

Resource Brief

Rincon Mountain District

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Saguaro National Park
Cultural Resources



Cactus Forest Drive

Introduction

Cactus Forest Drive is a scenic roadway located within the Rincon Mountain District (RMD) of Saguaro National Park (SNP), on the east side of Tucson. It is a loop road, approximately 8.4 miles in length and begins and ends at the park visitor center.

The Cactus Forest Drive has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹ The Cactus Forest Drive cultural landscape reflects the government-sponsored work relief program of the Depression (New Deal era) and national park design philosophies of the 1930s.

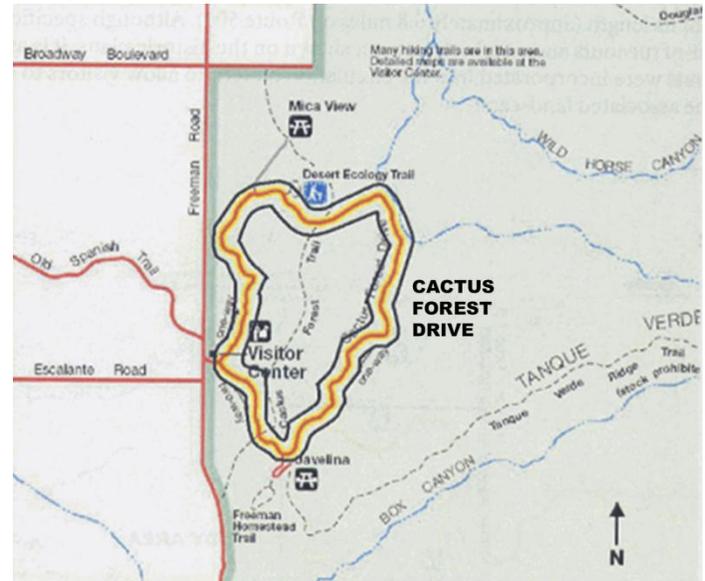
Cactus Forest Drive

The Cactus Forest Drive (originally designated Skyline Loop Road) was constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) between 1936 and 1939. The CCC Features associated with Cactus Forest Drive include the existing roadbed and alignment, multiple course-stone retaining walls, masonry culverts, and drainage-control features.

Cactus Forest Drive was originally designed as a scenic loop road allowing visitors to experience Saguaro National Monument's ecosystem at a leisurely pace. The original setting is intact and views in all directions remain relatively unchanged since the 1930s. The present landscape of Cactus Forest Drive still retains the visual character of the 1930s landscape design with overlooks and turnouts at various locations that provide



1930s photograph showing construction of the Cactus Forest Drive. Photo number SAGU 257, Box 4, Folder 19, Pt 2, WACC.



A portion of the park map showing the location of Cactus Forest Drive.

opportunities for park visitors to view and experience the Sonoran Desert landscape in an unobstructed setting.

The road continues to serve this purpose while maintaining the original road alignment and many original features that reflect the naturalistic design elements, philosophies, and architectural styles and building materials that reflect the National Park Service rustic design philosophy of the 1930s.

Most of the work in Saguaro National Monument was undertaken by the CCC enrollees assigned to Camp Tanque Verde (SP-11-A). By 1936 the Skyline Loop Road, which became Cactus Forest Drive, was planned, staked, and the CCC men from Tanque Verde Camp began construction. In 1938 Camp Tanque Verde closed due to lack of water and the Skyline Loop Road was completed in 1939 by CCC crews from Randolph Park (SP-3-A).

In 1951 the Cactus Forest Drive re-graded and hard surface paved; in 2006 the drive was rehabilitated, including repaving, minor widening to accommodate a bike lane, striping of road, and closure/rehab of some turnouts and improvement of others.

The Civilian Conservation Corps

The Civilian Conservation Corps (originally designated the Emergency Conservation Work program) was a public work relief program that operated from 1933 to 1942, and was a part of President Roosevelt's New Deal. The major objectives of the program were to give jobs to hundreds of thousands of discouraged and undernourished young men, ages 17 to 28, idle due to the Great Depression. The CCC would build up these young men physically and spiritually and start the nation on a sound conservation program to conserve and expand timber resources, increase recreational opportunities, and reduce the annual toll of forest fire, disease, pests, soil erosion and floods.

The CCC provided the men (enrollees) with shelter, clothing, food and a wage of \$30 a month, \$25 of which had to be sent home to their families. Each enlistment period was for six months. To provide enrollees with necessary training for employment after discharge, a program of vocational and academic training was later added.

NPS Rustic Design

The landscape division of the National Park Service, under the tutelage of Thomas Vint, was given responsibility for producing building plans, specifications, and estimates. All projects were based on master plans that conformed to larger principles for landscape protection and harmonized park development. Structures were designed to be compatible with their surroundings and local traditions. Native materials were used extensively to help accomplish this goal and rustic design was implemented where applicable. Roads were designed to standards established by the National Park Service that "maintained the characteristics that were hallmarks of national park roads".

In keeping with the principles of designing in harmony with nature, the Cactus Forest Drive and associated structures incorporated native materials such as local stone and were sited to minimize intrusion on the landscape and maximize the ability of visitors to experience the pristine natural setting from their motor vehicles. The scale of building was simple and minimalist. Naturally occurring features were incorporated into the road path or avoided through design so as not to substantially alter the setting.



Close-up of stone capping and water control feature built into retaining wall.

¹ National Park Service
2008 Cactus Forest Drive, Saguaro National Park, Cultural Landscapes Inventory.

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