

**OFFICE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION**

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August 23, 2004

Dr. Stephanie Toothman
National Park Service
Pacific West Region
909 First Street
Seattle, Washington 98104-4159

Dear Dr. Toothman:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the National Register Multiple Property nomination for Yosemite National Park. I concur that the properties identified and evaluated in the nomination do constitute a coherent group of geographically dispersed resources that are eligible for listing in the National Register. The nomination does an excellent job of defining separate, but related contexts that make clear the significance of the individual resources, as well as the reasons that they collectively constitute a multiple property. The inclusion of a number of the park's less elaborate, high altitude resources is particularly noteworthy. The context statements synthesize a large amount of historic documentation in a clear and concise manner and the descriptive material that is provided for the individual resources or resource groupings is excellent.

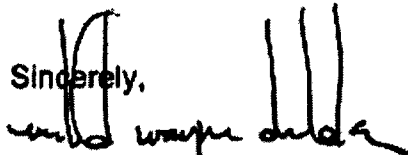
We concur in all of your findings regarding the resources enumerated in the multiple property nomination. We agree that the following properties are eligible for the National Register as a part of a multiple property.

Lake Vernon Cabin Building #2450
May Lake High Sierra Camp Historic District
Hetch Hetchy Comfort Station Building #2104
Henness Ridge Fire Lookout Building #5300
The Golden Crown Mine
Glen Aulin Sierra Camp Historic District
Chinquapin Historic District
Buck Creek Cabin Building #4800
Snow Flat Cabin Building #3501
Snow Creek Cabin Building #3450
Sachse Springs Cabin Building #2452
Ostrander Ski Hut Building #5110
Old Big Oak Flat Road
New Big Oak Flat Road
Merced Lake Ranger Station Building #3400
Merced Lake High Sierra Camp Historic District

Wawona Tunnel
Vogelsang High Sierra Camp Historic District
Tuolumne Meadows High Sierra Camp Historic District

I have signed the application as commenting authority. If you have any questions, please call
Gene Itogawa of my staff (916) 653-8936.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Milford Wayne Donaldson". The signature is written in a cursive style with some vertical strokes.

Milford Wayne Donaldson
State Historic Preservation Officer

Cc: Kimball Koch

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of
Property

historic name Old Big Oak Flat Road

other names/site number

2.
Location

street & number N/A not for publication

city or town Yosemite National Park (YOSE) vicinity

state California code CA county Mariposa & Tuolumne code 043 & 109 zip code 95389

3. State /Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this 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 meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:
entered in the National Register
See continuation sheet.
determined eligible for the
National Register
See continuation sheet.
determined not eligible for the
National Register

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

Old Big Oak Flat Road
Name of Property
_____ removed from the National Register
_____ other (explain): _____

Mariposa & Tuolumne, CA
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many as apply)	Category of Property (Check only one)	Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count)	
☐ private	☐ building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
☐ public-local	☐ district	_____ buildings	
☐ public-State	☐ site	_____ sites	
☒ public-Federal	☒ structure	_____ 1 _____	_____ structures
	☐ object	_____ objects	
		_____ 1 _____	_____ 0 _____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
Historic Resources of Yosemite National Park, California

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register
0

6.Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)	Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)
<u>TRANSPORTATION/road-related (vehicular)</u>	<u>TRANSPORTATION/road-related (vehicular)/pedestrian related</u>

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)	Materials (Enter categories from instructions)
Other: NPS Rustic	foundation <u>N/A</u>
	walls <u>N/A</u>
	roof <u>N/A</u>
	other <u>Asphalt, Concrete, Stone</u>

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Old Big Oak Flat Road
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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)

- ☒ **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.
- ☐ **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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Transportation

Period of Significance

1869-1938

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or a 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.

Significant Dates

1935

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Yosemite Turnpike Road Company

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

Primary location of additional data

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University

Old Big Oak Flat Road

Name of Property

___ designated a National Historic Landmark

___ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

___ recorded by Historic American Engineering

Record # _____

Mariposa & Tuolumne, CA

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X Other

Name of repository:

Yosemite National Park, California

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 960

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	<u>11</u>	<u>266800</u>	<u>4178600</u>	3	<u>11</u>	<u>264700</u>	<u>4177800</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>11</u>	<u>266850</u>	<u>4178350</u>	4	<u>11</u>	<u>261450</u>	<u>4179250</u>

___ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

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

The National Registry boundary includes the portion of the old Big Oak Flat Road stretching from the Tamarack Flat Campground to the valley woodyard. It includes all man-made structures associated with construction and use of the road such as overlooks, retaining walls, and culverts, plus the immediate environment on each side of the road.

Boundary Justification

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

The boundary includes the historically significant old Big Oak Flat roadbed, stone retaining walls and culverts, overlooks, and other historic structures associated with early use of the road. The boundary stops at the Tamarack Flat Campground because the stretch of road west of there has been paved and impacted by recent development.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Andy Kirk, Richard Coop, Charles Palmer

organization UNLV Public History date 3/8/04

street & number 4505 Maryland Parkway Box 455020 telephone (702)895-3544

city or town Las Vegas state NV zip code 89135-5020

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

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

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

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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 the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this 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 Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Summary

The original Big Oak Flat Road can still be followed by vehicles only in a few areas: that part of the road through the Tuolumne Grove, and the section from Gin Flat on the Tioga Road to the Tamarack Flat campground. The section of road from Crane Flat to Gin flat remains as a roadbed and is used as a cross-country ski trail in winter, but as it is in wilderness it is closed to vehicles. The historic route dropped into the valley some distance uphill from the present road, completed in 1940. A rockslide destroyed the zigzag switchback section in 1945 and traffic was switched to the modern highway. Subsequent slides and washouts further blocked the old road, but its line of descent is visible from the south side of the valley from Tunnel View on the Wawona Road. The original route can be traced in a few places. One route used by visitors is a steep, narrow, downhill-only winding section from Crane Flat to Hodgdon Meadow, that passes through the Tuolumne Grove of Big Trees. This nomination includes all manmade structures on the route such as bridges, culverts, walls, and building foundations as well as the roadbed itself.

General Description

The Big Oak Flat wagon road provided access into Yosemite Valley from the north side of the Merced River. It descended to the valley floor via a switchback down the steep talus slopes. The famous “Zigzag” section between the El Capitan Bridge and Gentry’s Station had steep sides cribbed with solid rock walls without mortar.

In 1899 the toll road was thirty miles long. It began at Dorsey’s old sawmill, about two miles northwest of Hamilton’s station, and extended east through Hardin’s, Crocker’s, Hodgdon’s, the Tuolumne Big Tree Grove, Crane Flat, and through Gin and Tamarack flats to Gentry’s Station, and then to the valley floor. The road width averaged thirteen feet with a maximum grade of 0.16 percent. The fourteen miles from its commencement to Crocker’s Station was kept open all year, while the section from Crocker’s to the Yosemite Valley Grant boundary was open seven months of the year.

The following description is keyed to the accompanying map:

- The base of the old Big Oak Flat Road has been impacted by a number of activities since the days of its use as a road. During the 1930s, a large Civilian Conservation Corps camp was located there. Currently the area is used as the powder magazine for the park, as a woodyard, and as a slash and burning site. Scattered remains of roads, trails, and foundations present a confusing picture.
- The lower part of the road was obscured about 1949 when the decision was made not to reopen the road after the big rockslide, because of a lack of money and the perceived lack of need for this route. The site of the El Capitan checking station has not yet been ascertained in the lower few hundred yards of roadbed.
- Above the powder magazine, the road is used for about a hundred yards as the valley woodyard, resulting in

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stacks of logs from hazard tree removal, stream clearance, and other projects involving trees; which are cut up privately for park employee use. There is scattered debris, including log scraps and assorted trash. Vehicles have pushed the road edges out into the woods during the course of cutting and loading wood. The woodyard ends where the first drainage channel cuts through the old road. Above that point, the road is intact.

4. The rockslide fell on the road’s largest switchback. There were many slides in that area, but the biggest was in the winter of 1943. The new Big Oak Flat Road had been finished a couple of years earlier, and the park made no effort to cut through this slide on the old road. That was the beginning of the road’s erosion, although it is not in as bad shape as it appears. Roughly eighty percent of it is intact between Tamarack Flat and El Capitan. It has been severely damaged where creeks cross the road and have cut through the road fill and its walls. The material from the various rockslides sits on the road; covering it rather than having taken the road out. The pavement can be seen through the piles of rock. Before construction of the new road, substantial work on the old road included some realignment and wall reconstruction. The realignments were not major, and the road remains in its original location. Reconstruction of a number of the creek crossings has occurred and many walls were rebuilt after the slides. Several of the original walls still remain.

5. Above the rockslide area is a very narrow pullout that has a railing. This is Rainbow View. During the late afternoon, a person can see a rainbow in Bridalveil Fall. Deterioration of the road has not affected the view. Between Rainbow View and Fireplace Creek, on the downhill side of the road, sits the stone foundations of a cabin. The historical use of this unrecorded structure is unknown. It may have been a storehouse for road maintenance or, because of its location midway on the controlled part of the road, may have been where someone was stationed in case of emergencies.

6. Gentry’s station was the ranger station at the top of the control area. The station is gone, but its dump remains. The road builders left a large cedar growing in the middle of the road, demonstrating that roads could successfully be built around obstacles instead of plowing through them with a cut-and-fill freeway approach to the land. At Gentry, cars waited for their two-hour turn to go up and down the road. One wall below Gentry and above Fireplace Creek is especially unique. The majority of rockwork on the road was done by Italian stonemasons, but this particular wall was apparently built by Chinese labor. It is a high wall, eight or nine feet in places, built to hold the road around bedrock. Because the wall was built partly on a large tree, it was constructed with a sharp corner in it to allow the tree some room for growth. It affords an interesting illustration of early construction methods and the care with which the road was hung on the side of the mountain. The later use of heavy explosives contributed to the erosion of that sensitivity and permitted an altogether different approach to road building. The new Big Oak Flat Road is at once evidence of the change but also of some blending of the old ways.

7. Just outside the boundary of the old Yosemite Grant was a patch of privately held land. The remains of the old

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Gentry sawmill lie approximately at the #7 location.

8. This is the location of the later Cascades subdivision, a proposed development of the early 1900s similar to that at Foresta. Roads were graded and lots marked out, but apparently no construction took place. There were houses here when Gentry ran the place. Nevertheless, little remains but foundations, a few dumps, and many cut stumps from the logging operations.
9. The trail from Gentry to El Capitan and Yosemite Fall was an extension by Conway and his Eagle Peak Trail. The route departed from the original path across the uplands plateau; the historic Mono Trail. Conway’s route provided more views and made a loop with the old Big Oak Flat Road. An old trail once ran from this point or from Gentry down to roughly the area of Pohono Bridge. It was part of Lafayette Bunnell’s Lower Trail, used to avoid the snows of the high country in early spring. Most of that trail is gone, although the U.S. Cavalry marked it with a “T” blaze on the old Big Oak Flat Road so they could find it.
10. The road from Cascade Creek to Tamarack Flat has been maintained since the rockslide of 1943, having been worked on as recently as 1984. The California Wilderness Act of 1984 closed the road at Tamarack Creek just below the Tamarack Campground, so that equipment can no longer be used on the road to repair it. Officially that part of the road is a trail and is maintained as such.
11. One used to be able to drive down to about “Oh, My Point” on the old road until the flood in the winter of 1964-65, when the bridge at Cascade Creek was destroyed. The structure was rebuilt as a trail bridge to prevent vehicles from going any farther down the road. The abutments for it are not original. The first bridge was a wooden truss in a slightly different location. The existing abutments date from the twentieth century.

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Significance

Property Type: Resources Associated with Settlement and Industry (1851-1951)
 Subtype: Transportation
Property Type: Resources Associated with State and Federal Administration of Yosemite (1864-1966)
 Subtype: Early Administration
Period of Significance: 1869-1938.

Three roads were of extreme importance in promoting visitation to Yosemite Valley in the 1870s. The influx of visitation and the ever-increasing growth in popularity of the valley and surrounding country eventually led to the establishment of Yosemite National Park and its status as one of America’s favorite vacation spots. It was the second road into the valley from the north, but the Big Oak Flat Road eventually became more popular and continued to serve Yosemite visitors until 1940 when the new Big Oak Flat Road was completed. The old Big Oak Flat Road bed and its bridges, rock culverts, retaining walls, and other man-made structures are considered significant in transportation. Large sections of the original roadbed remain.

Historical Context

Big Oak Flat, an early mining community thirty miles west of Yosemite National Park, gave its name to the Big Oak Flat Road. It was the second access for wheeled vehicles into Yosemite Valley. The Chinese Camp and Yosemite Turnpike Company began the road in 1869, after securing a franchise for a toll road from the state of California. In September of that year its officers gained for that company and from the Yosemite commissioners, the exclusive privilege to build a wagon road within the grant, to enter the valley on the north side of the Merced. The road was to be completed by July 1, 1871.

By June 1870 the road stretched east from Big Oak Flat, through First and Second Garrote, past Sprague’s, Hamilton’s, and Hardin’s ranches, and on beyond the Hodgdon Ranch to Crane Flat. On January 20, 1871, the company was incorporated as the Yosemite Turnpike Road Company. By July 1871 the Big Oak Flat Road had reached Gentry’s Station at the northwestern edge of the Yosemite Grant atop the cliff above Yosemite Valley. There the company ran out of time and money. Although the state extended the deadline for the completion of the road, the company forfeited its franchise on January 1, 1872.

Because the Yosemite commissioners heard nothing further from the company about future plans, they gave the Coulterville and Yosemite Turnpike Company the exclusive privilege of extending its wagon road into Yosemite Valley and collecting tolls. The commissioners believed that the exclusive privilege would offset the cost of the venture by securing all travel into Yosemite Valley from the north side of the Merced River. The Coulterville Road became the pioneer route to Yosemite, opening the valley to wheeled vehicles in 1874 and signaling a new era in tourism.

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Meanwhile, in 1872 the Yosemite Turnpike Road Company again requested from the Yosemite commissioners a franchise to build a road into the valley from the north, but because they had already granted that privilege to the Coulterville Company, the Yosemite commissioners refused the petition and several more. Finally, the state legislature overruled the commissioners and granted the privilege in 1874. The road, extended from the earlier road to Gentry's Station, reached the valley floor on July 17, 1874, one month after the Coulterville Road. Title to the road was conveyed to James Hutchings in 1878, who conveyed it to the Big Oak Flat and Yosemite Turnpike Road Company, incorporated in 1879.

This road, that was built in defiance of the Yosemite commissioners, severely affected the economy of the Coulterville Road by offering an alternative route into Yosemite Valley. The Big Oak Flat Road eventually surpassed the Coulterville Road in popularity. In 1885, the California state legislature passed an act allocating money to purchase the 3974 mile section of the Big Oak Flat Road from Gentry's to the valley floor.

After the establishment of the national park, the future of the four toll roads into Yosemite Valley became problematic. Not only did the high tolls bother visitors, but tolls seemed incompatible with the concept of a national resort and recreation area open to all. The U.S. Army, administering the national park, believed that federal acquisition of the roads would encourage more public use of the park and enable maintaining them in proper condition to supply army troops and facilitate patrol duties.

The Big Oak Flat Road opened to auto traffic in 1914. In July 1915 Tuolumne County purchased the Big Oak Flat Road leading into Yosemite Valley in order to make it toll free. It then gave the portion from the park boundary to Gentry's, to the federal government. The government proceeded to repair the road and establish checking stations at Gentry's and El Capitan on the valley floor.

In 1925 the NPS and the Bureau of Public Roads made an agreement under which major park roads would be built and maintained. In 1926, a road program for the entire National Park System was drawn up. It adopted a policy of building roads within the parks to the same standard as those leading into them. Under this program, the NPS determined to relocate the Big Oak Flat Road between Crane Flat and Yosemite Valley farther to the south, shortening the distance between the two places and enabling the road to be opened earlier in the spring. This work did not begin until 1935.

The new route left the All-Year Highway a short distance below the valley floor, near the powerhouse diversion darn, and climbed the north wall of the Merced Canyon above The Cascades. The new road was finished in 1940. The park converted the old route descending into Yosemite Valley into a one-way downhill scenic road. Visitors used it until

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1943 when a large rockslide made the road impassable to autos.

The Big Oak Flat Road is significant as one of the earliest transportation routes into Yosemite Valley. It served horse and wagon traffic and it eventually opened the Yosemite Valley to automobiles. Four-foot-high stone foundations of an old cabin can be seen at the Rainbow View bend in the road: its early function unknown. Other significant resources along the road include drainage structures such as riveted culverts, sections of old pavement, and outside retaining walls. At Rainbow View, railings are present above the rockslide area. Eighty percent of the old Big Oak Flat Road is still intact. The 1945 rockslide buried the zigzag section, while some parts of the remaining road surface have been littered by fallen rock or cut through by creeks crossing the road.

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Bibliography

Finley, Michael V., Superintendent, Yosemite National Park to Regional Director, Western Region “Review of National Register forms for factual data,” September 7, 1989.

Paden, Irene D. and Margaret E. Schlichtmann, *The Big Oak Flat Road*.(San Francisco: Lawton Kennedy, 1955).

Historic American Engineering Record, “Big Oak Flat Road, Yosemite National Park” HAER No. CA-147 (Washington: Department of the Interior, 1991)