

Rocky Butte

By Graham Houser

Rocky Butte is a 612-foot-high extinct cinder cone volcano in Portland, one of many buttes in the Boring Lava Field. Located between the Roseway and Parkrose Heights neighborhoods in northeast Portland, the crown of the butte offers a panoramic view of the city over a tree canopy of bigleaf maple and Douglas-fir. The butte has served many purposes, not only for the usefulness of its basalt and wildlife, but also as a landmark, which has both physically and metaphorically elevated the institutions built along its slopes. The butte is a popular recreation site for hiking, picnicking, rock climbing, and cycling.

For generations, the butte provided hunting grounds for the Multnomah, Clackamas, and Cascade/Watlala people, who called the place Mowich Illahee, or “Home of the Deer.” By the 1880s, resettlers had arrived in the area, where they logged the trees and quarried the rock on what was then called Wiberg Butte for use in Oregon roads, railways, churches, hotels, and fireplaces. The heavy use of the quarry led to the present name, Rocky. The Mazamas, an alpine hiking club, organized moonlight hikes to Rocky Butte in 1913, and high school science classes (1915) and social clubs such as the Audubon Society (1932) and the Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts made excursions there.

In the early 1920s, Rocky Butte was proposed as a possible location for the 1925 Atlantic–Pacific Highways Electrical Exposition, and some property owners began to develop the area in anticipation of the event, which never happened. At about the same time, The Grotto and the Hill Military Academy built facilities on the slopes of the butte. In 1930, a revolving airway beacon was erected at the butte’s summit. The beacon was designated as site number 00, the beginning of the Portland-to-Spokane Air Mail route, when the Portland airport was still located on Swan Island.

The three-acre Joseph Wood Hill Park at the crown of Rocky Butte, named after the founder of the Hill Military Academy, was dedicated to the city in 1935. The same year, the county planning commission used funds from the State Employees Recreation Association and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to initiate the construction of park infrastructure and a scenic drive. Lead engineer Paul Northrup led the design of the viewpoint structure, which looks as though it “sprung from the crest itself.” Workers crafted parapet walls and balustrades of basket arches in a pattern of stone and joinery, using methods that relied on hand tools. The work was overseen by Superintendent of Masonry Raffale (Ralph) Curcio and Engineer A. J. Dreyer. The Scenic Drive surmounts a steep slope in a limited space and has a 375-foot-long tunnel that features a sharp 257° curve whose exit passes over the entrance portal on the Butte’s west flank. The drive was completed in 1939.

During the 1940s, with support from the WPA, Multnomah County budgeted for a new jail on the east side of Rocky Butte. The jail was large enough to house over four hundred prisoners near the “county rockpit” on the east slope, and the rocks crushed by prisoners were used to build the prison walls over the next few years. Escapes were a regular occurrence because of poor construction design and short staffing, earning the jail the nickname “The Sieve.” The much-criticized institution remained in operation until 1983, when it was demolished to make room for Interstate 205. The basalt stone from the jail was used to restore the walls of the Historic Columbia River Highway.

The proposed plans for I-205 cutting along Rocky Butte’s eastern bluffs were controversial, and residents of Maywood Park incorporated the neighborhood as its own city in 1967 so they could legally oppose the construction. Eighty-two homes were lost when the interstate was built through Maywood Park, but local advocacy ensured that the freeway was built below ground level and had a sound-wall barrier and a greenbelt.

In 1973, the airway beacon on Rocky Butte was scheduled to be torn down, but students at neighboring Jason Lee Elementary started a “Save the Beacon” campaign with help from Multnomah County Commissioner Don Clark. The students’ efforts were successful, and the beacon was still operating as of 2024.

The Rocky Butte Preservation Society was formed in 1985, and by 1991 the Rocky Butte Scenic Drive District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The road and the slopes and crown of the butte comprise the Rocky Butte Natural Area, which is administered by the City of Portland. The iconic lamps, installed at the top of the butte in 1995, were styled after those at Vista House, a century-old observatory at Crown Point in the Columbia River Gorge.

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