

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

FL-PRC-041
CS 2310
Preston Overlook

Historic Name Other Name	Preston Overlook	CS # SHPO Inv #	2310 FL-PRC-041
Location	S side of TH 52/TH 16 about 1.5 mi W of the E jct of TH 52 and TH 16	Hwy District Reference	TH 52/16 6A 19.2
City/Township County Twp Rng Sec USGS Quad UTM	Preston, City of Fillmore 102N 10W Sec 6 Preston Z15 E574700 N4835810	Acres Rest Area Class	.5 4
Designer	Nichols, A R, Consult Land Arch	SP #	2310 52-20-37-1
Builder	FERA/SERA, Suspected	SHPO Review #	
Historic Use Present Use	Roadside Parking Area Roadside Parking Area	MHS Photo #	013516.01-12
Yr of Landscape Design	1937-38	MnDOT Historic Photo Album	Nic 1.16 Nic 5.14 Nic 5.18 Nic 5.32 Ols 1.88
Overall Site Integrity	Intact/Slightly Altered		
Review Required	Yes		
National Register Status	Eligible, see Statement of Significance Now listed: see http://www.dot.state.mn.us/roadsides/historic/files/wayrep-suppl.pdf for additional information.		
Historic Context	Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960		

List of Standing Structures

Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built	Fieldwork Date
01	Overlook Wall	1937-38	05-12-97
02	Curb, Stone	1937-38	
NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table			Prep by Gemini Research Dec. 98 G1. 60
			Prep for Site Development Unit Cultural Resources Unit Environmental Studies Unit

Final Report	Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways (1998)
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■ BRIEF

The Preston Overlook is a .5-acre site located on the southern side of T.H. 52/T.H. 16 within the City of Preston, just inside the eastern city limits.

■ STANDING STRUCTURES

Stone Overlook Wall. Built 1937-1938 by local relief labor (probably FERA/SERA). This gracefully curving stone overlook wall was built near the top of a bluff that drops sharply 60-80' into the ravine of the South Branch of the Root River. The overlook provides long views of the river valley, the Fillmore County Fairgrounds in Preston, the city of Preston, and hills and farmland to the south and southeast. The wall is built of random rubble, grayish-tan limestone (with many straight edges) on a stone footing. The rock was quarried on the site. The wall has many triangular pieces of rock and an upper course of rectangular slabs. It was built in a long curve with a small rectangular lookout bay near its western end and a large semicircular lookout bay near its eastern end. The northern face of the wall is about 2'10" tall. The wooded hillside drops off sharply south of the wall so that the southern face of the wall is about 11' tall. Several piers (about 2'9" square) are spaced at intervals and project a few inches above the wall.

There is a flagstone walkway (about 6' wide) along the inner side of the wall. The walkway widens into a terrace within the rectangular bay. The semicircular bay is filled with a flagstone terrace that surrounds a grassy oval inset.

Stone Curbing. Built 1937-1938 by local relief labor (probably FERA/SERA). The rest area's grassy island is surrounded by limestone curbing. It is unusual that the curbing on the northern side of the island adjacent to the highway shoulder is still in place. In other wayside rests of this age, the curbing has been removed or covered with asphalt. The plan also specifies sections of stone curbing extending east and west from the ends of the wall. These sections are either missing or covered with asphalt.

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

The rest area has a pull-off drive that curves to create a grassy island between the drive and T.H. 52/T.H. 16.

The original and current landscaping makes use of the area's natural forests. In fact, landscape architect A. R. Nichols used a photograph of the site in a captioned photo album to illustrate "Conservation of Trees in Construction of Concourse" (Nichols album, Volume 5, pg. 14, in Mn/DOT Site Development Unit). The photograph shows the large elm (extant) next to the inner side of the wall near the semicircular bay. The elm's position was adjusted for in the laying of the flagstone walkway.

There is a large elm on the southern edge of the island, but no other plantings on the island. Much of the rest of the site is planted with grass. The bluffs that surround the overlook are covered with a natural hardwood forest.

The original planting plan specifies that four American Elm and two groups of juniper shrubs be planted in the central island. Groups of juniper were also specified to flank the southern face of the semi-circular bay. About 1000 deciduous shrubs, about 34 American Elms, 18 Junipers, and 11 Poplars were to be planted on the sloping shoulder across the highway to the north and northeast for erosion control.

The original construction plans indicate a picnic area located on the northern side of T.H. 52/T.H. 16 about 700' east of the overlook's eastern entrance road. The picnic area was not examined during fieldwork.

■ **SETTING**

The Preston Overlook is a .5-acre site located in a rural setting, just inside the eastern city limits of Preston. The site is located on the southern side of T.H. 52/T.H. 16, which at this point is built along the bluff line on the edge of the river valley of the South Branch of the Root River. The highway approaches Preston from the northwest, drops into the valley of the South Branch of the Root River, and bounds the city of Preston on the north and east, and then climbs steadily along the ledge of a high bluff. Near the summit of this bluff is this overlook which offers a view of Preston and the rolling hills along the wooded banks of the river (Johnson 1949:39).

The surrounding terrain consists of large hills and wooded ravines with pasture land, some tilled fields, and natural hardwood forests. This portion of Fillmore County is part of the Richard J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood Forest (formerly the Minnesota Memorial Hardwood State Forest). This state forest was first established in 1962 when the forestry division of the Department of Natural Resources began purchasing lands for inclusion. The forest extends along the Mississippi River from Goodhue County southward to the Iowa border.

The site is bordered on the north by T.H. 52/T.H. 16. Across the highway to the north is an apple and berry farm. There are relatively undeveloped wooded hills east and west of the site along the curving highway.

■ **INTEGRITY**

Alterations

The site appears to have been constructed fairly close to plan.

A thin, poured concrete cap was added to the wall circa 1950 or 1960. The wall has been repaired poorly and carelessly several times with various mortar materials.

The pull-off drive is now so thickly paved with asphalt that it is now higher than the flagstone walkway and stone curbing, and the asphalt is covering portions of both. Despite these alterations, the site appears to be quite intact.

The site retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Notes on Condition

The wall is in poor to fair condition with failing mortar and broken stones. It has been poorly repaired several times with various mortar materials, most recently at the western end in 1996 after a vehicle struck the wall. Many of the walkway flagstones are missing, covered with earth, overgrown with grass, or heaving. Stone curbing is missing and covered with asphalt. Trees south of the wall have not been trimmed recently so that much of the view from the overlook is blocked.

■ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Preston Overlook was constructed in 1937-1938 by the Minnesota Department of Highways, possibly in cooperation with the City of Preston, as part of a 1.1-mile-long roadside development project. The Preston Women's Improvement Club had lobbied for two years for a highway beautification project that would be similar to the Inspiration Point roadside parking area in nearby Lanesboro (which was also inventoried in this study).

It is not clear whether the project was built solely by the Department of Highways, or whether Depression-era relief labor was employed. The *Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development Along the Trunk Highways in Minnesota* for 1938 indicates that this was a "State direct labor project." The report briefly describes these projects as follows, suggesting that the Preston Overlook was built without relief labor:

The State direct labor projects consisted of the development of roadside parking areas, perpetuation of historic markers, and landscaping of available right of way. These improvements were located in areas where no relief labor was to be had and where we had requests from civic organizations and the District and District Maintenance Engineers (*Annual Report 1938:2*).

However, a July 15, 1937, newspaper article indicates that "All labor is being supplied through the local N. R. S. [National Reemployment Service] office (*Preston Republican*, July 15, 1937). This suggests that the wall was built by local unemployed workers who registered at a local relief office that would typically have been housed in the local city hall or the county courthouse. The funding for this relief labor probably came from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). FERA funds were administered through the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA).

The July 1937 newspaper article describes the project as follows:

Under the direction of state highway department Engineer N. L. Garbush, who moved here last week with his family and is residing in the Ibach house, eight men went to work last Friday on the knoll above the old Olson quarry.

As this crew of men digs trenches where native-rock [probably Shakopee or St. Lawrence limestone] walls will later be laid up, Engineer Garbush announces that a quarry will be put in operation to provide the rock, and a drag line will be set up to move dirt for the landscaping and terracing. Besides building the look-out and roadside park above the old quarry, the project calls for landscaping of both sides of the highway from the junction near Dreier's to Ginder's bridge -- a distance of 1 1/4 miles. When the project has been completed -- which it is estimated will be some time in October -- the park

will be equipped with picnic tables and benches by the state. It will make an ideal picnic spot.

The work will be similar to that done on the Lanesboro hill, and it will be up to Preston citizens to name the spot, just as the Lanesboro project was named 'Inspiration Point.' All labor is being supplied through the local N. R. S. office (*Preston Republican*, July 15, 1937).

The original construction plans (signed in March of 1937) indicate that the site was designed by A. R. Nichols, Consulting Landscape Architect, and Harold E. Olson, Engineer of Roadside Development. The plans were signed by Nichols, Olson, J. C. Robbers (District Engineer), O. L. Kipp (Construction Engineer), and J. T. Ellison (Chief Engineer).

The stone foreman was Walt Joseph (source: SHPO inventory form 1980). Joseph (1896-1971) was a lifelong resident of Preston. He served in the Army during WWI, returned to Preston and first worked as a butcher and later in construction. He may have been hired as one of the so-called Local Experienced Men (LEM) that were sometimes hired on projects that used unskilled relief labor.

The December 2, 1937, edition of the *Preston Republican* reported that the project was nearly complete:

With work virtually completed on the beautification project along Highway 52 north [sic] of town, N. L. Garbush, project engineer from the landscaping division of the state highway department, expects to leave with his family within a day or two for St. Paul after four and one half months work here.

Although some finishing touches will have to be added next spring after the frost goes out of the ground, there is little left to be done on the project. The attractive masonry wall and flagstone walk on the knoll above the Olson quarry have been completed. About a week will be required to finish the stone curb and level off the earth along there, but that will be done next spring after the frost has gone out of the ground.

Likewise, the concrete curb and flagstone-lined ditch at the "Y" have been completed [on T.H. 52 east of the site], altho [sic] there yet remains a small amount of earth-work and seeding to be done there in the spring (*Preston Republican*, Dec. 2, 1937).

The article provides details about the quantities of materials used, and concludes:

A stone curb 650 feet in length extends along the roadside near the knoll, and also 650 feet of concrete curbing. More than 5,500 cubic yards of dirt were excavated, and the roadside for a half a mile or more on either side of the point has been smoothed off and planted down with grass and shrubs, which, in a year or two, should give Preston one of the most attractive highway approaches in this section of the state (*Preston Republican*, Dec. 2, 1937).

The *Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development* for 1938 also provides construction details.

Mn/DOT Site Development Unit files indicate that in 1961 there were two picnic tables, two fireplaces, a well, and two toilets here.

■ **PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS**

There apparently have been no previous SHPO cultural resource reviews of the property.

■ **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Preston Overlook was built in 1937-1938 by the MHD, in cooperation with the City of Preston. Relief labor was apparently supplied by a local relief office and was probably funded by the FERA/SERA. Preston is one of 37 stone overlook walls recorded in this inventory. It is one of seven sites in the inventory known or suspected to have been built under the FERA/SERA program. The site is one of more than 60 properties in the inventory that were designed by, or whose design is attributed to, Arthur R. Nichols.

This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960." It is recommended that the Preston Overlook is ELIGIBLE for the National Register under this historic context because it meets the following registration requirements:

Significant to the History of Roadside Development. The Preston Overlook is among the 68 Depression-era properties in the inventory that represent the MHD's first large-scale effort to construct roadside development facilities in the state. The site is important as a well-preserved example of the work of relief workers and the MHD. The property is an example of the distinctive and well-constructed public facilities, built by the MHD in partnership with federal relief agencies, that met the objectives of roadside development while providing essential work and job training to the nation's unemployed during the Depression. (National Register Criterion A.)

Design Significance. The Preston Overlook is a well-preserved example of the stone overlook walls built by the Roadside Development Division. It is an excellent example of the application of the "National Park Service Rustic Style" to a roadside development facility. Its flagstone terrace is unusual because it was designed to encircle an existing oak tree. The overlook has stonework of excellent quality, and displays the special labor-intensive construction techniques and distinctive use of indigenous materials that characterize both the Rustic style and federal relief construction in Minnesota. Furthermore, the Preston Overlook is an important example of the roadside development work of prominent landscape architect A. R. Nichols. (National Register Criterion C.)

The site may also be associated with the "Federal Relief Construction, 1933-1943" and "Tourism and Recreation in the Lake Regions, 1870-1945" historic contexts.

■ **OTHER COMMENTS**

This property may require further evaluation for potential archaeological resources.

This stretch of T.H. 52/T.H. 16 is fairly busy, but the traffic motion and noise do not detract from the atmosphere of the site.

■ REFERENCES

Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development Along the Trunk Highways in Minnesota. Minnesota Department of Highways. 1938.

Johnson, R. O. *Tour Guide of Minnesota.* St. Paul: Department of Business Research and Development, 1949.

Nichols, A. R., comp. *Album of Roadside Development Projects.* 7 vols. Photo album prepared for the Roadside Development Division, Minnesota Department of Highways. Ca. 1937-1941.

Preston Republican, July 15, 1937; Dec. 2, 1937; and Nov. 11, 1971.

Site Plans. Minnesota Department of Transportation, St. Paul.

■ ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Preston

Preston was settled by Euro-Americans in 1853, named the county seat in 1856, and incorporated in 1871. It was reportedly named by John Kaercher, founder and mill owner, in honor of his millwright, Luther Preston.