**1. Name of Property**

Historic name: Tonahutu Creek Trail

Other names/site number: Little North Inlet Trail; Tonahutu Trail; 5GA.3823; 5LR.11897

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**2. Location**

Street & number: Rocky Mountain National Park (ROMO)

City or town: Grand Lake

State: Colorado, code CO, county Grand; Larimer, code 049; 069, zip code 80477

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**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] nomination [ ] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [X] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [ ] nationally [ ] statewide [X] locally. ([ ] See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title: Joe Wallin

State or Federal agency and bureau: Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Colorado Historical Society

---

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that the property is: [X] entered in the National Register [ ] determined eligible for the National Register [ ] determined not eligible for the National Register [ ] removed from the National Register [ ] other, explain [ ] See continuation sheet.

Signature of the Keeper: Ken A. Bearl

Date of Action: 3/5/08

---
5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Click as many boxes as apply)
- [ ] private
- [ ] public-local
- [ ] public-State
- [X] public-Federal

Category of Property
(Click only one box)
- [ ] building(s)
- [ ] district
- [ ] site
- [X] structure
- [ ] object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not count previously listed resources.)
- Contributing
- Noncontributing

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register.

Name of related multiple property listing.
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
Rocky Mountain National Park
Historic Park Landscapes In National and State Parks

6. Function or Use

Historic Function
(Enter categories from instructions)
- RECREATION AND CULTURE/ outdoor recreation
- LANDSCAPE/ park
- TRANSPORTATION/ pedestrian-related

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)
- RECREATION AND CULTURE/ outdoor recreation
- LANDSCAPE/ park
- TRANSPORTATION/ pedestrian-related

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)
- 19th and 20th Century American Movements
- Other: Rustic

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)
- foundation
- walls
- roof
- other EARTH
- WOOD
- STONE

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)
8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

[X] A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

[ ] B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

[X] C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

[ ] D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

[ ] A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

[ ] B removed from its original location.

[ ] C a birthplace or grave.

[ ] D a cemetery.

[ ] E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

[ ] F a commemorative property.

[ ] G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

[ ] preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested

[ ] previously listed in the National Register

[ ] previously determined eligible by the National Register

[ ] designated a National Historic Landmark

[ ] recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

[ ] recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data:

[X] State Historic Preservation Office

[ ] Other State Agency

[ ] Federal Agency

[ ] Local Government

[ ] University

[ ] Other

Name of repository:

Colorado Historical Society

Rocky Mountain National Park
10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property  

31.5

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

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   13 430126 4457184
   Zone Easting Northing
   13 430639 4458136
   Zone Easting Northing
   13 430522 4459180
   Zone Easting Northing

The UTM points were derived by OAHP from heads up digitization on Digital Raster Graphic (DRG) maps provided to OAHP by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Sierra Standish, contract position (RMNP contact- Cheri Yost)

organization Rocky Mountain National Park  date 10 November 2006

street & number 1000 Highway 36  telephone (970) 586-1394

city or town Estes Park  state Colorado  zip code 80517

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional Items

(Combine with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(name) Rocky Mountain National Park, U.S. Department of the Interior

street & number 1000 Highway 36  telephone (970) 586-1394

city or town Estes Park  state Colorado  zip code 80517

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding the burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127, and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.)
DESCRIPTION

Location: The Tonahutu Creek Trail is on the west side of Rocky Mountain National Park. The trail begins along Tonahutu Creek, a few city blocks from Grand Lake at the park's southern boundary. Following the creek upstream, the trail climbs north and then northeast, gradually rising in elevation. Upon emerging from timberline, the trail travels south and ends on Flattop Mountain.

Setting: The Tonahutu Creek Trail ascends about 2,750 feet in elevation, moving through diverse geological and ecological zones. Below timberline, the trail remains alongside Tonahutu Creek, moving through a relatively lush riparian zone and the largest montane meadow in the park. Above timberline, the trail passes through exposed tundra near the Continental Divide.

General route established: 1880
Trail improvements: 1924

Materials: Earth, local rock and log/wood.

Destination: Flattop Mountain

Length of main trail: 13 miles
Trail Width: Ranging from 2 to 5 feet

Significant built features: Dry laid rock walls, log footbridge/stock ford combinations, bogwalks, log and rock water bars and drains, Harbison Ditch, and abandoned cabins in Big Meadows

Significant natural features: Tonahutu Creek, Big Meadows, Granite Falls, Ptarmigan Point, Bighorn Flats, and Flattop Mountain

Trail tour:
Approximately thirteen miles long, the Tonahutu Creek Trail begins at 8,500-foot-high Grand Lake and ends on top of 12,250-foot-high Flattop Mountain. The Tonahutu's sibling—the North Inlet Trail—begins and ends in the same place, but completes the trip in only 11.5 miles. For this reason, possibly, the North Inlet has witnessed more use in the twentieth century. Tonahutu traffic remains relatively light and the trail appears less impacted. This route has been designated part of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

The Tonahutu Creek Trail takes its name from the creek that it follows. Most of the trail's thirteen miles are within seeing or hearing distance of Tonahutu Creek; only the last few miles, up on the tundra and near the Continental Divide, lie beyond the Tonahutu's drainage.

The trail begins at the filtration plant, a few blocks north of the lake. Dense trees surround the parking lot, and the trail, departing to the north, disappears quickly into the shadows. For the next five miles, the trail gains minimal elevation, moving through a relatively lush valley. The flat trail ranges from two to five feet wide, using log bogwalks to cross the wet zones. In other areas, soccer-ball sized rocks line the dirt pathway. Approximately one mile in, a trail cuts off to the left (west) to connect with the Kawuneeche Visitor's Center. Less than a tenth of a mile later, another trail branches to the left, heading toward Grand Lake Lodge. Yet another minute or two farther, the trail uses a split log to pass over the Harbison Ditch. The ditch resembles a small stream. This whole 5-mile section, though consistently wooded, fluctuates between older and newer growth stands of trees. Several backcountry campsites dot this section of trail.
After the first three and one half miles, the trees begin to open up, displaying Big Meadows—a long band of marshy grass running from north to south. The trail skirts along the western side of the meadows, passing the remains of the Sam Stone Cabin and Barn (5GA.2086, determined eligible for the National Register in 1997), which sits just a few feet from the trail. At the northern end of the meadows, a trail branches to the left. This trail leads toward Long Meadows and Onahu Creek.

Now about five miles from the trailhead, the Tonahutu Creek Trail keeps to the curve of the creek and heads eastward into a steep valley. For the next 4.2 miles the trail gradually, and then rapidly, ascends. The sides of the valley narrow and become steeper, and rock walls support the grade. Rushing along the side of the trail, Tonahutu Creek gains speed, demonstrated in the rush of Granite Falls. However, this section is not entirely steep; some flat, damp areas merit more bogwalks. Log footbridges cross streams running down to meet the creek.

After this 4.2-mile stretch, the trail reaches timberline and another junction at about 10,600 feet. The Haynach Lakes Trail branches to the northwest. The Tonahutu Creek Trail continues on, bending to the southeast and wrapping around the top of the drainage.

The last section, 3.8 miles long, brings the trail up about 1,600 more feet onto the tundra of Bighorn Flats. Although the trail remains narrow, it passes through some boggy areas; low rock walls help prevent erosion. Substantial cairns also mark the way. By now, the trail has gained enough elevation to earn views in all directions. Back and to the west, the Tonahutu drainage drops away; to the south, Longs Peak peers over other mountains. Eventually, the trail affords a clear outlook onto Middle Park, far off to the west, and Trail Ridge, to the north. The Tonahutu now goes round the eastern side of Ptarmigan Point—a little hump in the relatively rolling tundra region—and approaches Flattop Mountain from the north.

As its grand finale, the Tonahutu Creek Trail delivers its traveler to the junction atop Flattop Mountain. Out here, in the wide-open tundra, a sunny day can be green and spacious. However, the threat of storms always hovers, and the traveler should know which direction to take next. A traveler has three choices: to return the way one came; to head eastward and down the Flattop Trail, four miles to Bear Lake; or to go northwest along the North Inlet Trail and 11.5 miles back to Grand Lake.

**Trail construction and alterations:**

As early as 9,000 years ago, prehistoric peoples tramped up the drainage of Tonahutu Creek (or over from Flattop Mountain) to the seasonal hunting area of Bighorn Flats. While these people did not purposefully create a visible trail, their repeated movement through the area can be interpreted through archaeological sites above timberline. Sherman Sage and Gun Griswold, two of the most recent Native American travelers, reported that Arapaho groups would trek through this corridor in the mid-nineteenth century.

Although Euroamericans consistently used this route in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, no documented effort of trail construction exists until 1924. In this year, a park trail crew improved the trail under the guidance of Ranger Fred McLaren. By this time, repeated use on the spur up to Haynach Lakes had developed through repeated use.

A 1939 trail schematic plan called for Civilian Conservations Corps (CCC) Class 207 to reconstruct the first three flat miles of the trail. The drawing showed a slight adjustment of the alignment, avoiding both the boggy ground near the creek and the need for switchbacks. The drawing also illustrated how to use more crushed rock in the bed of the trail.
This 1939 plan called for minor trail adjustments.
Other than its consistent drainage problems posed by proximity to Tonahutu Creek, this trail seems to historically require minimal maintenance. The trail's resistance to weather suggests a combination of sound construction (earlier in the twentieth century) and fairly light use.

**Tonahutu Creek Trail integrity:**
The Tonahutu Creek Trail retains a high degree of integrity in relation to its 1880 route and to its 1924 improvements. Much of the trail follows the historic nineteenth century alignment, which likely followed paths cut by Native Americans. While the park improved the trail in 1924, this change aimed to improve trail features and bring it up to Naturalistic Design standards. In 1939, a slight realignment followed these same principles by taking the trail out of the wet meadow. Park trail crews have replaced ephemeral features such as wood bridges, log bog walks, and log checks and rebuilt in-kind stone steps using materials gathered on site, following Naturalistic Design standards.
SIGNIFICANCE

The Tonahutu Creek Trail is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criteria A and C, meeting the registration requirements set forth in the Rocky Mountain National Park Multiple Property Listing. Under Criterion A, the trail is eligible in the area of Entertainment/Recreation for its association with the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century resort industry around the Grand Lake region. The period of significance begins in 1880 at the establishment of the route and ends in 1945, the year in which tourism in the park significantly changed due to increased automobile traffic after World War II. The trail is eligible under Criterion C in the area of Landscape Architecture; the trail design reflects National Park Service (NPS) Naturalistic Design of the 1920s through the 1940s.

The Tonahutu Creek Trail also demonstrates the national trends described in Linda Flint McClelland’s Historic Park Landscapes in National and State Parks Multiple Property Listing. In this second context, the trail is eligible under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment/Recreation for its connection to the twentieth-century movement to develop national parks for public enjoyment. The trail is also eligible under Criterion C in the area of Landscape Architecture for a design that reflects NPS Naturalistic Design of the 1920s through the 1940s.

Historical Background

Like most trails on the west side of Rocky Mountain National Park, the Tonahutu Creek Trail gained popularity with tourists later than its eastside counterparts. But tourists were not the first people to use and appreciate this trail. When two Arapaho elders visited Rocky Mountain National Park in 1914, they indicated that the their people historically preferred the Tonahutu Creek Trail to its alternative, the North Inlet Trail, for reaching Flattop Mountain from Grand Lake. The elders identified the grassy expanse above Harbison’s ranch as "tonahuta." The term translates into "Big Meadow," likely referring to the area called Big Meadows today. Tonahutu Creek and the Tonahutu Creek Trail continue to bear a version of this Indian name.

Archaeological study has revealed relatively frequent prehistoric use of the area. The trail leads up to Bighorn Flats, a tundra region popular for hunting elk and Bighorn Sheep. Archaeological sites include base camps and game processing facilities dating from 150 to possibly 9000 years ago. Prehistoric peoples (Late Paleoindians) and historic peoples (the Ute and Arapaho) appear to have used the relatively sheltered area around the headwaters of Tonahutu Creek. From here, they could seek protection and also access the tundra. Archaeologist Thomas Lux asserts that “game procurement on the tundra remained a persistent attractor throughout prehistory,” suggesting that “hundreds of generations of native peoples” traveled here.

Researchers have not discovered more sites farther west and downhill along the trail; “dense vegetation found alongside the creek and the steep nature of the trail” inhibit the discovery of more sites. Nonetheless, prehistoric use patterns connect Rocky Mountain National Park to Middle Park, and the Tonahutu drainage is a plausible link between the two. Middle Park, southwest of Grand Lake, earned the name “Game Bag” in the Arapaho language.

There is not enough information at this time to nominate the Tonahutu Creek Trail to the National Register for its archaeological significance.
In the late nineteenth century, Ute and Arapaho groups moved to reservations hundreds of miles away. A small but steady stream of settlers and vacationers began accessing the Tonahutu Creek Trail. As early as the 1880s, the trail remained an important travel route for the growing number of people who wanted to cross the Divide. Up until about 1900, asserted future superintendent Roger Toll, the Tonahutu Creek Trail "was the shortest trail between Estes Park and Grand Lake and was the one most often used."¹

The Tonahutu Creek Trail's travel significance diminished in the twentieth century. More people visited the Grand Lake area, but improvements to the North Inlet Trail lured away many potential users. The Tonahutu Creek Trail retained a low profile among tourists. However, the lower traffic did not reflect unpopularity. The trail consistently appeared on contemporary tourist maps. When the newly founded park closed the trail in 1918—horseback riders had complained about the soggy trail near timberline—the tourist community noticed, and lobbied for it to be reopened. In 1924, the park rebuilt and reopened the pathway. Ranger Fred McLaren supervised the construction, relying upon a foreman named Parton and a crew of about ten men. Superintendent Toll inspected the work on foot, and commented: "Although several miles longer than the North Inlet trail, [the Tonahutu Creek Trail] is the easier and more interesting trail. It is particularly well adapted to winter use."² The 1924 project reflects the first concerted effort to build a sustainable Tonahutu Creek Trail. Although the long trail required regular maintenance through the rest of the twentieth century, the alignment has not significantly shifted.

The CCC Class 207 may have reconstructed the first three flat miles of the trail. A 1939 trail schematic plan called for a slight adjustment of the alignment, avoiding boggy ground near the creek. The drawing also illustrated how to use more crushed rock in the bed of the trail. It is unclear whether the CCC carried out this work. However, this lush, marshy zone would continue to demand considerable maintenance throughout the twentieth century.

The Tonahutu Creek Trail is not conspicuous in either the 1982 or 2000 Trail Plans. Other than its consistent drainage problems posed by proximity to Tonahutu Creek, it appears the trail has required only basic maintenance over its active life.

Today, the Tonahutu Creek Trail may not gain attention proportionate to its attractive green valley and tundra scenery. However, it does gain notice from backpackers. It constitutes a section of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail and forms a link in a popular backpacking loop within the park.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Superintendent's Annual Reports. RMNP library.

Superintendent's Monthly Reports. RMNP library.


GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION
The trail is located entirely within Rocky Mountain National Park. Beginning a few blocks north of Grand Lake, the trail moves north, then northeast, along Tonahutu Creek. Rising out of the drainage and onto the tundra, the trail travels south toward Flattop Mountain. Most of the trail is within Grand County, but the final two tenths of a mile cross the Continental Divide and pass into Larimer County. The boundary of this nomination extends a distance of 10 feet on either side from the centerline of the trail. The trail route is shown on the USGS topographic quadrangle maps which follow.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION
The boundary includes the resource and associated features such as (but not limited to) footbridges, signs, rock walls, and bogwalks. Though landscape features are important to the experience of the visitor traversing the trail and may contribute to the overall integrity of the trail, they are not included in this nomination.

UTM REFERENCES (cont.)

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(NAD27)

Junction with Green Mountain Trail
Junction with Timber Creek Trail
Quadrangle Map Edge
Continental Divide/ County Line Crossing
Continental Divide/ County Line Crossing
Continental Divide/ County Line Crossing
Junction with Flattop Mountain Trail
PHOTOGRAPH LOG

The following information pertains to photograph numbers 1-10 except as noted:

Name of Property: Tonahutu Creek Trail
Location: Grand County/ Colorado
Photographer: Sierra Standish
Date of Photographs: July 2003
Negatives or digital files: Rocky Mountain National Park and digital TIF files at the National Register in Washington, DC.

Photo No.              Photographic Information

1  Trail entering Big Meadows. View to northeast. Photograph taken August, 2005.
2  Ruins of cabins. Photograph taken August, 2005.
3  Granite Falls. Photograph taken August, 2005.
4  Log stringer bridge and stone steps. Note stone abutments on bridge. Width can accommodate a horse.
5  Half-log footbridge.
6  Drainage of Tonahutu Creek. View to west.
7  Top of drainage, just below timberline. Note the gradual grade of the trail.
8  Trail emerging from timberline. View to north.
9  Rock drain in tundra.
10 Trail crossing through tundra, near junction with North Inlet Trail and Flattop Trail. Looking northwest.