Location: Poinsett State Park
6660 Poinsett Park Road, Wedgefield, South Carolina.
33.817783, -80.512192 (Center of Poinsett State Park)

Significance: Poinsett State Park gains its significance through its association with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which was responsible for the construction of thousands of state parks across the nation as a means of land and natural resource conservation and economic revitalization. Poinsett State Park is significant at the state level as it is one of the original 16 parks developed by the CCC in the state of South Carolina. The development of these parks resulted in the creation of a state park system in South Carolina, which had not existed prior to the start of the CCC construction in 1934. Poinsett State Park maintains much of its historic integrity in that it retains a great number of the original structures built by the CCC from 1934 to 1938. These buildings exemplify a high level of craftsmanship and rustic qualities characteristic of CCC construction.

Description: Poinsett State Park is located in Wedgefield, South Carolina, Sumter County and is 1000 acres in size. Nestled in the High Hills of the Santee, this geographical area is unique in that it is the meeting point of four different ecological regions, these being: the Coastal Plains at the northwestern boundary of the park, the Carolina Sandhills throughout, and habitats from both the Piedmont and Blue Ridge Mountain regions. The Coastal Plain ecology is comprised of pine woodlands which are flat and consist of multiple pine like loblollys and longleafs which are both found at Poinsett. The Carolina Sandhills also support pine woodlands, but are hillier with sandy soils. Upland forest and bluffs are associated with the Piedmont and Blue Ridge Mountain ecosystems and support thriving growth of pines, hickories, oaks and in the case of the Blue Ridge Mountains, mountain laurel. Bald Cypress and Spanish Moss are also found in abundance throughout the park.

The original construction of Poinsett State Park by the CCC included the creation of access roads, footpaths, several campsites and cabins, the entrance gates to the park, the lake, dam, spillway, bathhouse, changing facilities and loggia, parking areas, various shelters, the caretaker’s house and garage, pine nurseries, and fire places within shelters. Soon after its completion, the park gained popularity for its 10 acre lake which was used for swimming and recreational activities such as fishing. The bathhouse was used as a concession stand, dining room, and housed changing facilities. Some of the shelters were placed on hills and along trails for more scenic use while others were built near the lake for group picnics.
Almost all of these original CCC resources are still present in the park today, and retain much of their original architectural and material character, including their coquina foundations. Coquina is a native rock-like material composed of sand and compacted shells left in the landscape, dating from 10-20 million years ago, at which point in time the park area was covered by the ocean. The coquina used throughout the park was excavated on site. After excavation, CCC Company 421 shaped this coquina rock into blocks which they then used to construct the foundations for all almost all of the structures in the park, giving the buildings a rustic feel and unique appearance. Only the dam and the spillway, both made of built up earth and local stone, were constructed without the use of coquina. Used in the construction of the remainder of the park’s structures, the coquina utilized in the foundations of the cabins, shelters, and bathhouse’s are in good condition. Additionally, the timber used for the cabins’ weatherboarding and roof shingles, the shelters, and the bathhouse appear well-maintained. The cabins and shelters appear to be painted regularly since peeling paint was not noticeable. A comparison between current and historic photographs of the bathhouse reveals a difference in the color of the exterior wood cladding, which suggests re-staining.

Though the structures remain largely unaltered, their uses, in contrast, have changed. The bathhouse serves as a prime example to this alteration as it now serves as the park office. As result of this change in use, the shower/change area located within the building is out of use, a fact also due largely in part to the closure of the lake for public swimming in the 1990s. It is still allowable to fish recreationally on the lake.

There are a small number of resources missing from the historic list of CCC facilities present in the park originally, such as the pine tree nursery and a cabin that was located near the bathhouse. The absence of these resources are made evident through the examination of a CCC resources map. Additionally, a change can be found in the park’s overlook shelter which once boasted a clear view down one of the sand hills. This view has been drastically altered and today showcases an abundance of new growth trees and plants which block the intended view down into the Coastal Plain from the shelter. Another intrusion to the original landscape is seen in the creation and the existence of equestrian camps and trails.

**History:**

Established in 1933 by the United States Congress as an extension of the New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) acted as an outlet to employ jobless single young men in natural resource conservation and development. Shortly after the establishment of the CCC, the citizens of South Carolina’s Sumter County purchased about one thousand acres of uninhabited land for $5,000 and “donated it to the county for the purpose of the development of a recreational area and refuge” as a state park in August of 1934. Several separate parcels of land were incorporated to create the park lands, including the Benehaly family’s 104 acres, the Levi family’s 522 acres, H.J. Windham’s 86 acres, and the Protestant Episcopal Church of South Carolina’s 288 acres. This
land, primarily used for farming since the mid-1700s, was also the site of a mill structure at one point. Today, visitors can still find fragments of the mill’s coquina walls and foundation on its original site.

Named after Joel Roberts Poinsett (for whom the poinsettia flower was also named), Poinsett State Park quickly implemented the CCC program. Between October 1934 and August 1935, CCC Company 421 not only completed the construction of camp facilities, but also cleared ten acres for a lake, roads, footpaths, parking areas, and foundations for the park buildings. Additionally, the company had also finished construction on the exterior façades of the caretaker’s house, the lake spillways, Red bud and longleaf pine nurseries, a picnic shelter as well as several bridges and landscaping projects. The completion of these projects successfully accomplished both forestry and state park goals.

As one of the first CCC Companies established in South Carolina, Company 421 was formed by Kershaw County’s Superintendent R.A. Conard in April 1933. Soon after the organization of Company 421, Conard was promoted to assistant state forester. Camden resident and Foreman J.S.H. Clarkson then became the project superintendent about the same time Company 421 relocated to Sumter County for the Poinsett State Park project. The Company was sure to utilize the natural resources the land, using local coquina rock and harvested wood for the construction of facilities like the picnic shelter and bathhouse. The bathhouse was multi-functional, and “[contained] a concession area, a kitchen and dining room, and a loggia, in addition to shower, dressing, and restroom facilities.” Today, this building serves as the Park’s office space, and at one point also acted as a small nature museum. Otherwise, all of the original structures built by Company 421 remain intact and still maintain their initially intended function.

However, by mid to late 1935, Poinsett State Park was forced to address the controversial subject of park segregation. CCC Colonel George Buell announced that the CCC Camp must “be moved,” and furthermore, that Poinsett should be “completed by a ‘Negro CCC Camp,’ or the camp itself would be abandoned and the state park work halted.” Despite strong opposition from Senator Byrnes, County commissioners, city councilmen, State Forestry Commission officials, and other town leaders, Buell would not consider otherwise. Not long after Colonel Buells’ visit, Company 421 relocated to Rock Hill for a soil conservation project, Superintendent Clarkson transferred to Kings Mountain, and landscape architect promoted to Table Rocks’ superintendent position.

On September 5, 1935, F.M. Murray and African American Company 4475 began work as project superintendent and attending work crew. After completing a “two-week conditioning period, during which time enrollees’ work was evaluated for skill positions, Company 4475 began work surfacing park roads and filling in the borrow pit, where rock for the spillway and other structures had been obtained.” Among this work, they also completed the
caretaker’s house and garage, various shelters, and continued work on the
bathhouse. Although Company 4475 proved to be efficient in work ethic and
qualified in skill and craftsmanship, the predominantly white surrounding
community was not receptive to their occupancy at Poinsett. After only two
months working in Sumter County, Company 4475 was relocated to a new state
park in Chester, South Carolina—which left progress at Poinsett stagnant for
over two months. Finally, Veterans Company 2413 received assignment to
transfer from Givhans Ferry. During their time spent at Poinsett, the Company
completed the incomplete structures, and focused on landscaping. By the
summer of 1937, the Park was finally equipped for its official opening to the
public, designating it as the second state park to do so.

Enjoyed by Boy Scout troops, visiting families, visitors, and residents, forestry
programs, and other recreational groups, Poinsett State Park became known for
its large lake, used primarily for recreational swimming and water sports. Due to
the water safety hazards that arise which such a massive amount of visitors,
“waterfront safety” became one of the main duties of Poinsett’s staff. An August
17, 1954 article found in Columbia, South Carolina’s newspaper, The Columbia
Record (now known as The State), then superintendent F. Marion Dwight
commented that “preventative’ rather than ‘corrective’ life saving at the sandy
beach” connected to the lake. By the 1990s, swimming “fell out of favor…[and
came forbidden] at a number of inland parks.” Only last year was the facility
reopened at the Park, cautioned with “swim at your own risk” policy
enforcement. The 1990s also saw the introduction of a “primitive equestrian
campground located north of the original CCC Camp site.” With this short-lived
program, equestrian trails and horseback riding lessons were also established.
Unfortunately, it too “fell out of favor” with the South Carolina State Park
officials after only a few years which resulted in the closing of the equestrian
campground since then.

While not much has changed structurally at Poinsett State Park since its
establishment in the 1930s, many new programs and community events have
been created in the more recent years. For example, the park has recently
completed a number of new multiuse trails. Poinsett State Park staff also hosts an
annual mountain bike race, and have established various volunteer support
programs through a biking group known as Midlands SORBA for the care and
keeping of the Park’s bike trails. Even today, the park rangers and programs
give significant attention to the Park’s strong connection with the CCC,
including information about the history and results of the program strongly
connected with the Park throughout the property. Although Poinsett State Park is
just a small example of the history and evolution of the larger State Park
program in South Carolina, its establishment certainly played a huge role within
the implementation of the CCC program. The CCC’s presence in South
Carolina’s state parks ultimately aided in immensely changing “the public
landscape of the state” for the benefit of future generations.

Copies of deeds located in the Poinsett State Park research files, Resource Management Office, South Carolina State Park Service, Columbia, South Carolina.

Gregorie, Anna King. History of Sumter County. Sumter, South Carolina: Library Board of Sumter, 1954.

Laura Kirk, Interpretative Park Ranger: Lee State Park, South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, & Tourism, Oral History of Poinsett State Park


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April 3, 2014
Entrance gate and shelter, built by CCC 1936-37. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Interpretive sign and adjacent parking lot. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)

Loggia at former bathhouse, now park office. Built by CCC in 1936. (Photographer: Sarah Sanders, 3/9/14)
Loggia and tea room at former bathhouse, now park office. Built by CCC in 1936. (Photographer: Sarah Sanders, 3/9/14)

Loggia at park office. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)
Park office and Old Levi Mill Lake. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)

Old Levi Mill Lake and dam. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)
Park office, Old Levi Mill Lake, and boat house to right. Parking lot in the background center. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)

Large spillway, constructed by CCC in 1935. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)
Large spillway, constructed by CCC in 1935. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)

Small spillway, constructed by CCC in 1935 & 1937. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)
Small spillway and bridge, constructed by CCC in 1935 & 1937. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)

Small spillway, constructed by CCC 1935 & 1937. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Stairs to small spillway. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)

Small spillway, constructed by CCC 1935 & 1937. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Coquina trail, created by CCC in 1935. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)

Shelter 1. (Photographer: Sarah Sanders, 3/9/14)
Shelter 1 and restroom facility. (Photographer: Sarah Sanders, 3/9/14)

Shelter 2 and drinking fountain, constructed by CCC 1936-37. (Photographer: Sarah Sanders, 3/9/14)
Shelter 2, constructed by CCC 1936-37. (Photographer: Sarah Sanders, 3/9/14)

Restroom facility. (Photographer: Sarah Sanders, 3/9/14)
Shelter 5, constructed by CCC in 1935. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)

Shelter 3, constructed by CCC in 1935. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Trailside Shelter, constructed by CCC in 1937. (Photographer: Amber Anderson, 3/9/14)

Dining Hall. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Roadway to cabins, constructed by CCC in 1935. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)

Sign for cabin locations. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Cabin area with Cabin 4 and Cabin 3 from left to right. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)

Circular roadway between cabins with Cabin 4 right. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Cabin 1, constructed by CCC in 1936. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)

Cabin 2, east elevation, constructed by CCC in 1936. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Cabin 2, south elevation, constructed by CCC in 1936. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)

Cabin 3 constructed by CCC 1937-38. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Cabin 4 constructed by CCC 1937-38 (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)

Picnic area near cabins. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Path to trailheads near cabins. (Photographer: Jacqueline Don, 3/9/14)
Historic Photo – Construction of Spillway. (Courtesy of South Carolina Department of Archives and History, date unknown)

Historic Photo – Bathhouse. (Courtesy of South Carolina State Parks, date unknown)
Historic Photo - Loggia at bathhouse. Built by CCC in 1936. (Courtesy of South Carolina State Parks, date unknown)

Historic Photo - Lake at Poinsett State Park. (Courtesy of South Carolina State Parks, date unknown)
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