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A Hundred Miles on a Clear Day

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Lookout Mountain Incline

The history of the Incline has its roots in the Cherokee removal, the Civil War, court battles, greed, labor strikes, romanticism, tourism, and engineering. The story begins in the heartbreak of the Trail of Tears. After the Cherokee Nation was removed to Oklahoma, Col. James Whiteside bought up property on Lookout Mountain. Land was cheap because it was not easily accessible. He completed the Whiteside Turnpike in 1852, the only road to the top of the mountain and it probably traced a path used by the Cherokee for hundreds of years. The Whiteside family charged a toll of $2 per person on the turnpike, during a time when a good meal cost 25 – 50 cents and working men were paid $1 to $2 per day. Adding insult to injury, it took 4 hours to travel the rough, steep turnpike from the base of the mountain to the top. Both Chattanoogans and tourists from as far away as the Atlantic coast, New Orleans and Memphis came to escape the summer heat and enjoy the cool, healthy mountain air. Investors and speculators sought to develop the mountain area as a summer resort. The Whitesides completed the first hotel on the mountain, Lookout Mountain Hotel in Summertown. This hotel was occupied by both Federal and Confederate military and was burned down during the war.

The tragedy of the Civil War battles in Chattanooga and on Lookout Mountain later gave way to the veterans returning with family and friends to view the former battlefields. The bloody Battle of Lookout Mountain was romantically renamed the “Battle Above the Clouds” and there was a brisk tourist trade to view the Point where General Joe Hooker placed his flag. Point Park is now part of the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park.

After the Civil War travelers had a more urgent reason to reach the mountaintop. During the yellow fever epidemic in 1878 desperate people sought refuge in the healthier mountain air. The high toll and the steep ascent made a perilous time even more difficult and may have influenced the building of an alternative road. In 1879 the Johnson Turnpike (now Ochs Highway) was completed. The gentler grade and lower toll made living on the mountain top even more attractive. Many Chattanooga residents were interested in building summer homes on Lookout for both cooler weather and for health reasons. The mountain is not only noticeably cooler than the valley, but it is also beautiful with a panoramic view of seven states. The beauty of Lookout Mountain has been favorably compared to the Swiss Alps. Newspapers of the day would rhapsodize about the “primitive grandeur” and the “ozone of the cloud-plane”.

Even though tourists could now take the Johnson Turnpike to the mountain top, they still had to cross Whiteside property to access the Point. To recoup the loss of tolls on the Whiteside Turnpike, Harriet Whiteside, the widow of Col. Whiteside, charged 25 cents to visit the Point. Only tourists who used the Owen’s Livery Co. were allowed to visit the Point, all others were barred by security guards. Rival livery owner L.J. Sharp sued the Whiteside family and this was just one of many court battles as property owners and investors struggled to monopolize the tourist trade and to find other ways to traverse the mountain. Construction of the rail lines were plagued with labor strikes and property disputes.

In order to build a railway going up a steep mountain, railroad engineers had developed a funicular railway system. This system consisted of two cars which counter-balanced one another linked by a cable and a driving wheel at the top. As one car descends, the other car ascends. Major W.R. King engineered the first Incline on Lookout Mountain. It was officially opened on March 9, 1887 and provided direct access to the Point Hotel from St. Elmo, the neighborhood at the foot of the mountain. The Chattanooga and Lookout Mountain Railway stretched 4,000 feet up the mountain with a 33% grade and include 2 major curves, which were not common to funicular railroads. It also connected to the 2 mile Narrow Gauge Railroad which ran from the Point Hotel to the tourist sites of Sunset Rock and the Natural Bridge. Passengers included those staying at the hotel and Chattanooga residents and day-trippers visiting the Point for the day and a meal at the hotel. The open air trolley style cars allowed many to enjoy the cool fresh air on the mountain as a relief from the summer heat in Chattanooga. Fare was 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for children for the 5 minute trip. The Point Hotel offered first class accommodations for
$2.50 to $4.00 per night. There were 58 guest rooms with Brussels carpet and a large dining room for both guests and day-trippers.

All too soon there were more competitors. The Broad Gauge Railroad was completed on May 27, 1888 and was boarded in downtown Chattanooga and ridden all the way to the top of the mountain. The Chattanooga and Lookout Mountain Railway Company reasoned that this would give them an edge over the competition with the first Incline. The official opening of the Broad Gauge Railroad, a train of 5 passenger cars, coincided with a land sale on the mountain top (arranged by the company) and there were 6,000 passengers the first day. At least 2,000 more had to ride the Incline, because there was not enough room on the Broad Gauge train.

The rival line also built a rival hotel, the Lookout Inn, which was completed in 1890 with 400 rooms. The dining room could hold several hundred people and the hotel also boasted a bowling alley and a billiard room. Both lines were dependent on the hotel trade, the hotels suffered from the competition with each other, and by 1895 neither the lines nor the hotels were doing well at all. There was not enough demand for both an incline and a railroad. Nor was there enough tourist trade for both hotels. After the second Incline was completed, the other two lines quickly succumbed to economic realities. The Broad Gauge Railroad closed in 1898 and the first incline was dismantled in 1900 after plans to be re-purposed as a freight line never materialized.

In 1895 the second and present day Incline was built by the engineer John T. Crass and the Lookout Mountain Incline Railway Company. The Incline is still the steepest incline in the world with a 72.7% grade and a one mile long track. The new Incline served both residents and tourists, which helped it to survive the loss of the Lookout Inn to fire in 1908 and the dismantling of Point Hotel in 1913.

Today the Incline is operated by the Chattanooga Area Regional Transportation Authority and carries more than 100,000 passengers each year. The track is advertised as “America’s Most Amazing Mile”. Passengers can park at either the foot or the top of the mountain and ride the Incline in either or both directions. Traveling at about 10 miles per hour the one-way trip takes about 10 minutes. There is an observation deck at the top and it is claimed that on a clear day one can see the Smokey Mountains a hundred miles away. The entrance to Point Park is just a few steps from the Incline station. At the park entrance is a Visitor’s Center with exhibits and information about the park. The Incline was designated as a National Historic Site in 1973 and it is also a National Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark.

On a personal note, I highly recommend first visiting the Hunter Art Museum in downtown Chattanooga to view the 1878 painting, “Chattanooga from Lookout Mountain” by James Hope. Then ride the Incline to the mountain top and marvel at the difference in that same viewpoint over one hundred thirty years later.

For more information visit www.ridetheincline.com.

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Incline Timeline

1852  Whiteside Turnpike
1857  Lookout Mountain Hotel, burned down during the Civil War
1878  Yellow Fever Epidemic
1879  Johnson Turnpike (later called St. Elmo Turnpike and now Ochs Highway)
1881  Lookout Mountain House
1885? Narrow Gauge connecting Point Hotel with Sunset Rock & the Natural Bridge (2 miles)
1887  (March 9) First Incline (from St. Elmo to Point Hotel)
1888  (mid-May) Point Hotel completed a few days before the Broad Gauge
1888  (May 27) Broad Gauge Railroad, the Chattanooga & Lookout Mountain Railway, from downtown Chattanooga to mountaintop
1890  Lookout Inn
1895  (Nov. 16) Second and current Incline (from foot to Lookout Inn)
1898  Broad Gauge closed
1900  First Incline dismantled
1908  Lookout Inn burned down (Nov. 17) seen from downtown
1913  Point Hotel torn down
1921  Lookout Mountain House burned down
1928  Lookout Mountain Hotel (castle)
1957  new owners rename it Castle Above the Clouds
1964  castle purchased by Covenant College
Bibliography


