

Celebrate Chimney Rock State Park's 10th birthday

KAREN CHÁVEZ

KCHAVEZ@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

CHIMNEY ROCK, N.C. – The wildly shaped rocks and picture-perfect panoramas have been around for eons, but the beauty of Chimney Rock State Park has only been owned by the public for 10 years.

In honor of the milestone birthday, on May 21, staff at the park in Rutherford County will celebrate with guided hikes, historic exhibits and, of course, cake.

Admission to the park May 21 will be \$10 for adults who donate a can or box of food at the Ticket Plaza. Food items such as canned tuna and chicken, peanut butter, macaroni and cheese, and soup will be donated to the Hickory Nut Gorge Outreach Food Pantry.

Tickets to the park, about 25 miles southeast of Asheville, are usually \$15 per adult. They have been discounted for the past two years to \$13 since the elevator to the Chimney – one of the main attractions at the park – has been out of commission.

The elevator is expected to reopen by the end of the year, said Landdis Hollifield, spokeswoman for Chimney Rock LLC, which operates the attraction portion of the state park.

At 10 a.m. there will be a guided hike on the easy trail to Hickory Nut Falls, and at noon there will be cake for all outside the Cliff Dweller's Gift Shop. From 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. there will be a display of historical photos at Cliff Dwellers and music by dulcimer player John Mason.

The park is unusual in its operation, Hollifield said, since it charges an entrance fee. Entrance to most of the 40 state parks in North Carolina is free, including Mount Mitchell, Lake James, Grandfather Mountain and Gorges in Western North Carolina.

The fees collected by the private company go to supporting the major infrastructure in the park including the elevator built in 1949 with a vertical tunnel through the mountain, shops, and the wide range of trails including the 499-step Outcroppings Trail.

But the fees don't keep the droves away. Visitation increases each year. Despite the Party Rock wildfire that burned through Lake Lure and the Rumbling Bald area of the park last fall, more than 267,000 people visited Chimney Rock State Park in 2016.



CITIZEN-TIMES PHOTO

A guided hike to Hickory Nut Falls is set for Sunday at Chimney Rock State Park.

History of park passion

The park's history goes back more than a century. It started in 1880 when Jerome B. Freeman, a Henderson County state legislator, bought 400 acres on Chimney Rock Mountain from the Speculation Company for \$25, said Todd Morse, a descendant of the next owners and general manager of Chimney Rock LLC for more than 20 years.

Freeman commissioned the first set of stairs, bridges and ladders in 1891, making Chimney Rock and the waterfall more accessible and opening the private park to the public.

Lucius B. Morse, a physician from Missouri suffering from tuberculosis, came to the gorge to relieve his symptoms in 1900. He and his brothers Hiram and Asahel bought the land from Freeman in 1902.

They built a 3-mile park road leading to the top of the 2,280-foot-high mountain in 1916, and opened the site as a park for people to hike the precarious cliffs, grottoes and boulders, and take in the wide views of the Gorge from the Chimney.

In 2004, the Morse family started looking to sell the prime piece of real estate. By 2006, negotiations with the state of North Carolina had begun and on May 21, 2007, the deal was sealed

with 1,000 acres known as the World's Edge formally creating the state park.

Intense public love for the park, nestled in the scenic Hickory Nut Gorge, fueled improvements and additional land purchases. With the help of land trusts including the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy, today the park covers 6,892 acres.

One of the goals of Morse brothers was to make the park more accessible, said Todd Morse, who is writing a book on the park's history. "When they opened the park you could only get to the top by horse. There was very little else – an old hunting trail that went to the waterfall."

The park is now classified as a state Significant Natural Heritage Area, with nearly 600 plant species and some 90 rare plants including Carolina saxifrage and sweet white trillium, and 19 rare animal species such as the Peregrine falcon, cerulean warbler, green salamander and Indiana bat.

The natural wonders also attracted Hollywood. Parts of the 1992 Hollywood blockbuster "Last of the Mohicans" were filmed at the park.

Looking forward, an intense focus will be on improving the Rumbling Bald area, which is popular rock climbers and free to visitors. A \$370,000 project to include restrooms and spaces for 90 cars, will be funded with the voter-approved Connect NC Bond of \$1.5 million, said park Superintendent James Ledgerwood.

The rest of the bond money will go to create a public access at the World's Edge, the remote area on the south side of Hickory Nut Gorge.

The elevator is set to reopen by the end of the year, Hollifield said, and an alternative route to the Outcroppings trail, called Crevice Pass, is underway. It will allow visitors to squeeze between massive boulders to get to the trail while the deck in front of Gneiss Cave is being expanded.

"What makes our park special is there is so much biological diversity and diversity with hiking trails," Hollifield said.

"Whether you want the ultimate challenge of the Outcropping Trail or a nice gentle walk to the base of waterfall, everyone can enjoy the park, including children. Large families come and they break into groups to do their own hikes. The variety keeps people coming back."