

E. Gail Throop

# Rustic Architecture Period Design in the Columbia River Gorge



*Detail of retaining wall, Beacon Rock State Park headquarters. Photo by Matt Meacham, 1995.*

**T**he rustic style of architecture is represented in many structural artifacts nationwide. It is important to understand a style, and the ideas, shared vision and work, and common history that lie behind it, to successfully appreciate and manage the artifacts derived from it. It is the intent of this article to refresh the definition of rustic architecture, and to describe how the style was expressed by the USDA Forest Service in the Pacific Northwest Region (in the states of Oregon and Washington). The rustic recreational developments in the Columbia River Gorge are used as examples to illuminate the policy and program changes within the agency during the period of the Great Depression. Simpler, smaller in scale, and less familiar than Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood or the Stockade at Sunrise in Mt. Rainier National Park, these recreation facilities embody the characteristics of rustic architecture.

Styles in architecture are seldom the creation of a single individual, but rather the outgrowth of particular social and economic periods. The rustic style of architecture is closely associated with the Great Depression, for maturity and eloquence of its expression was achieved at that time. Rustic was appropriate to rural environments, but neither rude nor artless. Successfully handled, the style achieved sympathy with natural surroundings and intimacy with landscape. The rustic style was variously expressed nationwide, in the constructions of all federal land-managing agencies. Further,

*Visitor registration station at Eagle Creek, Columbia River Gorge. Photo by George Bleekman III, 1993.*



each agency developed an idiom that was particular to administrative areas that might reflect models and building materials traditional to that geographical region. In the Pacific Northwest, the style is often termed “Cascadian,” in reference to the mountain range that provided local design inspiration.

The basis of rustic architecture was a design philosophy founded on an ethic of nonintrusiveness. Key to this ethic were the concepts of subordination, retirement, and assimilation. Important factors in the achievement of “accessories to nature” were predominantly horizontal lines, low silhouette, organic forms, and scale, proportion and texture of the building materials.

The Forest Service Depression-era recreational structures, including ski lodges, community kitchens, trail shelters, amphitheatres, and scenic overlooks, most closely adhered to Albert H. Good’s definition of “rustic design”: they appeared to “have been executed by pioneer craftsmen with limited hand tools.”

Of log, pole and masonry construction, the structural members were carefully proportioned to the natural setting. Log uprights corresponded in diameter to the measurements of the surrounding trees. The desired effect was lost if the natural materials were too unblemished in their appearance: logs with knots and whorls were superior to clean poles. Foundations and masonry walls were styled to appear as “rough rock footings” or natural outcrops.

The use of rock presented certain problems. Boulders often gave the appearance of instability and their use was infrequent; irregularly-shaped rock was preferable. Placed along their horizontal axis, uncoursed rubble stone resembled nature’s bedding patterns, and more closely tied the structure to the ground.

Roof design was another challenge: roof pitch had to be compatible with potential snow load and other climatic conditions without establishing too great a vertical emphasis that would dominate the scene. Too, roofs had to achieve a proper proportion with the often massive nature of upright support members and footings. Oversized

Administrative headquarters, Beacon Rock State Park. Photo by Matt Meacham, 1995.



verge members helped resolve this problem as did the use of heavy shakes instead of shingles.

Prior to the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Forest Service pursued a cautious conservative recreation site development policy. That policy held that the recreation role of the national forests was to provide space for recreation. The New Deal ushered in changes in the magnitude and scope of the Forest Service recreation program which in turn produced significant and far-reaching changes in its recreation policy. With regard to the emergency programs and their products, regional foresters were instructed to give more attention to the “social” functions of the forests. Permanent recreation improvements were to be encouraged. Not only would the Forest Service supply needed recreation structures but also it would strive to design and locate those facilities in aesthetically pleasing ways. Public service would be paramount.

The Depression-era recreational developments at Wahkeena Falls and at Eagle Creek in the Columbia River Gorge represent the achievement of those social, service, and aesthetic goals. The sites clearly reflect the comprehensive planning typical of the period. The structures embody the (Forest Service) Pacific Northwest Region’s particular expression of the rustic style of architecture.

The Columbia River Gorge offered significant design challenges with forested settings, rock outcroppings, and little flat ground. The respective design solutions for Eagle Creek and Wahkeena Falls responded to these conditions in similar ways but with differing interpretations. At both sites, the features and furnishings lie easy on the land and seem to grow from it.

Eagle Creek is a large and complex site, including a picnic area, a campground, a trailhead,

and a scenic overlook. As designed and built, the site occupied a large contiguous parcel of land at the confluence of Eagle Creek and the Columbia River with each use area located separately. Subsequent interstate highway construction and the introduction of a national fish hatchery have disturbed the unity of the parcel, but each of the different use areas remains intact, and the original cohesion is apparent. The structural components are a community kitchen, comfort station, information station, suspension bridge, and a community overlook building. The architecture is an interesting blend of the “refined rustic” associated with Forest Service administrative sites, and the rough-hewn “rugged rustic” assigned to recreation facilities. The community kitchen and the information station appear to “have been executed by pioneer craftsmen with limited hand tools.” They are of log (and pole) post and beam construction, with random rubble masonry. The comfort station, affectionately known as “Big John,” is of frame construction, with large dimension timbers, rough-sawn siding, and random rubble masonry veneer. The Overlook Building combines frame construction with some round log roof members and rather formally finished rubble masonry piers. The built features retire into the mature forest setting, while the changes in contour within the site are both accentuated and assimilated with drylaid masonry retaining walls that almost appear to be natural.

Wahkeena Falls is a smaller site, originally comprising a campground with adjoining picnic area. Structural features include a community kitchen and a set of stone-veneered toilet buildings. Again, there is a blend of rural and urban influences: log and random rubble masonry shelter juxtaposed with frame and fitted stone toilets. What is more noteworthy is the formality of the masonry in the convertible campstoves, steps, and other built landscape features, particularly in comparison with the great informality of the stonework at Eagle Creek. The cut-and-fitted quality of the masonry lends an entirely different feeling to the facility at Wahkeena Falls. Lacking the design documents, it is not possible to tell whether the masonry treatment is an accurate execution of the intended design or the preferred pattern of the



Picnic table in campground. Photo by Matt Meacham, 1995.



Corner of comfort station at Beacon Rock State Park, near Beacon Rock trailhead and headquarters. Photo by Matt Meacham, 1995.

Corner of comfort station at Beacon Rock State Park picnic area. Compare style of masonry to photo above. Photo by Matt Meacham, 1995.



individual craftsman building the stoves.

Beacon Rock State Park is a Depression-era complex composing the state park administrative headquarters, a large comfort station at the Beacon Rock Trailhead, and a community kitchen in the picnic area adjacent to the Hamilton Mountain Trailhead. The park is located in Washington, on State Highway 14, west of Bonneville Dam. Created by Washington State Parks, perhaps with the design

assistance of the National Park Service, the Beacon Rock complex offers an interesting comparison in the expression of the rustic style of architecture.

The three major structural components of the Beacon Rock complex are spatially organized by function and separately located within the park boundaries. The small administrative buildings are simply-detailed frame construction with random rubble veneer. The comfort station is of horizontal log and stone, and the community kitchen is log post and beam construction, with low solid railings and large "window" openings. The structures differ substantially in materials and textures, and thus do not reveal a cohesive architectural character. However, they all clearly relate to a single design theme, and each connects to its individual setting and the requirements of the site. The architectural interpretation is very responsive to the environment of the Columbia River Gorge, but the point of view shows a subtle difference from that of the Forest Service designers. Both expressions are sensitive and articulate and present appropriate solutions to the problems posed by the landscape.

The rustic style represents an early-20th-century movement in American architecture. Based on a philosophy of nonintrusiveness, it was particular-

ly appropriate to rural environments. It was picturesque, romantic architecture that recalled the American past, was wholly integrated with the landscape and responsive to the environment. The idiom was developed as a solution to the problem of providing facilities for the public, in national parks and forests, and in state parks, that did not compete with natural or scenic values. Rustic helped to create an image, and to convey an ethic of conservation. It strongly influenced public expectations about the appropriate character and appearance of recreational and administrative buildings in parks and forests. In the eloquence of its expression and in its divergence from the trend toward functionalism in urban architecture, rustic made an important contribution to 20th-century American architectural thought.

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