

The Grand Promenade at Hot Springs National Park

The Grand Promenade project was funded by the PWA in December 1933. Other projects also authorized that year were the construction of a new hot water line to the Government Free Bathhouse, a sewage disposal system at Gulpha Gorge campground, utility buildings (now the Maintenance Complex) on Whittington, an administration building, West Mountain Road reconstruction, and 27.5% of the funding for a city sewage disposal system. The promenade project caused some local opposition from people who thought the area involved should become either a parking lot or a bypass for downtown motor traffic. The park service had a very different view. As noted National Park Service Architect Charles Peterson put it, “The aesthetic purpose of this whole development is to provide an architectural transition from the multistoried structures across Central Avenue to the natural wooded slopes of Hot Springs Mountain.”



North end of Bathhouse Row in 1910: Note the service roads behind the buildings.



South end of Bathhouse Row and Army-Navy Hospital in 1910

Thomas J. Allen, park superintendent during this time, did not agree, stating in a letter to the NPS director, “A formal or semi-formal type of planning will ruin the natural beauty of Hot Springs Mountain and thereby remove one of the principal attractions which brings people to this resort. Plazas, stairways, fountains etc. may be seen and enjoyed in practically every city in the United States, and there is nothing in such structures which will offer our visitors anything but what they obtain at home...I sincerely feel that if we proceed with the formal plan now suggested, especially as regards the structure proposed for the location opposite the Arlington Hotel [this was the cascade feature], we will be making a mistake which will be later regretted. It will ruin the natural beauty of the lower slopes of Hot Springs Mountain, will build up the general comment that Hot Springs National Park is merely, or similar to, a municipal park...I am in favor of the general idea of a promenade, but I believe it should be of a naturalistic design and planned so as to enlarge upon the outdoor features, trees, shrubs, etc. with the elimination of any formally designed structures...”



Obliterating the old service road

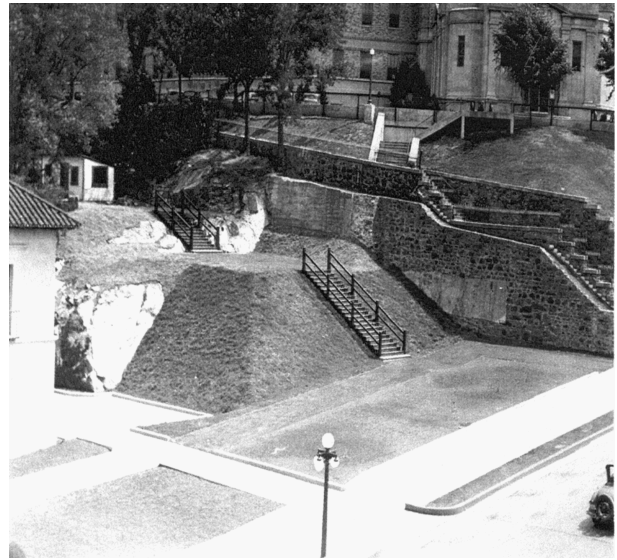
Both formalistic and naturalistic approaches were incorporated into the final landscaping plans. A formal bricked walkway was to be installed, but the earthen slopes along the walkway were to be retained. South of the formal entrance the promenade was

at a higher level than the old service road, requiring that soil be brought in to soften the angle of the walk's bed. The retaining wall on the upper side of the service road was to be buried, the width of the lower service road diminished (probably to discourage motor vehicles), the edge of the slope brought down to the road's east boundary, and the lower retaining wall covered with additional soil.

Work in 1934 was mostly preparatory. Late in the year the shop buildings above Arlington Lawn were removed, and the area between the bandstand above Stevens Balustrade and the Imperial Bathhouse on Reserve Street was excavated and graded. The grading was completed in July 1935. In March 1937 the Imperial Bathhouse at the south end of Bathhouse Row (the only bathhouse to face south) closed and was demolished on June 5. This made it possible to create a landscaped entrance to the promenade from Reserve Street, and in August a temporary entrance was completed there. In 1938 a gravel walk was added to the Grand Promenade site.



Razing the Imperial Bathhouse



Site after removal of bathhouse

The Civilian Conservation Corps (C. C. C.) opened a work camp at Lake Hamilton in November 1939. Half of the resources were to be spent on improvements to Hot Springs National Park; the other half was to go for Game and Fish Commission work. One of their park projects was the improvement of mountain roads and trails, so they may have done some of the brickwork on the promenade. They left on March 15, 1942, and by August 1942 370 lineal feet of brickwork from the Reserve Street entrance to the ramp behind the Fordyce Bathhouse were completed. In December a drinking fountain was placed above the Reserve Street entrance.



Completed brickwork on south promenade.

Apparently the Grand Promenade received little attention throughout the war years and for the decade beyond, but the area itself underwent some dramatic changes. With the installation of a thermal spring cooling station in 1950, the large cooling towers behind the bathhouses were no longer required. The last of them came down in 1952 and 1953, vastly improving the view from the promenade. On February 30, 1956, grading, drainage, and brickwork began, extending the promenade



Grading the north end of the Grand Promenade; Arlington towers in distance.

from the ramp south of Stevens Balustrade to Fountain Street. The Noble Fountain was moved to its present location at the promenade's Reserve Street Entrance in July 1957, and on August 9, this entrance was at last complete. The completion of the north end of the promenade extension required the removal of the remaining portions of the old service road and the demolition of the 1893 superintendent's residence northeast of Arlington Lawn. The structure was razed in April 1958, and the site was landscaped. On July 25, 1958, the completion of promenade landscaping and lighting put the final touches on the Grand Promenade. On April 13, 1982 the Grand Promenade became a National Recreational Trail

