made in national newspapers about the severity of the road during the winter. In earlier times, citizens were even called upon to voluntarily clear the pass of snow.<sup>60</sup>

Part of Raton's outreach to tourists included building a scenic overlook at Goat Hill, which was considered "a fine natural park as any city could wish to possess."<sup>61</sup> In 1927, the city, after acquiring the land from the Maxwell Land Grant, with aid from the Rotary Club, built a winding road connecting the scenic highway to the top of Goat Hill. The early overlook was constructed with a parking lot, safety wall and a flag pole. The *Raton Reporter* predicted "Goat Hill driveway and the view from the summit will be talked of by thousands of tourists after the summer of 1927 is closed... [T]he picture which spreads before them when they reach the hilltop will form one of the most delightful recollections of their trip out here."<sup>62</sup>

In 1930, the Raton Kiwanis Club proposed a sign for Goat Hill that was described by one newspaper as comprising "gleaming red lights" [that] spell out "RATON" and [would] be "visible for miles around."<sup>63</sup> With its tall capital letters and hillside location, it was undoubtedly influenced by the 1923 "Hollywoodland" sign in Los Angeles, but took the promotion one step further by adding illumination by the means of 15,000 volts of electricity. Erected at a cost of \$1,000, the sign was officially lit on the night of August 20, 1930. For many years an image of the sign ran across the masthead of the *Raton Range*. In the late 1930s, the city erected a "Star of Bethlehem" adjacent to the Raton sign at the Goat Hill overlook. The five-pointed star, which was created for city Christmas celebration, is illuminated with white lights.

## End of the Scenic Highway

Although much improved since Territorial days, the steep grades, tight curves, and indirect routing through a residential area, led to the demise of the Raton Pass Scenic Highway as a public road. Several years after New Mexico's completion of U.S. Highway 85, the State of Colorado considered relocating a section of the highway south of the village of Morley to the east side of AT&SF railroad tracks, reclaiming the path of Santa Fe Trail.

The Bureau of Public Roads, in a February 26, 1935 letter to the New Mexico State Highway Department, recommend the two states convene a conference to "determine a common point" on the proposal.<sup>64</sup> Reaction to the realignment in Raton was bitter. "Raton Pass is this region's greatest advertising factor," began an October 22, 1937 editorial in the *Raton Reporter*. "Plans now are to abandon the road [Scenic Highway] and build a military highway down Railroad canyon. That road will probably come regardless of what we think or can do about it, but the famous Scenic Highway MUST NOT BE ABANDONED."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> *Colorado Springs Gazette*, December 26, 1913, 10.

<sup>61</sup> *Raton Range*, August 19, 1905, 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Raton Reporter*, January 14, 1927, n. pag.

<sup>63</sup> *Raton Range*, March 21, 1931, 1.

<sup>64</sup> J. A. Elliott, letter to Grover F. Conroy, February 26, 1935, TS. FAP-1-A Project Correspondence File, New Mexico Department of Transportation.

<sup>65</sup> *Raton Reporter*, October 22, 1937, 1.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

The relocation idea gained momentum during the late 1930s with both states, but delays in acquiring right-of-way and relocating utilities hampered the project.<sup>66</sup> Final plans for the realignment were submitted to the Bureau of Public Roads in October 1939, and the highway in the valley on the east side of Raton was finished in 1942.<sup>67</sup>

The new highway, approximately three miles shorter, created a faster, safer passage over the pass. With the rerouting of U.S. Highway 85 complete, the State Highway Commission abandoned the Scenic Highway from Raton to the New Mexico–Colorado border on September 14, 1945, returning it to Colfax County. In reaction to the abandonment, the Raton Chamber of Commerce published in *New Mexico Magazine* a plan to reopen the old scenic route: “The old Scenic Route remains in the minds of thousands upon thousands of visitors to Raton and into New Mexico. Being higher in the main [to the new highway], and with the famous 8-mile hairpin, it brought thrills to the visitor and with it mingled gasps of delight of the snow-capped Sangre de Cristo Range.”<sup>68</sup>

In December 1947, after what a newspaper account described as a “three-month battle,” the county deeded the scenic highway to the City of Raton.<sup>69</sup> A controversy ensued when ranchers began erecting fences across the roadway. Many protested that they wanted the city to keep the road open as a scenic drive. Initially, the city was willing to accept the deed without the requirement to keep the road maintained. But during a “stormy” city council meeting on December 2, 1947, when the matter came to be decided, the council voted 6 to 3 to accept the deed “with the “consequences” of keeping the road open.”<sup>70</sup>

But this did not end the controversy. Ranchers continued to protest the city’s plan to maintain the road. In a subsequent city council meeting on March 17, 1948, a coalition of ranchers agreed to no longer object to the plan, if the city created a game refuge adjacent to road, maintained right-of-way fences, and installed cattle guards where the ranchers had erected fences, all to be tested during a “trial period.”<sup>71</sup>

The so-called trial period for the ranchers lasted nearly 40 years, and finally in 1981, the city turned the Scenic Highway into a city park. Currently, the Old Raton Pass City Park, which is part of the surrounding Climax Canyon Park, offers hiking trails, the scenic overlook, and interpretative markers. As part of an effort to revitalize the historic road, the Raton City Council passed a resolution on April 12, 2005 to list the Raton Pass Scenic Highway in the National Register of Historic Places.

<sup>66</sup> *Union County Leader*, August 10, 1939, 1.

<sup>67</sup> This route carried U.S. 85 until 1956, when the corridor was upgraded and reconstructed to meet the standards of the Federal-Aid Act of 1956, effectively bypassing Raton with the completion of the Interstate 25 in 1975.

<sup>68</sup> “Raton Seeks to Restore Old Scenic Route,” *Front Door News of New Mexico*, November 1945, 36. Article reprinted in Raton Chamber of Commerce advertisement printed in the magazine.

<sup>69</sup> *Raton Daily Range*, December 1, 1947, 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Raton Daily Range*, December 3, 1947, 2.

<sup>71</sup> *Raton Daily Range*, March 18, 1948, 1.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

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Raton Pass Scenic Highway

Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico

County and State

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Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** N/A

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreeage of Property:** Approximately 24 acres

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates (decimal degrees)**

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A  
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- |                        |                        |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 36.907445 | Longitude: -104.456802 |
| 2. Latitude: 36.906037 | Longitude: -104.456293 |
| 3. Latitude: 36.904333 | Longitude: -104.444970 |
| 4. Latitude: 36.901523 | Longitude: -104.450408 |
| 5. Latitude: 36.907445 | Longitude: -104.456802 |

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The nominated property is indicated by a heavy black line on an attached map drawn to scale. The boundary includes a 50-foot right-of-way on each side of the highway.

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The nominated district includes the steep “Goat Hill” section of the Raton Pass Scenic Highway. With its dramatic hairpin curves, views over Raton Basin, and its associated scenic overlook, it represents the most characteristic section of the old highway between Raton and the New Mexico-Colorado border and is among the few sections that is open the public and under mostly public ownership. This section of the Scenic Highway retains a high level of historic integrity and maintains its associations with the themes of transportation and engineering.

---

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: John W. Murphey / Architectural Historian  
organization: FirstLight Consulting  
street & number: 2502 Alamosa Place  
city or town: Santa Fe state: New Mexico zip: 87505  
e-mail firstlightconsulting@gmail.com  
telephone: 505.577.7593

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

date: August 30, 2015

### State Historic Preservation Office

name/title: Steven Moffson / State and National Register Coordinator

organization: New Mexico Historic Preservation Division

street & number: 407 Galisteo Street, Suite 236

city or town: Santa Fe state: New Mexico zip: 87501

e-mail steven.moffson@state.nm.us

telephone: 505.476.04444

date: September 30, 2014

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### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

### Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

### Photo Log

Name of Property: Raton Pass Scenic Highway

City or Vicinity: Raton

County: Colfax

State: New Mexico

Photographer: John W. Murphey

Date Photographed: April 2014

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 16: Modern and bituminous macadam paving, photographer facing southeast.
- 2 of 16: View from Goat Hill Park scenic overlook, photographer facing southeast.
- 3 of 16: Goat Hill Park, photographer facing northeast.
- 4 of 16: Concrete barrier, photographer facing northeast.
- 5 of 16: "RATON" sign, photographer facing northeast.
- 6 of 16: Picnic shelter at Goat Hill Park, photographer facing south.
- 7 of 16: Hairpin curve and grade around ridge, photographer facing south.
- 8 of 16: 1920 corrugated metal culvert with concrete headwall, photographer facing north.
- 9 of 16: Wood cribbing retaining wall, photographer facing north.
- 10 of 16: Rock retaining wall, Section 1, photographer facing northwest
- 11 of 16: 1908 concrete guard post, photographer facing north.
- 12 of 16: Grade ascending ridge, photographer facing northeast.
- 13 of 16: Rock cut of grade ascending ridge, photographer facing southwest.
- 14 of 16: "Double Horseshoe" curves, Goat Hill, Johnson Mesa, photographer facing east.
- 15 of 16: Top of grade with Bartlett Mesa in distance, photographer facing east.
- 16 of 16: Beyond historic district boundary, deteriorated road conditions, photographer facing northwest.

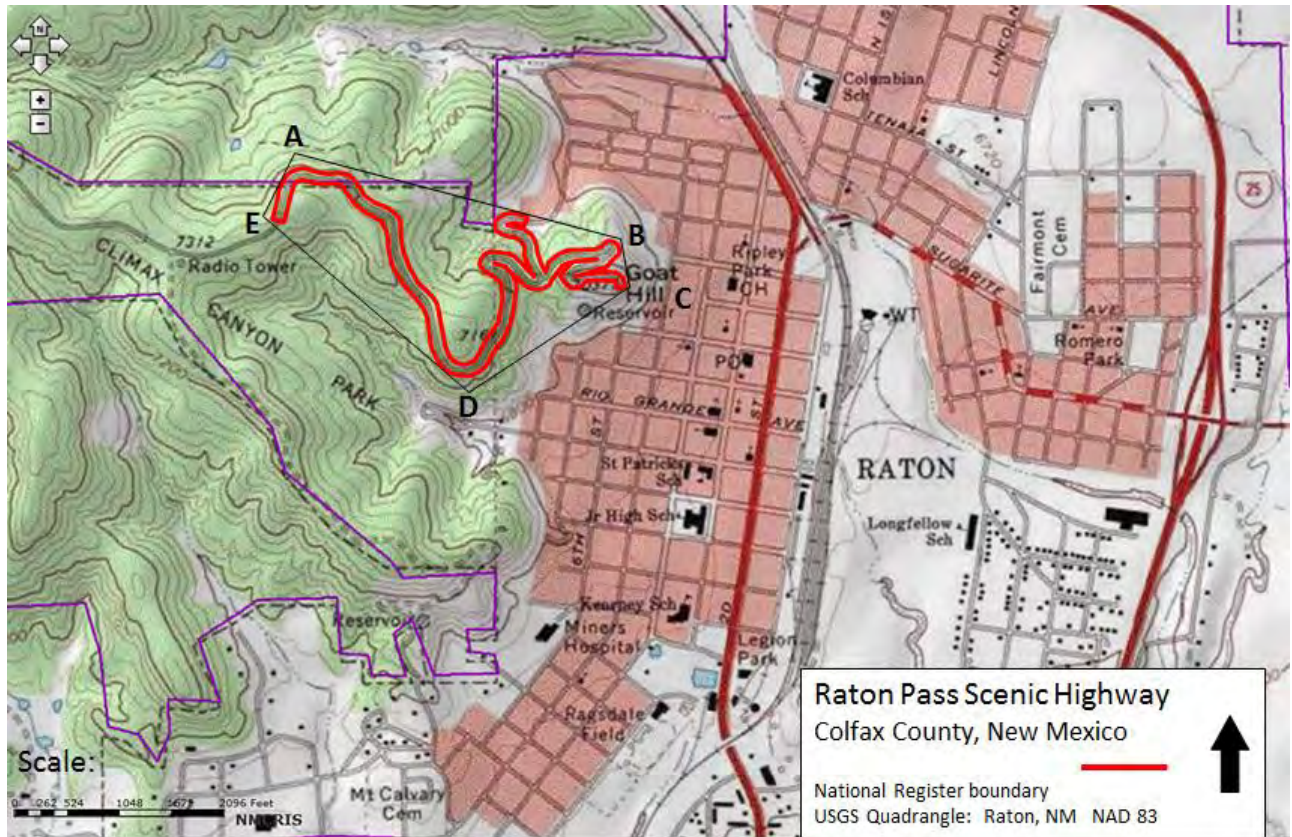
**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.



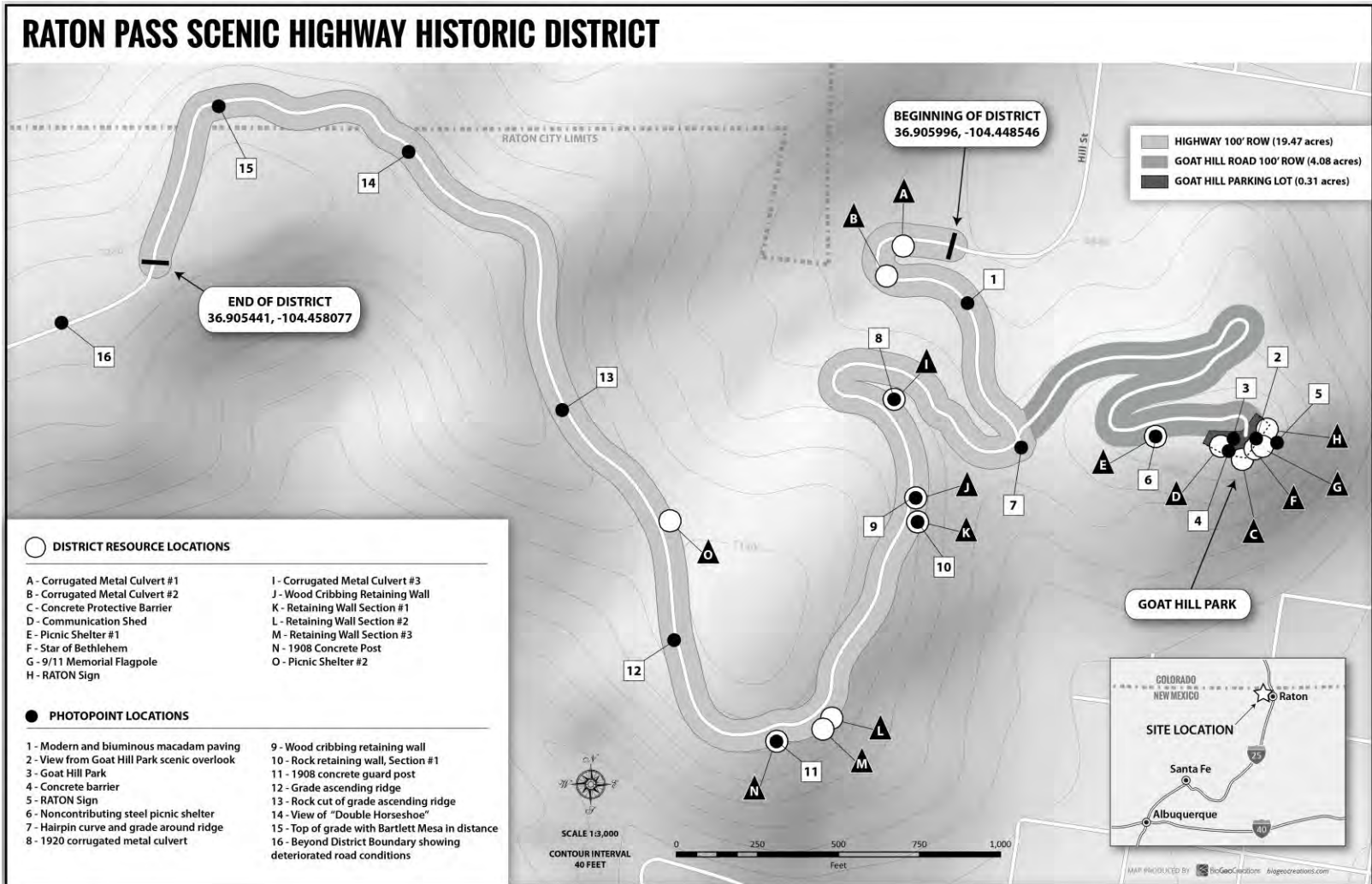
Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
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Colfax, New Mexico  
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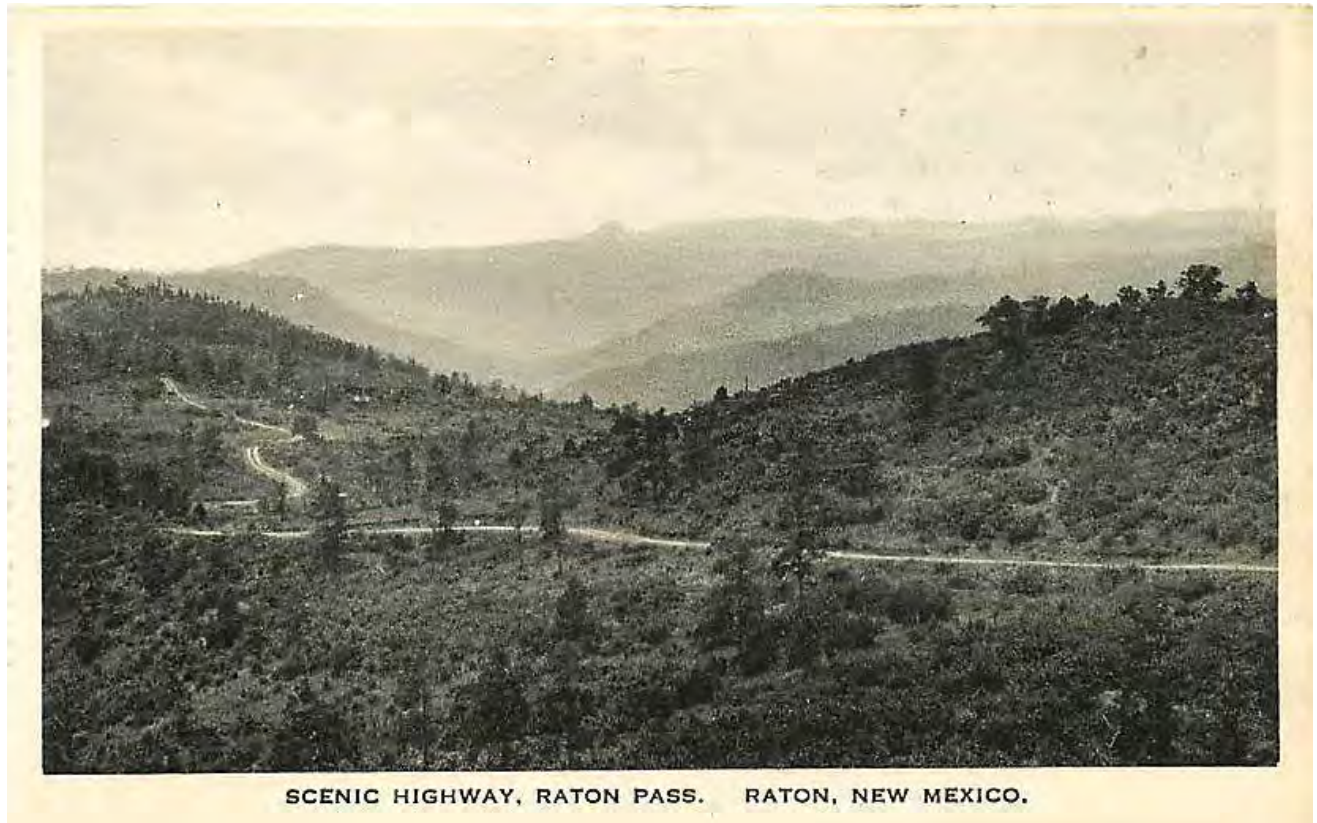


Figure 1. Raton Pass Scenic Highway in the 1920s.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



Figure 2. Raton Pass Scenic Highway in c.1921.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



Figure 3. Raton Pass Scenic Highway with double-horseshoe curves and Goat Hill Road in the distance. The Entrance to the paved highway is at left. Postcard, 1940s -1950s.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State

Photographs



1 of 16: Modern and bituminous macadam paving, photographer facing southeast.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



2 of 16: View from Goat Hill Park scenic overlook, photographer facing southeast.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



3 of 16: Goat Hill Park, photographer facing northeast.



Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



4 of 16: Concrete barrier, photographer facing northeast.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



5 of 16: "RATON" sign, photographer facing northeast.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



6 of 16: Picnic shelter at Goat Hill Park, photographer facing south.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



7 of 16: Hairpin curve and grade around ridge, photographer facing south.

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Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



8 of 16: 1920 corrugated metal culvert with concrete headwall, photographer facing north.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
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Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



9 of 16: Wood cribbing retaining wall, photographer facing north.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
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Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



10 of 16: Rock retaining wall, Section 1, photographer facing northwest

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



11 of 16: 1908 concrete guard post, photographer facing north.



Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



12 of 16: Grade ascending ridge, photographer facing northeast.

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Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



13 of 16: Rock cut of grade ascending ridge, photographer facing southwest.

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Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



14 of 16: "Double Horseshoe" curves, Goat Hill, Johnson Mesa, photographer facing east.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



15 of 16: Top of grade with Bartlett Mesa in distance, photographer facing east.

Raton Pass Scenic Highway  
Name of Property

Colfax, New Mexico  
County and State



16 of 16: Beyond historic district boundary, deteriorated road conditions, photographer facing northwest.



































UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Raton Pass Scenic Highway

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: NEW MEXICO, Colfax

DATE RECEIVED: 8/07/15      DATE OF PENDING LIST: 8/28/15  
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 9/14/15      DATE OF 45TH DAY: 9/22/15  
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 15000605

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N  
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N  
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT     RETURN     REJECT    9.17.15 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

Entered in  
The National Register  
of  
Historic Places

RECOM./CRITERIA \_\_\_\_\_

REVIEWER \_\_\_\_\_ DISCIPLINE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.

# RATON

## NEW MEXICO

P.O. BOX 910 RATON, NEW MEXICO 87740 (575) 445-9451/9551



October 28, 2013

**RE: Old Raton Pass Scenic Highway**

Mr. Murphey,

The City of Raton supports the nomination of the Old Raton Pass Scenic Highway for the National Historic Registry.

As one of the early state highways the Raton Pass Scenic Highway is viewed in our region as an asset and we believe that this acknowledgement would recognize it as such.

Please accept this letter as confirmation of the City of Raton's support of this endeavor.

Respectfully,



Butch McGowen, City Manager  
City of Raton





STATE OF NEW MEXICO  
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION DIVISION

Susana Martinez  
Governor

BATAAN MEMORIAL BUILDING  
407 GALISTEO STREET, SUITE 236  
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO 87501  
PHONE (505) 827-6320 FAX (505) 827-6338

RECEIVED 2280

AUG - 7 2015

Nat. Register of Historic Places  
National Park Service

July 28, 2015

J. Paul Loether  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places  
1201 "I" (Eye) Street, N.W. 8th floor  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Mr. Loether:

The enclosed disk contains the true and correct copy of the nomination for the Raton Pass Scenic Highway in Colfax County, New Mexico to the National Register of Historic Places.

- Disk of National Register of Historic Places nomination form and maps as a pdf
- Disk with digital photo images
- Physical signature page
- Sketch map(s)/attachment(s)
- Correspondence
- Other:

COMMENTS:

- This property has been certified under 36 CFR 67
- The enclosed owner objection(s) do  do not  constitute a majority of property owners.
- Special considerations: Note that this property is nominated at the national level of significance.

Sincerely,

Steven Moffson  
State and National Register Coordinator

Enclosures