

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

SL-DUL-2431
CS 6924
Thompson Hill Overlook

Historic Name	Thompson Hill Overlook	CS #	6924
Other Name	Thompson Point Overlook	SHPO Inv #	SL-DUL-2431
Location	SE side of I-35 about 800' SW of TH 2	Hwy District Reference	I 35 1A 250
City/Township	Duluth, City of	Acres	
County	St. Louis	Rest Area Class	NA
Twp Rng Sec	49N 15W Sec 14	SP #	61-103-28 6924-01
USGS Quad	West Duluth	SHPO Review #	
UTM	Z15 E560880 N5175180	MHS Photo #	013546.09-23
Designer	Nichols, A R, Consult Land Arch	MnDOT Historic Photo Album	Ols 3.136
Builder	Works Progress Administration (WPA)	Yr of Landscape Design	1938
Historic Use	Roadside Parking Area	Overall Site Integrity	Moderately Altered
Present Use	Hwy Retaining Wall/ Sea Wall Hwy Retaining Wall/ Sea Wall	Review Required	Yes
National Register Status	Not Eligible, see Statement of Significance		
Historic Context			
List of Standing Structures			
Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built	Fieldwork Date
01	Overlook Wall	1938	10-13-97
			Prep by
			Gemini Research Dec. 98 G1. 80
			Prep for
			Site Development Unit Cultural Resources Unit Environmental Studies Unit
NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table			
Final Report	Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways (1998)		

■ BRIEF

The Thompson Hill Overlook (also known as the Thompson Point Overlook and the Thompson Hill Rest Point) is a large stone retaining wall and scenic overlook that is located on the eastern side of I-35 (formerly T.H. 61), about 600' feet south of Kingsbury Creek within the City of Duluth. The wall is located across I-35 from (about 600' southeast of) Mn/DOT's Thompson Hill Travel Information Center, and is about 800' south of the junction of T.H. 2 and I-35.

■ STANDING STRUCTURES

Stone Overlook Wall and Retaining Wall. Built 1938 by the WPA. The Thompson Hill Overlook is a long, curving stone wall that retains the I-35 roadway (it formerly retained the T.H. 61 roadway) and originally served as a scenic overlook that provided a dramatic view of the St. Louis River, Lake Superior, and the cities of Duluth and Superior. It is no longer accessible by either vehicles or pedestrians and its current purpose is to retain the hillside.

The wall is built of randomly-laid, roughly-cut pieces of dark brown gabbro laid on a stone footing. Many of the pieces of stone are huge. The larger stones are interspersed with smaller pieces. The wall has a gently curving shape, is about 440' long, and is several feet thick near its base. There is a curving, 55'-wide lookout bay (that faces east) located near the northern end of the wall. The height of the eastern face of the wall varies with the terrain. The eastern face is about 8' tall (excluding the railing) at the southern end and about 13' tall (excluding the railing) near the wall's midpoint.

1,100'

The upper portion of the wall has a distinct upper railing that is about 2' thick and 3'6" tall. In some places, the western face of the railing has been reduced to about 18" in height by the I-35 roadway fill. The top course of stone on the railing is curved, rather than being flat, to form a convex cap along the railing's upper surface (perhaps for water drainage). Just beneath the upper course, the masons laid several pointed or polygonal rocks with straight sides and sharp angles for decorative effect. The railing has 3'6"-square piers spaced 31' apart. The western side of the wall was originally lined with a flagstone walkway that widened within the lookout bay to form a flagstone terrace. This area is now essentially a strip of rough grass adjacent to the freeway shoulder.

A geological plaque on a lectern-style stone marker was added to the lookout bay in 1955. It is believed (but was not confirmed during this study) that the text of the plaque addressed the Duluth Harbor. (See text at the end of this document.) The plaque was apparently removed from the overlook wall in the 1960s. (One Mn/DOT District 1 employee thought that the plaque might still be in basement storage.) A revised version of the Duluth Harbor geological plaque was installed at the Thompson Hill Travel Information Center (TIC) when it was completed in 1973.

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

The wall is located just off the curved shoulder of a heavily-traveled freeway. It is no longer accessible by either vehicles or pedestrians. The overlook originally included a gravel parking area that was separated from the T.H. 61 roadway by a 6'-wide island.

A metal guardrail currently separates the wall from the shoulder of the I-35 roadway. A chain-link fence extends north and south from the ends of the wall. (The fence encloses the freeway corridor.) A drainage culvert runs under the wall.

The wall retains the side of Thompson Hill, supporting the I-35 northbound roadway and retaining the hill above the Duluth, Missabe, and Iron Range (also known as the Duluth, Missabe, and Northern) railroad tracks that are located immediately east of, and parallel with, the wall.

The wall is surrounded by weeds and tall grasses. No original planting plan has been located.

■ **SETTING**

Thompson Hill Overlook is located on the eastern side of I-35 about 600' feet south of Kingsbury Creek within the City of Duluth. The wall is located across I-35 from (about 600' southeast of) Mn/DOT's Thompson Hill Travel Information Center (TIC), and about 800' south of the junction of T.H. 2 and I-35. The overlook provides dramatic views of the cities of Duluth and Superior, the St. Louis River, and Lake Superior.

The site is surrounded by the Thompson Hill TIC on the west; the Duluth, Missabe, and Iron Range railroad tracks and the forests of Fairmont Park on the east; Kingsbury Creek on the north; and the I-35 right-of-way on the north and south.

■ **INTEGRITY**

Alterations

The overlook appears to have been built closely to plan.

The southern 240' of the retaining wall has been demolished (perhaps when I-35 was constructed). A few feet have been removed from the northern end of the wall. A 300' rock guardrail that extended southward from the retaining wall has been demolished. The flagstone walkway, terrace, and stone curb along the inner side of the wall have been covered or removed. The overlook's parking area and narrow island have been removed. The highway has been upgraded to a freeway. The site no longer has vehicle or pedestrian access.

The Thompson Hill Overlook retains integrity of location, materials, workmanship, and association. The site's integrity of setting and feeling have been compromised by the transformation of the highway into a freeway and the loss of the site's parking area, access, and adjacent rock guardrail. The site's integrity of design has been compromised by the removal of the southern one-third of the retaining wall, and the loss of the flagstone walkway, stone curb, and parking area. However, viewed from the lower (eastern) side, the wall retains its essential integrity of design and remains a massive stone structure that retains the side of Thompson Hill (one of its primary purposes).

Notes on Condition

The wall is in fair condition and needs mortar repair. There appear to be some water drainage problems along the I-35 shoulder at the top of the wall that may threaten the wall.

■ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The overlook was constructed in 1938 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) working in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Highways. The overlook wall replaced a 1100'-long rock guardrail that had previously existed at the site.

A plan sheet entitled "Details for Parking Overlook on Thompson Hill-Duluth" was drawn in July 1937 and revised in November 1937 (S.P. 6924-01). The sheet is signed by A. R. Nichols (Consulting Landscape Architect), Harold E. Olson (Engineer of Roadside Development), and O. L. Kipp (Construction Engineer). Kipp dated his signature Aug. 3, 1937. The plan sheet is stamped "Final Plans. Const. Div. W.P.A. Sept. 1, 1938."

The 1938 project consisted of a 680'-long stone retaining wall and overlook. An additional 300' of rock guardrail was built to extend southward from the end of the wall. The eastern 580' of the 680'-long wall was designed as a scenic overlook. (Only 440' of this overlook remain today.) The inside of the wall at the scenic overlook was lined with a 4.5'-wide flagstone sidewalk and stone curb. The plan sheet signed by A. R. Nichols indicates that the overlook's 30'-wide parking area was to be separated from the T.H. 61 roadway by a long, narrow, flagstone-paved island. A circa 1955 historic photo indicates that the parking area was gravel.

The Thompson Hill Overlook was built as part of one of the largest WPA projects in the state. It was built in association with a large project that reconstructed T.H. 61 (formerly West Gate Blvd.) in Duluth in 1935-1938. In 1934, \$900,000 in federal Public Works Administration (PWA) funds were allotted to the State under the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Part of the money was used to finance highway construction projects that used labor from federal relief agencies. The labor for the projects was furnished "almost exclusively by the WPA as well as was a considerable portion of the equipment and materials expense" according to the Highway Commissioner's *Biennial Report* for 1937-1938. The regrading of T.H. 61 on Thompson Hill in 1935-1938 was one of the four largest projects on which the majority of these funds were spent. The three other large projects were the grading of T.H. 100 in Minneapolis, the grading of T.H. 12 and T.H. 61 in St. Paul, and the regrading of T.H. 169 between Virginia and Hibbing. These four projects were chosen because they were located near large cities where relief jobs for the unemployed were most needed (*Biennial Report* 1937:9, *Biennial Report* 1939:7).

According to the highway department's 1938 *Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development*, 4,462 cubic yards of native stone were used to construct the wall. The report summarizes the project:

On the southerly approach into Duluth along T.H. #61, a beautiful panoramic view is obtained of the City proper with Lake Superior in the distance. This area is a natural stopping point for the travelling public to enjoy the unusual vista. Here under a W.P.A. setup, a stonemasonry concourse wall has been constructed to provide an area for parking which is separated from the highway traffic by a 6 foot island. Native stone was used throughout and provision was also made for pedestrian traffic by incorporating a flagstone walk along the concourse proper (*Annual Report* 1938:42).

A Duluth man named Emil Miller may have been one of the stonemasons who worked on the overlook wall, probably as a Local Experienced Man (LEM). Miller's grandson, Bruce Miller, believes that Emil Miller helped construct the Thompson Hill Overlook, the rock wall

along Skyline Drive near 40th Ave. W., and several other WPA projects along the North Shore. Miller's grandson remembers his grandfather commenting that he also helped to construct the Lester River Bridge and several bridges along Seven Bridges Road. Miller quit the masonry trade during World War II to work in the steel plant in Duluth (Miller 1998).

The roadway past the overlook was originally T.H. 61. It was improved as I-35 in the late 1960s. A portion of the former alignment of the T.H. 61 roadway is located west (above) the I-35 roadway and has been renamed Skyline Parkway. This portion of the Skyline Parkway was known as the "Western Extension" of Skyline Drive. Skyline Drive is a 30-mile-long parkway that travels the length of Duluth about 600' above the shoreline of Lake Superior.

The Thompson Hill Overlook was probably closed to the public when I-35 was constructed. A new facility, the Thompson Hill Travel Information Center, opened during the summer of 1973. It is located on the western side of I-35 on the top of Thompson Hill about 600' west of (up the hill from) the stone overlook wall.

■ PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS

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

■ STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Thompson Hill Overlook is a roadside parking area that originally had a simple pull-off site design. The massive, 400'-long overlook wall was an engineering feat to construct and is one of the three largest structures recorded in this inventory. (The other two are the Garrison Concourse and the Gooseberry Falls Concourse.) Thompson Hill was built in 1938 by the WPA, and was part of the reconstruction of this segment of T.H. 61, one of the largest WPA projects in the state. It is one of 23 properties in this inventory that were built by (or suspected to have been built by) the WPA, and one of more than 60 sites 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, despite the factors listed above, the property is NOT ELIGIBLE for the National Register under this historic context due to loss of integrity.

■ OTHER COMMENTS

This property may require further evaluation for potential archaeological resources.

This site is also associated with local historic contexts established by the City of Duluth's Heritage Preservation Commission.

I-35 is a very busy freeway past this site. Because of the amount of traffic and its speed, it is not safe to view the wall from the I-35 roadway. (It can be seen best from the railroad trackbed below (park in Fairmont Park and climb Thompson Hill Road through the park up the western side of Kingsbury Creek to the railroad track bed).)

Although no longer accessible by either vehicles or pedestrians, the wall is currently serving one of its primary purposes -- retaining the side of Thompson Hill above the tracks of the Duluth, Missabe, and Iron Range railroad (located about 60' east of the wall) and supporting the trunk highway roadbed. It is a massive structure when viewed from below.

■ REFERENCES

Anderson, Rolf T. "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941." National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form. Oct. 9, 1990, amended Aug. 30, 1990.

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

Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Highways of Minnesota for 1935-1936. January 1, 1937.

Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Highways of Minnesota for 1937-1938. March 1, 1939.

Eubank, Nancy. *The Zenith City of the Unsalted Sea.* Duluth Historic Contexts Study. Prepared for the Duluth Heritage Preservation Commission. August 1991.

Miller, Bruce. Telephone interview. January 1998. [Grandson of Emil Miller and Thompson Hill Travel Info. Center employee].

Nunnally, Patrick D. *Jewel of the North: Duluth's Parkway System.* Prepared for the Duluth Heritage Preservation Commission. July 1997.

Rose, Nancy E. *Put to Work. Relief Programs in the Great Depression.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994.

Site plans. Minnesota Department of Transportation. St. Paul.

Thiel, George A. and Carl E. Dutton. *The Architectural, Structural, and Monumental Stones of Minnesota.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1935.

■ ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND TEXT OF MISSING GEOLOGICAL PLAQUE

Local Stone

Duluth gabbro was used to construct the Thompson Hill Overlook. The hills in and around Duluth were formed from an ancient lava flow called Duluth gabbro, one of the oldest rock formations on the continent. Gabbro is an igneous coarse-grained rock containing dark minerals which give it its dark color. The stone is commercially referred to as "green granite," "black granite," and "trap rock." Gabbro was quarried as early as 1896 in and around Duluth. During the early 1930s, a growing demand for "black granite" resulted in a number of new quarries opening near the city. Gabbro was used to construct roadside development features and state park structures along the North Shore, as well as many buildings in Duluth.

Duluth

The city of Duluth was named for Daniel Greysolon Du Luth, a French explorer and fur trader who first visited Lake Superior in 1678. The city was first settled by Euro-Americans in 1850-51, and platted and named in 1856. Duluth was incorporated as a town in 1857 and as a city in 1870. The city's expansion to the southwest eventually absorbed eight independent small communities located along the western bank of the St. Louis River: Fond du Lac (estab. 1856), New Duluth (estab. 1890), Gary (1916), Morgan Park (1914-1916), Ironton (1889-1893), Oneota (1856), Rice's Point (1858), and Riverside (1916). The City of Duluth extends for approximately 25 miles (southwest to northeast) along the shore of Lake Superior.

Lake Superior

Lake Superior is the largest body of fresh water in the world. The lake is 383 miles long, 160 miles wide, and is 489' to 1,400' deep. The Ojibwe called the Lake "Kitchigumi," meaning "Great Water." The early French traders called the lake "Lac Superieur" because it was located at the head of the Great Lakes. By the early 1920s, Duluth and the North Shore area had become a mecca for tourists.

Text of Metal Plaque Missing from Geological Marker

This plaque is believed to have been the plaque that was installed at the Thompson Hill Overlook in 1955. A revised version was placed at the Thompson Hill TIC around 1973.

"Duluth Harbor"

"Lake Superior occupies a great syncline or downfold in the rocks of the earth's crust. Its normal surface level is 602 feet above, and its deepest point is 700 feet below, sea level. The folding which produced this huge trough occurred during extensive volcanic activity more than 600,000,000 years ago. Eventually this depression was filled by material washed in from surrounding heights and much later was partly cleared of those sediments by glacial ice which pushed its way along the trough.

"As the ice melted about 10,000 years ago, the basin was filled by Glacial Lake Duluth almost to the level of this tablet. Then the earth's crust in the north, relieved of the weight of ice, was elevated by internal forces, thereby tilting the lake basin toward the southwest and flooding the mouth of the St. Louis River.

"The harbor formed by this submergence has been enlarged by the formation of Minnesota Point, an unusually good example of a sand deposit washed up by waves and shore currents."

"Erected by the Geological Society of Minnesota and the Department of Highways, State of Minnesota aided by a grant from the Louis W. and Maud Hill Family Foundation 1955."