

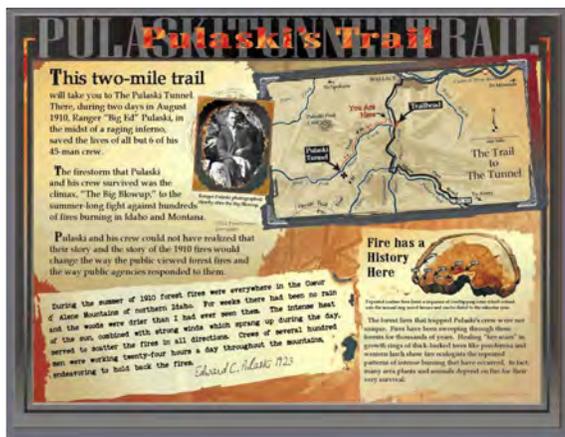
The Pulaski Tunnel Trail: A Closer Look

by Jim See, Pulaski Project President

Background

For me, the Pulaski Tunnel Trail offers both the beauty and peace of a cool walk in a forested canyon by a cascading creek and an adventure into the past. The trail begins at a well-marked trailhead about a half-mile south of Wallace, soon after King Street leaves Wallace's city limits. The trail's two-mile course ultimately brings hikers to a spot across the creek from the historic Pulaski Tunnel, the abandoned mine where "Big Ed" Pulaski saved all but six of his 45-man firefighting crew in the Great Fire of 1910. Be not deceived, the site's peaceful and idyllic setting belies the terrible events that etched this place into history almost a hundred years ago.

Until 2003, the trail was lost in overgrowth and erosion. The only signs of its former existence were two historical markers placed across the road from what is now the trailhead. Since 2003, however, the trail has been given new life. It has been cleared, graded, and, where necessary, strengthened by durable engineering. It has also been equipped with numerous large-format porcelain interpretive signs and a number of bridges where the trail crosses the creek.



Both the trail and the mine are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Pulaski showed considerable heroism in leading his crew to the haven of the mine and keeping them inside through the night and until everyone passed out from the fire's smoke and fumes. Within the firefighting community, Pulaski is also remembered for refining the two-bladed tool that bears his name.

The historical significance of the fire itself bears special note. The Big Blowup shocked the fledgling U.S. Forest Service, which had been launched only five years before. The shock in turn determined the new agency to make firefighting its top organizational priority. Over the long sweep of the history that followed, this policy left numerous unanticipated and unintended consequences in its wake. The Forest Service's zealousness about fire suppression created overgrowth in our

national forests, changes in prevailing tree species, and lessened available water supply per tree. The ironic result was that the Forest Service's priority on fire suppression, in turn, heightened the fuel load and risk of stand-destroying fires. Consequently, summertime in much of the American West provides conditions that too often lead to catastrophic forest fire. The interpretive aspect of the trail retells this history and also provides an historical foundation for the search for a new policy consensus for our national forests. The trail also honors the courage, dedication, and self-sacrifice of firefighters past, present, and future.

The trail may be divided into five different segments, each with its own rewards for visitors and hikers. Individuals or groups may choose to go for short walks, longer ones, or all the way to the trail's end. The trail offers a rewarding experience no matter how far one goes.

Trailhead Segment - 250 yards from the trailhead to the end of this segment

This segment is accessible to everyone, including visitors using wheelchairs. The trail's first 250 yards – starting at the parking lot, across the road to the trailhead, over the trailhead bridge, and to the trail's first three interpretive signs in succession – is paved and relatively level. The first three of the trail's large-format, impregnated porcelain signs offers a map of the trail and begins to tell the story of the Ed Pulaski and the Big Blowup. This segment also passes by three gabion dams. These were constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression and after Wallace experienced a devastating once-in-100-year flood in 1933. These dams provided flood control for Wallace over the 50-year period before the Placer aqueduct was completed in 1984. Especially in the spring, higher water flows create nice cascades over these dams. Also of interest in this segment is the first of several burnt-out cedar stumps, snags, and logs along the trail. These still bear the scars of the Big Blowup.



Third Bridge Segment - one-half mile from trailhead to the end of this segment

This segment completes the first one-half mile of the trail. It begins where the trail changes from paved surface to graveled tread. Curving its way through two groves of young cedars, the trail follows the south side of the West Fork of Placer Creek. The trail traverses two bridges and three boardwalks in this segment. The only switchback on the trail is in this segment. The short stretch of vertical climb that starts with the switchback adds a bit of exertion to the hiking experience. There are scenic overlooks of the creek in this segment and a number of benches sawn out of windfall log sections. Mother Nature was kind enough to provide a five-foot waterfall upstream from the trail's third bridge. The trail's fourth interpretive sign marks the end of this trail segment.



War Eagle Segment - one mile from the trailhead to the end of this segment

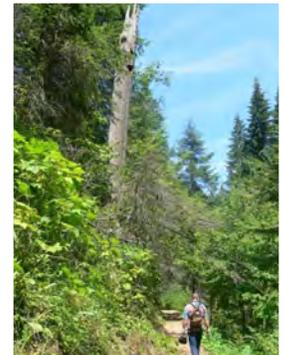


This segment takes the trail to the end of the first mile. The tread now becomes native surface and will remain so until the trail's end. An impressive waterfall is located in this segment along with several lesser cascades and quiet pools. Uphill and to the right of the trail is the location of the War Eagle mine. The tread narrows to its smallest width as it crosses a steep apron of mine tailings from the War Eagle. As the great inferno was closing in on them, Pulaski told his men that they were heading for the War Eagle. However, a backfire set near Wallace forced Pulaski to reverse his course and take the men back upstream to the Nicholson mine. Even to this day, some accounts of Pulaski's story mistakenly place Big Ed and his crew in the War

Eagle. Alongside the trail, hikers will encounter a water-driven buffalo blower for improving mine ventilation. This equipment was installed in the late 1920s.

Cedar Segment - one and one-half miles from the trailhead to the end of this segment

This segment covers the next one-half mile of the trail. It includes the fifth sign and two bridges. A long, flat, wide stretch of the trail in this segment may (repeat, *may*) be the site of a small group of mining cabins once known as Westfork. This segment is rich in burnt-out cedar stumps and logs. The last bridge crosses a smaller tributary that empties into the West Fork of Placer Creek. The view from the bridge includes a number of cedar logs in the creek bed; which create cascades of various sizes, depending on the season.



Pulaski Tunnel Segment - two miles from the trailhead to the end of this segment



This fifth and final segment is the most arduous. It begins at the sixth interpretive sign and, thereafter, includes three separate uphill climbs. The reward for your effort is your arrival at a trail loop that marks the trail's destination. The Pulaski Tunnel overlook point lies on the left side of the loop. Six interpretive signs are clustered on the loop. These signs tell of the ordeal endured by Pulaski and his crew and the long-term historical consequences of the fire. The loop is also a great place to rest. It will be recalled that six men perished in or near the Pulaski Tunnel in The Great Fire of 1910. Thus, this is also a place of reverence and contemplation.

The Hike Back

The hike back to the trailhead covers the same distance but seems shorter because what was a climb now becomes a descent. The total elevation change from trailhead to loop is about 800 feet. The uphill sections are relatively short and most are located in the Pulaski Tunnel Section near the end. Most hikers complete the entire trail in two to three hours. Visitors and hikers are advised to consider fitness and stamina in deciding how far to go. If you plan to go some, most, or all of the way, hiking shoes or boots and refreshments are advised. The Pulaski Tunnel Trail offers a beautiful hike and tells an important historical story. We hope you can visit soon!

