



# Observatory Hill

## Introduction

Observatory Hill is a somewhat small yet distinct, rounded hill approximately 80 feet high and roughly 1000 feet in diameter. The hill is located near the intersection of north Cactus Forest Drive and the North Cactus Forest trailhead (see Figure 1). Although the hill is not very impressive it does have an interesting history of which the average visitor might not be aware. As the name implies the hill was selected as the site of a new observatory by the University of Arizona (U of A) in the 1930s.

## Saguaro State Forest

The history of Observatory Hill begins before Saguaro National Monument (SNM) (Saguaro became a National Park in 1994) was proclaimed by President Hoover in 1933. In the years prior to the establishment of the monument, the U of A took it upon itself to preserve a bit of the Sonoran Desert and its magnificent Saguaro cacti. The President of the U of A, Dr. Homer Shantz, was a plant physiologist and plant geographer by training and saw the merits in preserving the wonderful stand of Saguaro cacti along the foothills of the Rincon Mountains. In 1929 and 1931 the U of A bought and leased land for a scientific preserve that would be known as the University Cactus Forest and eventually Saguaro State Park. At about this same time, the National Park Service, which had been looking long and hard for a tract of land that could be set aside for a new National Monument dedicated



Figure 1. Location of Observatory Hill in relation to Cactus Forest Drive and Trail. (Image courtesy of Google Earth®).

to the preservation and the protection of Saguaro cacti as well as a piece of the Sonoran Desert, decided that the Rincon Mountains and foothills was exactly what they were looking for. The Saguaro State Park was entirely within the authorized boundaries of the new monument (Figure 2). There were other private inholdings within the authorized monument boundaries and it would take decades before land issues would finally be decided.

## Observatory Hill

In November 1933 the Forest Service opened a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, Camp Tanque Verde (SF-1/SP-11), along the north side of Tanque Verde Wash. The Civilian Conservation Corps originally designated the Emergency Conservation Work program as a public work relief program that operated from 1933 to 1942.

The CCC enrollees from Camp Tanque Verde worked on nearby Forest Service land as well as the Saguaro State Park. Over the next 6 months the CCC accomplished many things, including “foundations for the University of Arizona observatory” and road on Observatory Hill (Figures 3 and 4). After the first Camp Tanque Verde

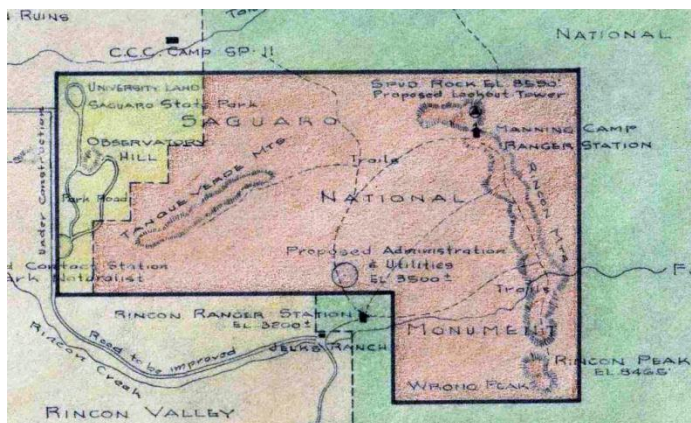
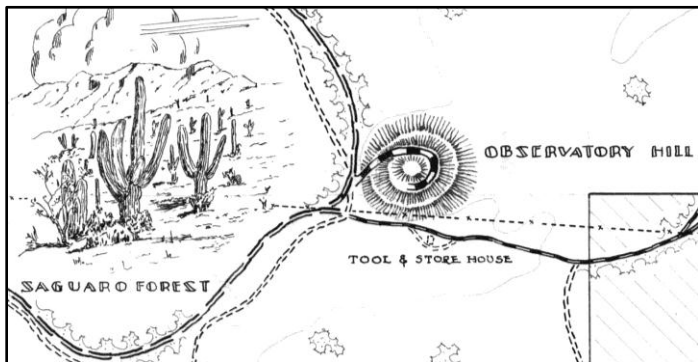


Figure 2. Saguaro State Park - 1937 Preliminary Map (detail); NPS land is in red, University, private, and state land in yellow, and the National Forest in green. SAGU257, Box 2, WACC.



**Figure 3.** Saguaro State Forest map, detail; drawing no.: SP-ARIZ/SF-9101-1-3; dated September 1, 1937. Note road to top of Observatory Hill. The symbol used for the road indicates the road was constructed prior to the date of the map. North is to the left.

closed in 1934 Shantz applied for a camp to work on what he now called the Saguaro Forest State Park. The CCC began work in the State Park in July 1935. Constructing the loop road (now Cactus Forest Drive) became the focus of their work.

It wasn't until March of 1935 that SNM got its first ranger, Charles Powell. In the monthly SW Monuments Reports for March 1935 Powell wrote:

Dr. Caroline E. Furness of Vassar, Dr. and Mrs. E.F. Carpenter and Dr. And Mrs. J.D. Williams of the University of Arizona, all astronomers, held a weiner (sic) and marshmellow (sic) party on the summit of Observatory Hill Friday evening, March 22, 1935.

In January 1937 Park Ranger Paul Baubien wrote:

Have heard from a trustworthy source that the University plans to immediately move their observatory from the campus to a hill in the monument. A gambling 'palace' south of town advertises its location with a revolving searchlight. Said searchlight prohibits all photography at the present location of the observatory.

It is not known when the idea of constructing an observatory on top of a hill in Saguaro Forest State Park first came about, but work was initiated in 1933 and the idea was still being talked about in 1937. No observatory was ever sited on top of Observatory Hill. The CCC tool and store house constructed at the base of the hill was used as a NPS ranger residence and contact station starting in 1937. Today, all that remains of the University's grand design is a graded hilltop and a graded road to the top of the hill that is now overgrown with mesquite and acacia (Figures 4 and 5).



**Figure 4.** Photograph of Observatory Hill, from the south looking north. Note the CCC cut and fill road near summit of hill.



**Figure 5.** Summit of Observatory Hill. Vegetation is slowly reclaiming the leveled summit of the hill. View to the NW.

## Access

Since there is no trail to Observatory Hill, and the park allows no off trail hiking below 4500 ft., travel to the site is prohibited. The foundation of the CCC tool and store house that was converted into a park residence can be seen along the Cactus Forest Trail. The foundation is 0.25 miles south of the North Cactus Forest trailhead.

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