

## Fort Mountain State Park History

Fort Mountain State Park sits at the southwestern end of the Cohutta Mountains near the Cohutta Wilderness. Sitting at 2,850 ft above sea level, Fort Mountain is a great destination for hiking and history lessons alike. The area in and around the park was home to the Cherokee Indians for hundreds of years, and their legacy is still felt throughout North Georgia today.

Fort Mountain State Park derives its name from an ancient stone rock edifice situated near the crest of the mountain. The rock wall zigzags along Fort Mountain for 855 feet and varies between two and six feet tall at points. Archaeological estimates state that the wall was constructed between 500 – 1500 CE. According to Cherokee lore, the wall was built by the “Moon-eyed people.” Legends tell that they were a race of people that lived in Appalachia, until they were driven out by the Cherokee. The Moon-eyed people were described by the Cherokee as being small, light skinned people, who saw better during the night than the day. The many theories of who the Moon-eyed people were, if they existed at all, help to lend an air of mystery to the ancient stones. The wall’s purpose has also been debated by archaeologists and historians, with theories ranging from a military defense fortification to a spiritual structure. The true purpose of the Fort Mountain rock wall remains an enigma to this day.



Recent photo of the stone wall ruins.



Black & white photo of wall by Bob Wilson, 1972.

The land that became Fort Mountain State Park was donated by Ivan Allen Sr., a popular Atlanta businessman, politician, and father of Ivan Allen Jr., the mayor of Atlanta during the Civil Rights Movement. The park officially opened in 1936, and its infrastructure was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was responsible for construction of many of the park’s facilities such as the lake and several buildings. They also did forestry work and made hiking trails on the mountain.

One of the most notable contributions by the CCC is the large stone fire tower that stands four stories tall at the top of the mountain. As its name suggests, this lookout tower allowed rangers to spot fires up to 40 miles away. The building of the stone tower was led by local stone mason Arnold Bailey. Bailey used his skills to carve a large stone heart into the tower to impress his sweetheart, Margaret. The two were married for 59 years from 1935 until Mr. Bailey’s death in 1994, at the age of 80. The heart formation remains in the fire tower today.



Close-up of the stone heart by Arnold Bailey, c. 1935.

The tower was utilized for the detection of fires from its completion in the 1930's until it was replaced by a newer metal tower on an adjacent peak in the 1960's. In 1971 the wooden cupola at the top of the tower burned. The remaining stone structure stood in disrepair until 2014 when the Georgia Department of Natural Resources undertook the task to restore the structure to its former glory. Over the next year, careful steps were taken not only to repair the structure but also to reconstruct its unique historical and architectural aspects. The stone tower at Fort Mountain won the 2016 Preservation Award for Excellence in Restoration from The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation.

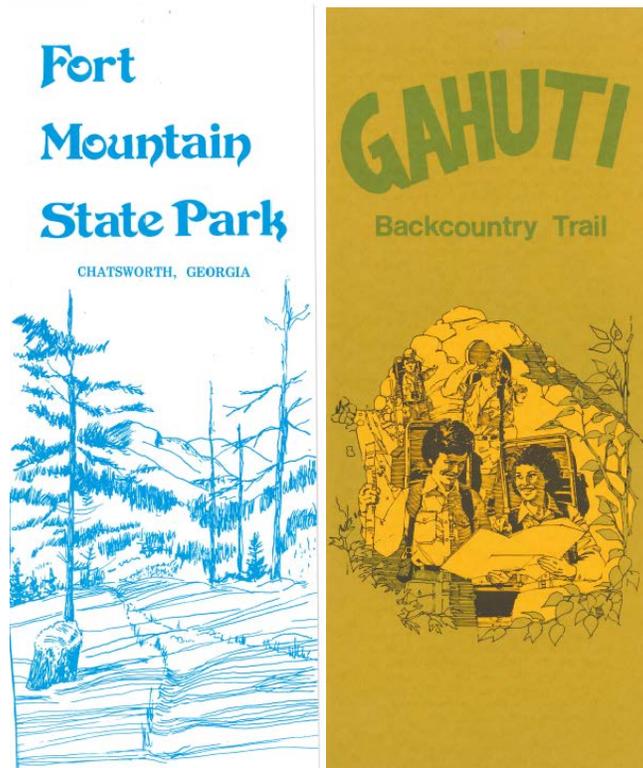


Fort Mountain Fire Tower, c. 1930s



Restored fire tower with seating area, 2016.

In addition to its significant historical significance, Fort Mountain State Park is a popular outdoor destination. Hikers can explore the popular Gahuti Backcountry Trail that circles the perimeter of the park in an 8.2-mile loop trail, plus additional trails for hiking and mountain biking. Fort Mountain State Park also offers beautiful mountain views, a 17-acre lake for fishing and swimming, camping, and much more family fun.



Fort Mountain State Park brochures, c. 1970s -80s.