

Whiteface Veterans Memorial Highway

A 5-mile drive to the top of the world

Words and pictures by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, June 10, 2005

WILMINGTON — It's been 70 years since President Franklin D. Roosevelt drove up to Wilmington in an open car to inaugurate the new Veterans Memorial Highway in 1935.

You, too, can drive to the top of Whiteface, New York's fifth highest mountain.

The toll road has been open since the middle of last month, and will continue to welcome visitors through the Columbus Day/Canadian Thanksgiving weekend.

From Lake Placid, the trip up Whiteface Mountain starts with the 10-mile drive north on Route 86 to the little hamlet of Wilmington. At the Wilmington stop sign (yes, there's only one), take a left — you'll see the marker pointing you up the mountain to the Memorial Highway.

Climb past Santa's Workshop, America's oldest theme park, on your right, and past the road to the Atmospheric Sciences Research Station on your left. When you get to a fork in the road, bear left (there's another sign, so you're not likely to lose your way).

The tollhouse, and the history

Just ahead, you'll see what looks like a Swiss alpine chalet. That's the 1934 tollhouse that marks the beginning of the 5-mile-long Veterans Memorial Highway. It's more than just a toll gate where you'll pay your part for the upkeep of this amazing feat of civil engineering — it's also a visitors interpretive center, with exhibits highlighting the historic and natural significance of the

area.

The center has been run since 1999 by the Whiteface Preservation and Resource Association. On display are exhibits highlighting area geology, flora and fauna, along with maps, aerial and satellite images, and historic photographs depicting the planning and construction of the Memorial Highway and its associated buildings.

Unfortunately, the WPRA has had trouble finding enough volunteers to keep the visitors center open every day.

A road up the mountain was first suggested over 100 years ago by a Lake Placid entrepreneur, but it was not until the 1920s that a highway up Whiteface was promoted with real vigor — after a road was paved up Pike's Peak in Colorado.

The prospect of constructing a new road through the Wilmington Wild Forest split the membership of the Adirondack Mountain Club and was opposed by other leading



The chalet-style tollhouse at the highway's entrance.

conservationists, but it won support from one highly influential group of Empire State voters: the network of American Legion members all across New York.

The owner of the four acres at the peak of Whiteface contributed them to the project with the proviso that the road be dedicated to the memory of America's Great War veterans. It was later rededicated to the memory of all American veterans.

Built in the 1930s, the highway itself and its associated buildings have been nominated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places by the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

"It was really an amazing feat of engineering to put this road up the mountain," observed Steve Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, "and there's a certain aesthetic to the road, to the retaining walls, that sort of thing, that's of the era. Even the very idea that there should be an aesthetic element to a road-building project was a reflection of the time."

The construction project was dedicated in 1929 by New York Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Six years later, Roosevelt returned as the American president to cut the ribbon opening the highway. It was the suggestion of a wheelchair-bound FDR that led to the blasting of an elevator tunnel to carry visitors from the parking lot to the summit of Whiteface Mountain, rising 4,867 feet above sea level.

The memorial drive

The drive up the Veterans Memorial Highway takes visitors



The entrance to the tunnel leading to the elevator that takes Whiteface visitors to the mountain's summit.

Tips for visitors

Dress for the weather — On one of the days when our reporter drove up the Memorial Highway, the temperature was in the upper 70s in Wilmington, but close to 40 degrees Fahrenheit at the top of Whiteface Mountain. Just because it's summer down here doesn't mean it's summer up there! To check weather conditions before you set out, call 946-7175.

Observe highway signs — You'll see several signs on the Veterans Memorial Highway: the 25-mph speed limit, for one, and the suggestion that you use your low gear to help save your brakes on the downhill trip. Both signs are well worth observing. A couple of years ago, a tour bus burned out its brakes on the way down the mountain and tore out much of the tollhouse gateway before riding up a guard rail and coming to a stop.

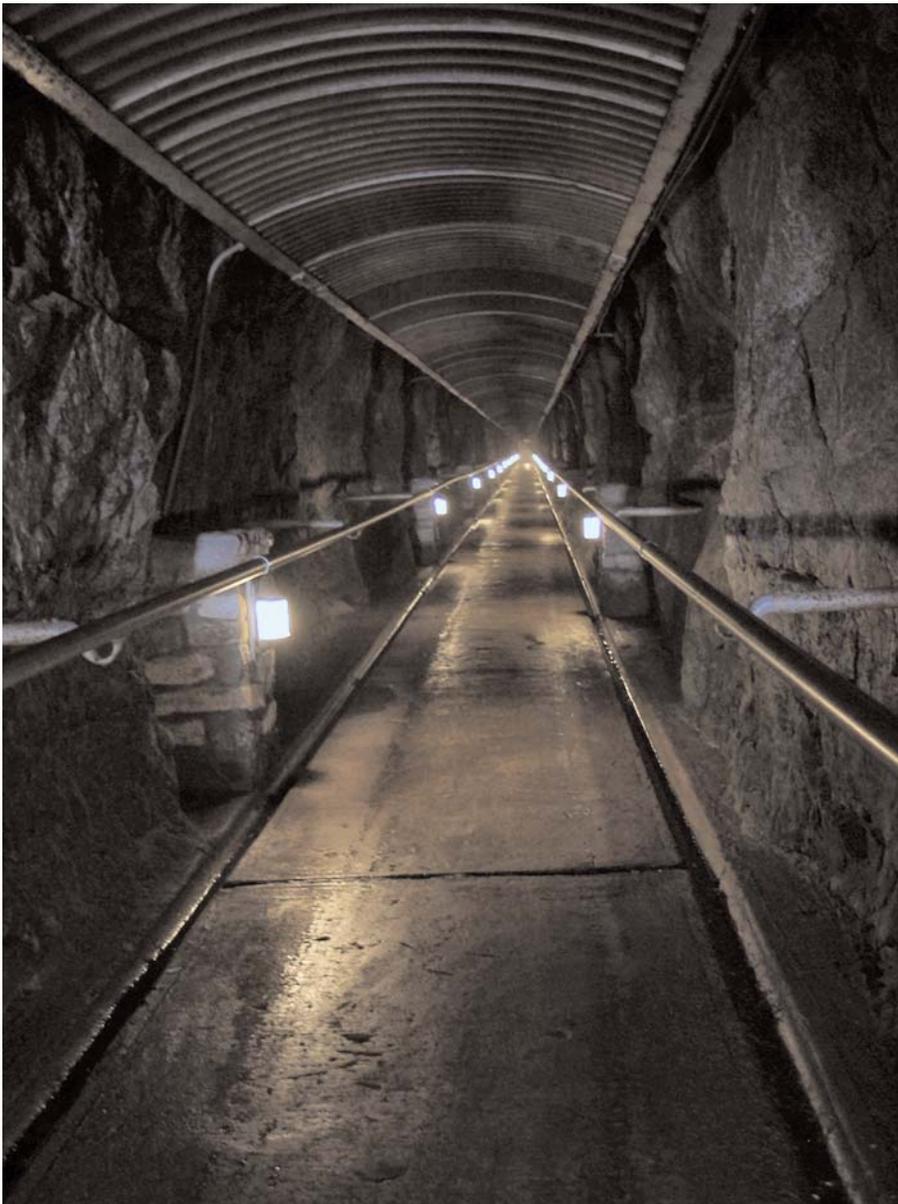
Bring a picnic lunch — There are plenty of tables on the drive up, or you can lay out a mountaintop luncheon at the summit. The menu at the Castle grill isn't especially pricey, but the selection is quite limited.

Visit the Castle first — Whether you plan to climb the 26-story staircase, which starts from the Castle

driveway, or take the elevator to the top of Whiteface, stop at the Castle first. In addition to the grill and gift shop upstairs, it has the only restrooms you'll find on the mountaintop.

Elevator up, staircase down — Once you get to the parking lot at the top of the Veterans Memorial Highway, you have a choice as to how you'll get to the summit of Whiteface. Our suggestion: Take the elevator up, and take the staircase down. Neither is to be missed, but the steep, rocky staircase is best experienced as a downhill journey.

Essential equipment: map, compass, binoculars and camera — The view from the top of Whiteface Mountain is truly unique, because Whiteface stands apart from all the other Adirondack High Peaks. To get the most from the view you can only get atop this mountain, bring a good topographic map and a compass to help you identify the geographic features laid out below, and binoculars to pick out details. To bring home a record of the stupendous views you'll see up there, make sure you take along a camera, too - even a disposable camera with a fixed-lense is better than no camera at all.



Interior of the tunnel leading to the summit elevator.

from 2,351 feet above sea level at the tollhouse to 4,602 feet at the Castle driveway, 5 miles away, an increase in elevation of 450 feet per mile. Besides the steady climb, the narrowness of the road, and the hairpin turns, there's one more good reason for the 25-mph speed limit: frost heaves, the washboard-like deformations left by water freezing beneath the macadam surface through the long, cold Adirondack winter.

The weather at the top of Whiteface is mercurial. Standing

by itself, with no other high peaks nearby, it catches every bit of weather that passes through northwestern Essex County. One day you'll come, and the chalkboard displayed on the tollhouse wall will show clear skies at the summit, allowing for up to 80 miles of visibility. Another day, it will be hazy, with just 1 mile's visibility. Yet another day, the summit will be completely socked in.

Visitors will get a sense for themselves of likely summit conditions when they've gone about a

mile past the tollhouse, where the first big view springs up through the trees at the Union Falls overlook, elevation 2,700 feet. Given the right conditions, you'll see Taylor Pond below you, lying like a dark blue blanket across a valley nestled against the next range of mountains north.

Higher still, past the 3,300-foot elevation marker, Taylor Pond can be seen even more clearly below — and looking up over your shoulder, you should get your first glimpse of “the Castle” above, a cut-stone-and-concrete structure erected at the end of the Veterans Highway.

Visitors have reported seeing fossil snow banks lying in the shaded curves of the Whiteface roadway as late as the Memorial Day weekend, becoming more common the higher they drove. Early season visitors have even reported seeing layers of ice draped like transparent curtains across northern rock faces cut into the mountain above 3,900 feet, the snow melting in the direct sunlight above it dripping down into the shade and freezing again.

At 3.7 miles along the mountain highway, just past a hairpin turn, drivers should slow down, preparing for a big surprise: the first fabulous view from Whiteface to the south and west, where Placid Lake with its southern peninsula and three signature islands rests, the Olympic Village nestled just beyond it, the High Peaks rising behind the village.

The Castle

From there, it's just 1.3 more miles to the parking lot at the top of the Veterans Highway, just below the Castle, built in 1936.

From the parking lot, the Castle doesn't look like much, but the Moorish stone arches along its driveway and inside, and the view from the upstairs gift shop and snack bar, are stunners. The Castle has two other signal attractions: It's heated, and it has the only bathrooms available for use by Whiteface summit guests.

Outside the Castle is the start of an iron-railed staircase that climbs a fifth of a mile up a bare granite ridge past dwarf pine forests, lichens and other vegetation that can be found only at alpine heights. These are among the oldest plant communities in New York state, and they are similar to what is found at sea level hundreds of miles closer to the Arctic Circle. Five interpretive

markers along the trail describe some of the features you'll find there.

Before you embark on the walk (make that, hike!) up the 26-story summit staircase, here are a few things to consider:

1) Though the bottom of the "staircase" starts with cut-stone steps, and though there are stone, metal or wooden steps built into many segments of the trail, there are also long stretches that climb across smooth, bare rock. Granted, the iron guardrails that line both sides of the trail are a great help — but still, the climb to the summit is much more than just a long walk up a staircase.

2) If you are going to climb the staircase, make sure you've worn a sturdy pair of shoes.

3) Remember that upward climbs are also downward climbs — it just depends upon where you start from. You can avoid a strenuous hike while still partaking of the stairway ridge trail by leaving the Castle and heading down through the parking lot to the elevator tunnel entrance. Take the elevator to the summit, and walk back down the Castle staircase.

The ride to the summit

Beneath a cut-stone archway is the entrance to a 426-foot tunnel cut into the living granite. The ceiling of the gradually rising tunnel is perhaps 7 feet above the floor, and there are maybe 6½ feet between the walls. Lamps are affixed every 10 feet at about knee height beneath the metal handrails on either side of the path. The low lights and narrow tunnel lend a distinctly subterranean tone to this short walk through the heart of the mountain nearly a mile above sea level.

The smallish elevator car — it holds 15 kids or 12 adults, jam-packed — rises into the middle of the Summit House at the top of Whiteface Mountain. When you step out of the circular stone house onto the wide porch surrounding it, though, the spectacular 360-degree view will give you the impression of being on top of the world.

While the other High Peaks are all grouped together, Whiteface rises alone. Nothing close by is anywhere near its height, giving visitors a viewing experience they can't get on any other mountaintop in the Adirondacks. Add to that the facts that you can motor up Whiteface and ride in an elevator to the summit, and you begin



The cylindrical weather observatory and the Summit House behind it are often mistaken from a distance for the famous Whiteface Castle, built a bit lower on the mountaintop.

to appreciate how extraordinarily accessible is the experience there.

The Summit House and the elevator tunnel rising into it were the last pieces of the Memorial Highway construction project, completed in 1938.

Atop the Summit House shines a lantern. A plaque affixed to the wall explains, "This Memorial Light ... is a mark of tribute to the war veterans of the nation. It burns constantly from May 15 until the Memorial Highway is closed to the public at the end of October."

There are two exits from the Summit House: one due north, and one due south. The north-facing doorway opens onto the portion of the surrounding patio that looks out toward Canada; the southern exit leads to the rocky summit and the view of Placid Lake and the High Peaks. Standing with his family one Saturday on the southern patio, a little boy was heard to exclaim, "You could never hit Lake Placid with a rock from here. It's impossible!"

Adjacent to the Summit House is a shingled tower rising several stories above the granite, the Whiteface Mountain Summit Weather Observatory, affiliated with the SUNY weather research facility headquartered down the mountain near Santa's Workshop.

Past the weather observatory, the mountain summit vista opens out at last. As many visitors hike up from Wilmington or the Marble Mountain trailhead to the summit as ride the elevator or climb the staircase. It's not uncommon to find the rough granite mountain-top crawling with guests, all entranced by the glorious view



Iron handrails help visitors climb down the 26-story "staircase" from the Summit House to the Castle.

presented for them there, many munching on lunches packed up in knapsacks or picnic baskets.

Hours, fees, info

The Veterans Memorial Highway on Whiteface Mountain will be open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. until June 27. Starting June 28, the hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. From Sept. 1 through

Oct. 11, the hours of operation go back to 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily. If the weather allows, the highway may stay open past Oct. 11.

The toll for trips up the Veterans Memorial Highway is \$9 for car and driver, \$6 for motorcycle and driver, and \$4 for each additional passenger. There is no additional charge for parking at the top.

How do they stack up?

From the top of Whiteface Mountain, visitors can see the entire High Peaks region of the Adirondack Park, including New York's highest, Mount Marcy.

Here's how the highest peaks in several eastern states rank with the top of the Adirondacks:

- Mount Mitchell, N.C. - 6,684 feet
- Clingman's Dome, Tenn. - 6,643 feet
- Mount Washington, N.H. - 6,288 feet
- Mount Marcy, N.Y. - 5,344 feet

- Mount Katahdin, Maine - 5,268 feet
- Mount Mansfield, Vt. - 4,393 feet

All of these are dwarfed by the Western mountains and the Alaskan peaks. Many mountains in the Rockies, Sierras and Cascades climb over 14,000 feet, while the highest Alaskan peak is Mount McKinley, whose summit rises nearly 4 miles above sea level to 20,320 feet.

By comparison, Mount Everest, the highest mountain on Earth, is 29,028 feet high.