Special summit

Groups collaborate to recover forgotten Sassafras



The current observation deck provides a view of three states. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

By Eric Connor | Staff writer | econnor@greenvilleonline.com

The name of South Carolina's highest summit is ubiquitous in elementary school textbooks, even if the mountain itself has for long amounted to little more than the answer to a trivia question.

Sassafras Mountain. The forgotten pinnacle of what little there is of tall South Carolina mountains.

If you're brave enough to pass through the open yellow gate that might close behind you, you can drive right up a broken asphalt road to the very apex of the mountain — remarkable access for a landmark that simply because of its distinction as the highest peak draws a unique set of visitors from across the country.

What visitors find — if they can find it, whether by car or by miles of arduous hiking along the 77-mile Foothills Trail — has for decades been very little, with thick forest blocking any majestic view and a fenced-in, metal contraption owned by the power company.

However, moves are afoot to change that — and in a big way.

Chief among them is a four-story observation tower, designed by the architectural minds of Clemson University, that will offer views of four states.

A series of modest, incremental improvements have foreshadowed what Sassafras could be as a destination, after years of complicated land deals that have made one of Sassafras' peculiar features — the border between North and South Carolina splitting its peak in half — a millstone impeding progress.

Meanwhile, those who have explored the mountain say there's so much more to the trivia question.

Defining geologic feature

Imagine a couple marrying atop Sassafras Mountain.

Holding hands — one standing in South Carolina, the other in North Carolina.

But there's more. Pull out your text-

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WHERE LAND MEETS SKY

Get a look at the beauty and uniqueness of Sassafras Mountain as a Clemson University architecture professor shares his vision for an observation tower atop the peak.

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books.

That same couple would not only stand together across two states, they would be straddling one of America's defining geological features that in a matter of turning one way or another can determine whether a leaf travels a few hundred miles or on for thousands more.

The border between the two states also represents the boundary of the Eastern Continental Divide. In 1813, when the Carolinas came together to determine their border, they attempted to draw it along the divide (which accounts for the squiggly portion of the border seen on maps).

The divide represents which way water will flow, whether it's into the Atlantic Ocean in Charleston or Savannah or — spectacularly — all the way to New Orleans into the Gulf of Mexico.

"It's one of the most interesting geological features in South Carolina," said Dennis Chastain, a Pickens County naturalist who has ventured into the deepest whereabouts of the mountain and is considered an expert in the history of South Carolina's hills and peaks.

There is a spot along the trail to Caesars Head, Chastain said, about 150 yards from the parking lot just below the summit of Sassafras, where a person can stand and throw a rock into three major watersheds that drain the Southeast.

Due east toward Table Rock, a leaf theoretically would travel from the South Saluda River, into Lake Greenwood, through the Congaree River in Columbia and on to Charleston.

To the west, a leaf would make its way into Lake Jocassee, then Lake Keowee and on through the Savannah River basin.

To the north, the journey would be extraordinary: Into the east fork of the French Broad River, through Brevard and Hendersonville and Asheville, into Knoxville into the Tennessee River, then to the Ohio River, into the Mississippi River and on to the deltas of New Orleans.

"That's really an incredible thing," Chastain said.

And the elevation of Sassafras — 3,553 feet above sea level — is not as constant as you might think, even if it's sometimes only a matter of centimeters, Chastain said.

The highest point on Sassafras actually stands in North Carolina, he said, on a mound of dirt between two roots of a tree, rising a mere six centimeters above the highest point in South Carolina.

"If that tree ever dies, it's going to collapse and we're going to be back having the highest point of Sassafras," Chastain said.

Future turned on Duke purchase

The top of Sassafras first became a destination in the 1940s when the South Carolina Forestry Commission built a fire tower to monitor the hills and valleys.

The tower was later abandoned, and as with other fire towers, locals would find a way to climb it.

Ultimately, the tower was torn down when the use of airplanes to monitor fire conditions during fire season became the norm. A cottage made of chestnut wood for the tower worker was burned to the ground by an unwitting camper in 2008.

The future of Sassafras began to turn when the state of South Carolina in 1999 completed its purchase of land from Duke Energy — known then as Duke Power — as part of the $21 million, 43,500-acre Jocassee Gorges preservation project.

The landmark purchase, however, didn't include the two-acre apex of Sassafras Mountain.

Duke kept that tract out of the deal.

Still, the North Carolina side of the mountaintop remained in the private hands of a former congressman.

One of the very features that made the top of Sassafras compelling — its state border — was also an albatross, said Emily Cope, deputy director of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources wildlife and freshwater fisheries division and among those who are shaping the peak of Sassafras.

"Sassafras was always one of those areas that we wanted to do something about and improve," Cope said. "We saw it as extremely important because it's South Carolina's highest point, but you can't do anything if you don't own the land. The state line runs across the mountain, so our hands were tied as to developing some type of destination point up there."

Just before Christmas 2004, Duke sold the two acres for $50,000 to South Carolina.

The DNR had its land — but not the whole piece. The rest was in North Carolina, 4.8 acres.

However, the momentum was gathering.

In 2010, the Conservation Fund and others bought 8,000 acres from the congressman with plans to make it available to the public. That land included the 4.8 acres.

At the same time, the DNR made a modest improvement, but it was one that revealed a side of Sassafras not seen before and began drawing visitors who could finally see something.

Workers — for a cost of less than $3,000 and in four days — used the wood of locust trees cut from the forest to construct a demure, 10 by 10 foot observation deck on the western side of the mountain, just steps away from a parking lot just beneath the peak.

Some trees were cleared, and a magnificent view of valley and beyond opened.

From the deck, the grandeur of Lake Jocassee can be seen as Lake Keowee blends on the horizon into the clouds.

On a recent rainy day, the valley obscured by fog, the visionaries of Sassafras nonetheless could finally see the mountain's destiny at hand.

In a press conference highlighted by remarks from U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, the Conservation Fund announced its donation of the 4.8 acres of the North Carolina side of the mountaintop to the South Carolina DNR.

The state now owns the mountaintop — and the visionaries are not looking back.

Pickens money paving future

It used to be Sassafras was tough to find, oftentimes word of mouth being the most reliable source. A group of those who make it a mission to climb the the highest points in America — the Highpointers, they're called — would come to Sassafras and leave underwhelmed.

The road to the top of the mountain, leading from the center for the blind off U.S.178 in Rocky Bottom, was in stretches perilous, broken, narrow.

Recently, Pickens County put forth money to pave the road and build shoulders so that two cars could pass at once, said County Council Chairwoman Jennifer Willis, one of a host of believers in Sassafras Mountain.

"This is the highest point in South Carolina," says Willis, among a number of partners in support of a new observation tower. "We ought to be shouting about it, not whispering in the back of the room saying, 'If you can find it, you'd love it.'"

The vision for the observation tower rests in the hands of the architectural department at Clemson University, which currently is working on improving the overlook, making it more accessible for the physically disabled.

This summer, the DNR asked Clemson architecture professor Dan Harding to design a tower for Sassafras. A graduate student took on the project as credit for the semester, and by the end of the summer, renderings of the tower were created.

While living in Montana, Harding was inspired by the idea of borders after taking his two young daughters to where the four corners of Utah,

Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona meet.

The youngest marveled at how she could pour water in one state and watch it drip into another.

The unique elements atop Sassafras — the border, the divide, the height — are what the tower will draw from, Harding said. The vision for Sassafras isn't one of gift stores with "rubber tomahawks," Harding said, but rather an unmanned visitor center with restrooms and trail improvements.

"We have a spot that you can drive to relatively quickly from all these major metropolitan areas," Harding said. "We have a lookout that's very accessible. Yet if you wanted to exert a certain amount of energy and hike the Foothills Trail, you could do that."

The tower — reaching as high as 60 feet — would rest with a pair of legs on either side of the border, never touching the line, with winding staircases offering 360-degree views from each of four floors, Harding said.

The mountains of Tennessee would be seen in the distance.

One obstacle still remains, however.

The metal contraption, standing within feet of where designers have planned the observation tower to rest.

In fact, the metal building is a communications tower owned by Duke Energy, a "two-way radio repeater," Duke spokeswoman Erin Culbert said.

Duke workers use the tower to communicate across the company's service area, from North Carolina to Oconee Nuclear Station, particularly when cell service fails, Culbert said.

When Duke sold its two acres to South Carolina, it retained the right to keep its radio tower and its power lines that stretch down the mountainside, she said.

However, Duke is "flexible" on what to do with the tower, Culbert said.

"We're very enthusiastic about the observation tower," Culbert said. "Duke Energy is working now to determine what options we have to maintain the important radio capability while also trying to accommodate the expansive view that visitors will have from the observation tower."

The tower's cost has yet to be determined, said Cope, the DNR deputy director, but it would be paid for through a fundraising campaign.

The optimist in Cope believes construction could start next year.

"Given the interest and excitement for this project, I really don't expect it to take very long," Cope said. "This is one of those things that people inherently want to support."



Dan Harding, associate professor of architecture at Clemson University, says Sassafras' uniqueness lies in its height and its place along both the state border and the Eastern Continental Divide. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

THE GREENVILLE NEWS



South Carolina's highest peak, Sassafras Mountain, provides a majestic view. A new observation tower in the works will let visitors see mountaintops in four states. KEN OSBURN/STAFF