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Storm King Highway - nature tamed, to a degree

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Storm King Highway, which connects Cornwall-on-Hudson and West Point, is one of the most spectacular roads in the Hudson Valley. Following the curves of the famous mountain in the Hudson Highlands, it provides a breathtaking view of the Hudson River and the surrounding peaks.

Visitors find the highway and its views amazing. And many wonder at the cut along the face of the mountain when seen from across the Hudson on the east shore or from a boat on the river.

The twisting, scenic road stands as a monument to the ingenuity of its builders as well as to the beauty of the Hudson Highlands.

The name Storm King was given to the mountain about 1876 by Nathaniel P. Willis, a local writer. Earlier, Dutch skippers had called the west shore peak Butter Hill because it looked like a mound of butter to them.

Storm King Highway was a dream for decades before the work was begun. Today, the ruggedness of the mountain's face accounts for the spectacular views that persuade motorists to stop beside the winding road to enjoy the panoramic sight of the river valley spreading out below. But in the early 1900s when workers first began carving a niche in the mountain's hardscrabble side, that same ruggedness meant danger more than beauty.

Before the road was constructed, the mountain was a barrier for generations between the Newburgh area and West Point. It had been a curse for Revolutionary War soldiers carrying orders from General George Washington's headquarters in Newburgh to West Point because they had to clamber over the towering, rocky barrier.

For years travelers had wanted a road along the cliffs of Storm King Mountain to complete old Route 3, which wound up the west bank of the Hudson. The distance was short - only four miles - but the obstacles were huge.

A 700-foot tunnel through the head of Storm King Mountain was in the original



plan for the twisting highway. But with the West Shore Railroad hugging the base of the cliff, the removal of 35,000 cubic feet of ledge rock more than 400 feet above presented too much of a challenge. Blasting meant hurling boulders on moving trains or blocking the tracks.

In constructing the highway (called Route 218), the grade was kept no steeper than seven degrees. Work on the road was time-consuming, difficult and dangerous.

To plot points on the rock face for the new road, men were lowered over the edge on ropes. In some extreme cases, artillerymen from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point used rockets to fire jars of paint at particularly inaccessible areas to provide reference points for the needed surveying work.

The surveying first started in 1903, but came to an end

after four years. The reason was opposition by some property owners and the expense of the unusually difficult undertaking. It wasn't until eight years later, in 1915, that the work resumed.

Construction was difficult because the heavy equipment typically used on such jobs could not reach much of the area needed. In some cases, machinery was disassembled and mules carried the pieces up to work areas, where it was put back together for use.

Men hanging from ropes drilled holes 10 feet into the rock and dynamite was shoved inside. In this way, rock was blasted away from the mountain face to leave a ledge that was the beginning of the road. The blasting had to be carefully planned so as not to rain boulders down on trains passing along the river's edge on the tracks below.

When the road finally was completed in 1919, after a delay during World War I, it was 24 feet wide and climbed to a maximum height of 400 feet above the Hudson. The construction cost of the 4.03 mile road was \$890,665.

During the building, a stone parapet was constructed on the outer edge—the motorists' only protection against a straight drop down to the Hudson River below.

After the road opened, it was blocked to traffic sometimes during summer months when troops from the nearby U.S. Military Academy had artillery practice in the area. The Orange County Board of Supervisors finally protested the closings, and the military operation at last was moved elsewhere in 1927.

As the automobile became more and more popular, the scenic route became a bottleneck to travelers escaping New York City heat for the cool mountains. This finally was corrected when a Storm King Bypass (Route 9W) was constructed and opened on September 26, 1940.

Tragedy struck the road in 1934 when a piece of ledge loosened and 500 tons of rock fell, killing three persons in two cars. The victims included an East Paterson, N.J. woman and her 4-year-old son, and a Brooklyn man in the car behind.

Rock slides, washouts and mud slides have been part of life on this road for years causing repeated closings. One section particularly prone to these slides is the stretch called "The Red Bank" just north of West Point's Lee Gate. Near "High Point," a panoramic lookout on a precarious corner of the road, the overhanging cliffs occasionally release debris - from pebbles to rocks as big as softballs. These missiles, however, rarely fall directly onto cars and buses.

The slides have spurred geologists, engineers and workmen in recent years to try to tie down some of the gargantuan crags of the mountain to stop the giant's weather-caused twistings and turnings from sending lethal avalanches onto the highway.

