

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION FILE
Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office

Listing Name: “See Rock City” Signs in Tennessee MPS

Listing Date: 12/23/2024

Reference Number: MC100011195



Photo Courtesy of Claudette Stager

SOUTH CAROLINA, RICHLAND COUNTY,
Bellevue-Newman's Field-Gracelynn Terrace Historic District (Additional Documentation),
Roughly bounded by Sumter St., Anthony Ave., Bull St., and Elmwood Ave.,
Columbia, AD97001206,
ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION APPROVED, 1/3/2025

TENNESSEE

“See Rock City” Signs in Tennessee MPS,
MC100011195,
COVER DOCUMENTATION APPROVED, 12/23/2024

TENNESSEE, CUMBERLAND COUNTY,
“See Rock City” Barn,
5700 TN-68,
Crossville vicinity, MP100011196,
LISTED, 12/23/2024
 (“See Rock City” Signs in Tennessee MPS)

VIRGINIA, PETERSBURG INDEPENDENT CITY,
Petersburg Old Town Historic District (Additional Documentation),
Bounded by Appomattox River and Norfolk Southern RR tracks; I95 and N. Madison St.; to Bollingbrook
St., E. Bank and W. Bank St., Brick House Run, and Commerce St.; and to Dunlop St. and railroad bed of
Seaboard Coast Line and piers Seaboard Air Line,
Petersburg (Independent City), AD80004314,
ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION APPROVED, 1/3/2025

Key to Prefix Codes:

AD - Additional documentation
BC - Boundary change (increase, decrease, or both)
FD - Federal DOE property under the Federal DOE project
FP - Federal DOE Project
MC - Multiple cover sheet
MP - Multiple nomination (a nomination under a multiple cover sheet)
MPS - Multiple Property Submission
MV - Move request
NL – NHL
ADNL-Updated documentation (NHL)
OT - All other requests (appeal, removal, delisting, direct submission)
RS - Resubmission

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National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (National Register Bulletin 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

New Submission Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

“See Rock City” Signs in Tennessee

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Rock City Gardens Roadside Advertising Campaign, 1935-Present

C. Form Prepared by

Name/Title: Dr. Rebecca Schmitt, National Register Coordinator
Organization: Tennessee Historical Commission/State Historic Preservation Office Date: November 2024
Street & Number: 2941 Lebanon Pike Telephone: (615) 770-1086
City: Nashville State: TN Zip Code: 37214

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)



November 13, 2024

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission-----
State or Federal agency and bureau

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

State or Federal agency and bureau

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E. Statement of Historic Contexts

Introduction

Dotted throughout the Southeast and Midwest United States, “See Rock City” signs are an important type of historic resource that developed amidst the confluence of several interrelated broad patterns of American history. As private companies and government entities developed vast networks of state highways and later interstates, entrepreneurs seized on the opportunity to market their wares to the growing numbers of motorists, particularly those with disposable incomes eager to engage in opportunities for new travel, commerce, and entertainment afforded by the increasingly safe and sophisticated road networks. Among these entrepreneurs was Frieda and Garnet Carter, the owners of Rock City Gardens, located on Lookout Mountain in Georgia, near the Tennessee state line.

The “See Rock City” Signs in Tennessee Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) establishes the contextual history of Rock City Garden’s advertising campaign, particularly in relation to the development of road systems, the growth of automobile tourism, and the development of modern roadside advertising trends during the twentieth century. As advertisers turned new and improved vehicular roadways into ‘buyways,’ Rock City operators efficiently used existing, privately owned buildings as a canvas for their memorable signs, advertising some variation of the message “See Rock City.” Rock City’s painter, Clark Byers (1915-2004), gradually painted signs on hundreds of buildings along roadways throughout the American Southeast and Midwest. Together, these signs created a sophisticated advertising network of approximately 800 signs that continually reinforced a message to motorists, urging them to “See Rock City.”

The MPDF establishes standards for evaluating the National Register eligibility of “See Rock City” signage in Tennessee under Criterion A in the area of Commerce for the signs’ role in Rock City’s advertising campaign. Signs played an important role in attracting visitors to the site. The signs were originally quite prolific, located through several states and forming an advertising network that continuously reinforced the advertisements’ messaging and reminded potential visitors about what Rock City Gardens had to offer. The signs were most commonly located on the roofs or side elevations of privately owned roadside buildings, usually barns. The signs vary in specific message, but they are all united by a clear advertisement for Rock City and directive to visit the property. The sign is the major contributing feature of the property that should retain sufficient integrity to convey its significance. While the MPDF utilizes a broad approach to the contextual history, this MPDF is geographically limited to the political boundaries of Tennessee, the state in which the majority of Rock City signs were historically located.

Historic Context: Rock City Gardens Roadside Advertising Campaign, 1935-Present

The Rock City Gardens roadside advertisement program emerged at a time when vehicular transportation systems were expanding and transforming American life. Prior to the twentieth century, few roads crossed multiple states, making interstate travel by road slow and difficult. Road surfaces varied, particularly from urban to rural contexts. Urban areas were more likely to have paved roads constructed of asphalt, stone, or masonry. By the end of the nineteenth century, about half of paved city streets were gravel or macadam (small, crushed stone), but most rural roads were dirt with some macadam. Such surfaces often made travel

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slow or difficult, particularly during bad weather when rain could create thick mud, making travel virtually impossible. Over time, wagon wheels created deep ruts, even in dry surfaces, which made turns difficult or damaging to the wagons (see Figure 1). Roads had to be repaired or shifted to new surfaces; either option was laborious and costly. Responsibility for building and maintaining roads varied by locality with private turnpike owners building roads and charging fees for use in some areas and local or state officials maintaining public roads in others. The federal government sporadically contributed funding and construction of some roads, such as the National Road from Maryland to Illinois.¹



Figure 1: Dirt Road in Nolensville, Tennessee. Courtesy of Tennessee State Library and Archives.

In 1892 the National League of Good Roads was founded to advocate for better roads, at first for bicyclists and automobilists but gradually incorporating an economic argument to promote rural agricultural industry and “Get the Farmer out of the Mud” by improving the routes from farm to market by using asphalt rather than dirt or macadam.² Related organizations also advocated for interstate travel routes comprising single roads that would allow motorists to travel from one state to another without having to navigate a patchwork of local roads and numerous turns. The Tennessee Good Roads Association, primarily comprised of progressive business owners, advocated for publicly funded roads to improve economic conditions and

¹ Henry Petroski, *The Road Taken: The History and Future of America’s Infrastructure* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 28-40; Jeanette Keith, “Lift Tennessee Out of the Mud: Ideology and the Good Roads Movement in Tennessee,” in *Tennessee: State of the Nation*, 2nd ed., eds. W. Calvin Dickinson and Larry H. Whiteaker (New York: American Heritage, 1995), 185-195.

² Tammy Sellers and Holly Barnett, *The Tennessee Department of Transportation: A Century of Achievement and Progress 1915-2015* (Nashville: Tennessee Department of Transportation, 2015), 10.

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promote cultural uplift. The resultant Good Roads Movement culminated in the creation of named (not yet numbered) interstate highways, constructed through private funding and sometimes public, including the Lincoln Highway in the northern United States, the Old Spanish Trail and the Lee Highway in the South, and the north-south Dixie Highway, Jefferson Highway, Atlantic Highway, and Pacific Highway.³

Many of Rock City’s signs were painted along the ‘named’ highways, particularly the Dixie Highway, which is not a single road but comprised of three roughly parallel sections that connected northern Michigan with Florida. The highway’s chief promoting organization, the Dixie Highway Association, was founded in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1915. Tennessee was not only the geographical center of the Dixie Highway but included sections of all three routes, meaning that Tennesseans were not only highly involved in its creation but benefitted heavily when it later led to increased tourism and economic activity. Promotion of the Dixie Highway and other such highways overlapped with the establishment of state-level public road agencies, such as the Tennessee State Highway Department in 1915, which resulted in public funding for highways and accelerated the construction process. Among the department’s initial top priorities was the Bristol to Memphis Highway, running the full east-west length of the state (see Figure 2), and the Dixie Highway.⁴



Figure 2: Route of the Memphis-Bristol Highway, 1911. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

At the same time, the Federal government dramatically increased its involvement in road construction in response to the Good Roads Movement. In 1916 the United States Congress passed the Federal-Aid Road Act, providing \$75 million for federal roads for five years. Subsequent acts dramatically increased the amount of funding to more than \$75 million per year, which solidified the federal government’s involvement

³ Sellers and Barnett, 13; Petroski, 43-45; Keith, “Lift Tennessee Out of the Mud: Ideology and the Good Roads Movement in Tennessee,” 185-195.

⁴ Sellars and Barnett; Martha Carver, “Drivin’ The Dixie Highway in Tennessee,” in *Looking Beyond the Highway: Dixie Roads and Culture*, edited by Claudette Stager and Martha Carver (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006).

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in road building and maintenance. Funding only increased once the Great Depression began in the late 1920s as road construction became one of many programs meant to kickstart the economy and provide employment. As road building became more complex, the government also standardized the system of numbering roads, the material of roads (typically concrete or asphalt which withstood weather and wear from vehicles significantly better than dirt or macadam), and the appearance of directional signage (see Figures 3 showing the complexity of construction and Figure 4 showing the much different appearance of modern roads as compared to earlier surfaces shown in Figure 1).⁵



Figure 3: Paving of the Memphis to Bristol Highway (Tennessee State Route 1) in Sparta, Tennessee, ca. 1949. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

⁵ Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 18-24.

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Figure 4: Memphis to Bristol Highway (Tennessee State Route 1, also known as Brockman Way in Sparta) after paving in Sparta, Tennessee, 1950. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Another major factor that influenced the new construction of roads was the growing popularity of the automobile. The gasoline-powered automobile had been invented in the late nineteenth century. By the first decade of the twentieth century, wealthy Americans had purchased automobiles primarily for recreation. The vehicles were expensive to buy and maintain, which precluded purchase by most people. Henry Ford’s moving assembly line changed that by offering the Model T, a simply designed and cheap automobile that the majority of Americans could afford. Other manufacturers quickly followed suit with models that appealed to the masses, which contributed to a relatively quick transition from horse-pulled vehicles to gasoline-powered automobiles. By the end of the Great Depression, the automobile had become a necessity of everyday life for a large portion of Americans.⁶

The accessibility of the automobile and corresponding development of vast and complex road systems contributed to profound changes in how people lived and traveled, both for everyday actions but also for occasional travel, such as for tourism. During the nineteenth century, long-distance travel for tourism was typically only available for wealthier patrons who could afford the monetary expense and necessary time to travel by train, at the quick end of the spectrum, or by water or road, on the slower end of the travel time

⁶ Lewis, 31-46

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spectrum. By the early-to-mid twentieth century, cheap travel via the automobile and improved roads meant that more middle- and working-class Americans could engage in tourism, particularly across long distances. Entrepreneurs established numerous new businesses along the road to serve the needs of travelers, including lodging, food, and service stations.⁷

While the automobile opened new modes of travel and experiences for all Americans, those experiences were not equally felt. African American drivers experienced motoring in the contexts of freedom and fear. The ability to travel freely without being relegated to the rear of public transportation opened new opportunities for travel, meaning that non-white drivers could decide their route for themselves without feeling the indignity of discrimination. However, that freedom to travel did not come without limits, some of which were imposed by the owners of public accommodations who would not serve Black patrons. Such industries included lodging, food, service stations, and tourist attractions. Rock City Gardens appeared to follow the path of most other white tourist attractions and did not allow non-white visitors, meaning that Black motorists would not have experienced the “See Rock City” signs the same as white motorists, at least not at first. Additionally, racist whites, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, used the threat of violence to discourage Black drivers from entering certain areas, particularly after sundown, leading to such areas becoming known as ‘Sundown Towns.’ In many instances, Klansmen went beyond threats to engage in actual violence, including beating or lynching Black motorists who had lost their way or broke down in unfriendly areas. These factors created a motoring experience that was substantially different than that of white drivers.⁸

As the number of people traversing the nation’s new roads increased, the commercial advertising industry shifted to meet them. The advertising industry had long relied on volume and repeated advertisements to reach consumers and reinforce their messaging. Advertisers had also long used outdoor signage to market everything from products to experiences using any surface available, including existing buildings or other structures and objects. Prior to and after roads became a major method of transportation, railroad companies painted advertisements on the sides of freight cars, such as the well-known campaign by the Great Northern Railroad promoting Glacier National Park and urging people to “See America First” by purchasing rail tickets to get there (see Figure 5). The Coca-Cola company, among many others, painted advertisements on the sides of commercial buildings in towns and cities. In rural areas, tobacco companies used barns as a canvas for signs as early as the late nineteenth century. Notably, the Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company of Wheeling, West Virginia had approximately 20,000 barns in twenty-two states painted by two-man traveling teams between 1891 and the 1970s. Barn owners received free tobacco and a monthly rental fee of \$1-2 (see Figure 6).⁹

⁷ John Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2008); Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2001).

⁸ Gretchen Sorin, *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020).

⁹ “An American Heritage: Mail Pouch Barns,” Greene County Tourist Promotion Agency, accessed November 19, 2023, <https://visitgreene.org/2020/09/an-american-heritage-mail-pouch-barns/>; Jeff Sherry, “Mail Pouch Barns: A Fading American Icon,” Hagen History Center, July 16, 2021, accessed November 12, 2024, <https://www.eriehistory.org/blog/mail-pouch-barns-a->

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Figure 5: Great Northern Railroad advertisement for Glacier National Park, painted on the side of a Freight Car, 1943.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

[fading-american-icon](#); Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012).

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Figure 6: Mail Pouch Tobacco Sign. Courtesy of Hagen History Center.

New roadways provided more physical spaces in which marketers could reach increasingly mobile consumers. As automobiles allowed motorists to increase their speed, advertisers experimented with new marketing techniques, including simplifying advertisements to short phrases accompanied by eye-catching images and later electric lights. Most new roadside advertisements were positioned on free-standing billboards, close to the side of the road, creating what has been described as “billboard alleys” (see Figure 7).¹⁰ Rock City’s later advertising campaign incorporated many of these old and new techniques, namely frequency of signs, use of existing surfaces, location close to the roadside, and short phrases.¹¹

¹⁰ Catherine Cudis, *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹¹ Cudis, *Buyways.*; Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*.

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Figure 7: Elk Avenue in Elizabethton, Tennessee, ca. 1963 showing the prevalence of billboards and signs painted on buildings in small towns. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

As an extreme method, some entrepreneurs designed buildings to not look like traditional buildings but rather like animals, objects like tea kettles or shoes, or non-traditional building forms (or at least, non-traditional to the predominantly white entrepreneurs). Known as mimetic architecture, these building forms were impossible to ignore and usually housed a roadside-related industry, including lodging, automotive services, or a tourist attraction.¹² The Grand Guitar, near Bristol, Tennessee, was built in 1982-83 in the shape of a Martin Dreadnought guitar and housed a music museum and gift shop before it was demolished in 2019 (see Figure 8).¹³ A building in the shape of a shoe once stood in Memphis, Tennessee (see Figure 9). The building opened in 1965 and housed a children’s shoe store. It later became a clothing store before being demolished in 1995.¹⁴ Non-traditional building examples include a chain of roadside motels known as

¹² Joan Marie Arbogast, *Buildings in Disguise: Architecture that looks like Animals, Food, and Other Things* (Homesdale, PA: Boyds Mill Press, 2004).

¹³ Claudette Stager and Anita Morell, “Grand Guitar,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2014), Section 8; “Grand Guitar (Demolished),” SAH Archipedia, accessed November 12, 2024, <https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/TN-01-163-0034>.

¹⁴ Vance Lauderdale, “Lost Memphis: Remembering when the “Big Shoe” Got the Boot,” Memphis Magazine, September 8, 2011, accessed November 12, 2024, <https://memphismagazine.com/ask-vance/lost-memphis-when-the-big-shoe-got-the-boot/>.

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‘Wigwam Village’ for their cabins in the shape of teepees constructed with wood framing and stucco. A highly intact example of a village stands in Cave City, Kentucky, which was built in 1937 to serve motorists on Highway 31W, particularly those visiting Mammoth Cave (see Figure 10).¹⁵ Less extreme examples include those businesses who simply used oversized objects or animals as symbols to attract the attention of motorists, such as Sinclair Oil Company’s use of dinosaur statues next to gas stations as well as on its branding and signs.¹⁶



Figure 8: Grand Guitar Museum and Gift Shop, Bristol, Tennessee, 2013. Courtesy of the Tennessee Historical Commission.

¹⁵ Claudia R. Brown and Keith A. Sculle, “Wigwam Village No. 2,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1988).

¹⁶ “DINO History,” Sinclair Oil, accessed November 12, 2024, <https://www.sinclairoil.com/dino-history>.

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Figure 9: The Big Shoe, Memphis, Tennessee, 1989. Courtesy of the Tennessee Historical Commission.



Figure 10: Wigwam Village, Cave City, Kentucky, 1988. Courtesy of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

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Rock City Gardens was established as tourist attraction within these contexts. Rock City Gardens is a National Register-listed tourist attraction on Lookout Mountain in Georgia, just south of the border with Tennessee. Rock City is located in an area that was initially marketed as a residential and recreational development called Fairyland Estates in the early twentieth century. Frieda Utermoehlen Carter (1880-1964) and her husband, Garnet Carter (1883-1954), purchased the property in 1924 and began designing and planning a rock garden that they originally intended to be part of their own residential property. Frieda Carter's initial garden incorporated the natural rocky topography of the site, which she supplemented with twine-marked paths and newly planted indigenous plants. Around 1930, the Carters began making improvements in anticipation of opening the property as a tourist attraction, which followed in 1932.¹⁷

Rock City Gardens incorporated 'natural' tourism with commercialized amusement opportunities (see Figure 11). Alongside the natural topography, the Carters installed man-made decorations such as gnomes and storybook characters to create an engaging experience. The location of Rock City atop Lookout Mountain also provided a unique visual experience with views for miles in multiple directions. On clear days, visitors could see landscape features from up to seven states, leading to a later advertising slogan "See 7 States."¹⁸



Figure 11: Rock City Gardens Post Card, ca. 1935. From "Digital Heritage Moment: Rock City," accessed November 12, 2024, <https://thelaurelofasheville.com/lifestyle/heritage/digital-heritage-moment-rock-city/>.

¹⁷ Patrick Sullivan, Julie Coco, and Denise P. Messick, "Rock City Gardens," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2010).

¹⁸ Sullivan, Coco, and Messick; Tim Hollis, *See Rock City: The History of Rock City Gardens* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009).

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In 1935, the Carters began a roadside advertisement program that brought the phrase “See Rock City” to American highways as far north as Lansing, Michigan, and throughout the southeast and midwestern United States. The Carters employed young sign-painter Clark Byers to paint signs on barns along roads for a fee of \$40 per barn. The owners of the barns received a small lease payment, typically \$5-10 per year, and the promise that the signs would be maintained, thereby providing the farmer free maintenance. Byers’ first sign was near Kimball, Tennessee along the Dixie Highway, so chosen because it had become a major tourist route from Chicago to Florida. It stated, “35 Miles to Rock City atop Lookout Mountain” (see Figure 12). Over the next few decades, Byers painted hundreds of barns with Rock City advertisements. The most common phrase was “See Rock City,” often paired with “See 7 States,” “Beautiful Beyond Belief,” or the “World’s 8th Wonder.” Many signs referenced Rock City’s location near Chattanooga or atop Lookout Mountain. Others followed the model of the first sign and told motorists how many miles they had until Rock City and others provided directions, such as which highway to stay on. By 1956, Byers had painted more than 800 signs throughout the country, contributing to the “See Rock City” campaign becoming one of the most recognizable advertising campaigns in the country.¹⁹



Figure 12: Rock City Barns Painted Clark Byers (left) with barn owner Cecil Smith (right) at the first barn in Kimball, Tennessee, 1961. The barn was later demolished for construction of Interstate 24. Courtesy of See Rock City, Inc.

¹⁹ Hollis, 39-42, 80-85, 97

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As Byers continued to paint signs along roadways, the federal government took steps to further transform vehicular transportation systems. In 1956, the federal government enacted the Federal-Aid Highway Act, co-authored by Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, Sr., which established massive funding for the construction of more than 41,000 miles of limited-access interstate highways. Over the next several decades, new interstates were constructed across the country, sometimes running parallel to existing state highway routes but often blazing new paths through areas previously undeveloped or occupied only by agricultural land. The Tennessee portion of the original interstate designation was completed in 1985, encompassing I-40 from Knoxville to Memphis, I-81 from Virginia to Knoxville, I-75 from the Cumberland Gap to Chattanooga, I-65 from Kentucky to Alabama, I-24 from Clarksville to Chattanooga, and I-155 from Dyersburg to Memphis.²⁰

The interstate transformed American life in positive and negatives ways. The interstate allowed people and goods to move more quickly and cheaply than ever before. In urban areas, however, it contributed to the destruction of neighborhoods, particularly those occupied by the working class and non-white people and created new traffic woes. In rural areas, the interstate shifted transportation and commercial patterns from the well-travelled but narrower state highways, resulting in a decrease of travelers and therefore contributing to the economic decline of bypassed communities. Simultaneously, communities near the new interstates began to grow with commercial areas established around access points, contributing to new low-density growth patterns centered around the automobile and parking, rather than walkable high-density development previously seen in historic areas.²¹

The issue of commercial advertising along American highways and interstates was also a controversial issue in the mid-twentieth century. Conservationists and critics of the interstates pointed to the numerous billboards along highways as unsightly and disruptive to the natural environment. They found support from First Lady of the United States Lady Bird Johnson who convinced her husband President Lyndon B. Johnson to include highway beautification in his Great Society legislative programs. On October 22, 1965, Johnson signed the Federal Highway Beautification Act into law. The act regulated signage and other aspects of the areas immediately adjacent to all highways, such as requiring advertisers to move billboards six hundred feet from the highway and requiring permits for other signs.²²

The Beautification Act had an immediate impact on “See Rock City” signs. Any signs that violated the act were supposed to be moved. If moving the sign was not possible, they had to be destroyed. Since the signs were located on buildings that could not be moved, Byers was required to paint over any signs that violated the act, thereby destroying a large portion of Rock City’s advertisements. For those signs that could remain, they were required to get a permit. The first permit in the State of Tennessee was for a Rock City sign.²³ In 1974, the act was amended to allow “landmark signs,” lawfully painted before 1965, that had historic or

²⁰ Sellers and Barnett, 85-93.

²¹ Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Lewis, *Divided Highways*.

²² Lewis, 168-173.

²³ Hollis, 115.

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artistic significance to remain, including those painted on barns.²⁴ As a result, many of Rock City’s signs became grandfathered into the law and no longer had to be deliberately destroyed, but the damage to many signs had already been done.

In 1968, Clark Byers retired after he was electrocuted while repainting a sign near Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Other painters took over the maintenance and painting program, but the advertising program decelerated, with even a brief self-imposed moratorium on new signs in 1974.²⁵ Rock City has periodically continued to repaint some signs and has continued lease agreements with amenable owners, but many owners choose to not continue the lease, and the signs were either destroyed or left with no maintenance. As a result, many signs have fallen victim to deterioration of the building on which they were painted. Numerous barns in recent years have either collapsed or been demolished, meaning that the numbers of signs remaining is dwindling by the day (see Figure 13).



Figure 13: Collapsed Barn in Bryson City, North Carolina, 2021. The barn is completely non extant as of 2022.

Courtesy of Google Streetview.

²⁴ Mason Smith, “Facing American: Once banned, barn art’s now preserved as landmark,” *Messenger Inquirer*, July 30, 1979; 23 U.S. Code § 131, Cornell Law School, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/23/131>, accessed September 4, 2024.

²⁵ Hollis, 118

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While estimates of the number of total signs usually range around 800-900, there is no comprehensive record of every barn that was painted with Rock City slogans. See Rock City, Inc., retains records on dozens of signs, including mid-century billboards that appear to be entirely non-extant, but it appears that not all barns historically had a record. In 1994-1995, author David B. Jenkins attempted to find and photograph as many extant Rock City barns as he could. See Rock City, Inc president Bill Chapin loaned him their file records of the barns to help, but Jenkins recounted finding twenty barns that Rock City had no record of, which was attributed to early record-keeping errors. His experience indicates that it would likely be impossible to identify every known instance of a Rock City sign.²⁶ Numerous enthusiasts have attempted to catalog extant signs through websites and social media groups, which has proven an important tool of recordation and for research, but even then only a few dozen barns have been documented with even those barns having follow-up documentation of empty lots or piles of wood from a collapsed barn due to neglect or storm damage. Other signs have been lost when the barn owner requested the sign be painted over. Estimates of signs that remain typically range around seventy though Rock City’s own list numbers at forty-two, as of the end of 2023 (see Section J).²⁷

Conversely, a new Rock City advertising program has also contributed to the removal of historic signs. In 2021, See Rock City, Inc. announced that it had partnered with the Tennessee Titans NFL Team in Nashville to install new signs on barns that had previously featured historic signs. The new signs use a combination of Tennessee Titans logo and colors (red, blue, and white), as well as the popular “See Rock City” slogan (see Figure 14). The new campaign represents a new era of Rock City advertising. While Rock City could have used new billboards, the choice to use barns indicates an urge to continue the long tradition of roadside signage which made Rock City so popular and has made “See Rock City” an important phrase in American roadside history.

²⁶ David B. Jenkins, *Rock City Barns: A Passing Era* (Chattanooga, TN: Free Spirit Press, 1996), 10. It is also important to note that See Rock City, Inc. does not necessarily have complete records for the barns that it has recorded. The file cards that Jenkins described in his book appear to have not been kept as few were found in the records that Rock City currently stores. It appears that new file cards were prepared in the 1960s when Rock City attempted to keep consistent maintenance logs. While some information was transferred to the new cards, it does not appear that all information was transferred or kept because many files do not state the information on when a sign was originally painted. However, a barn list kept by Rock City has recorded the original lease date, which can be considered an accurate record of when a barn was originally painted.

²⁷ Caroline Eubanks, “Is This Your Last Chance to ‘See Rock City’?” Atlas Obscura, May 19, 2022, accessed August 31, 2024, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/rock-city-barns-disappearing>; Barn Files, See Rock City, Inc., Lookout Mountain, Georgia.

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Figure 14: Rock City Barn near Chattanooga, Tennessee with the ca. 2021 Tennessee Titans Advertising Campaign. Courtesy of See Rock City, Inc.

The campaign’s success has been mimicked in multiple mediums, including barn-shaped birdhouses with the slogan “See Rock City” on the roof. Clark Byers originally created the birdhouse as a mailbox in the shape of a Rock City barn in the 1950s, but when the U.S. Postal Service said that the design was against regulations, Byers made the mailbox into a birdhouse. The birdhouse became one of Rock City’s most successful promotions and is a common form of souvenir sold in Rock City’s giftshop, found not only as actual birdhouses but also miniature versions on earrings, keychains, Christmas Tree ornaments, and other souvenirs. The birdhouse form has also been used on outdoor advertising signs, such as a sign near Interstate 24 at Halletown, Tennessee. A Rock City-owned farm called Blowing Springs Farm in Flintstone, Georgia has a barn that has been designed to look a birdhouse, complete with the “See Rock City” slogan on the roof (see Figure 15).

The success of Rock City’s advertising campaign has been referenced on other advertisements, such as an ad on a billboard that is open for lease, which has an image of a Rock City barn birdhouse, complete with the phrase “See Rock City” and the statement “Outdoor Ads Work!” suggesting that viewers were expected to immediately recognize the past success of Rock City’s advertisements (see Figure 16). Rock City signs have

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also been included in museums, including the American Sign Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio (see Figure 17) and the East Tennessee History Center in Knoxville, Tennessee, indicating that Rock City signs have been recognized by art and material cultural historians as significant and worthy of preservation.



Figure 15: Rock City Birdhouse Barn at Blowing Springs Farm, Flintstone, Georgia, Courtesy of Seeing the Scenic City Blog.



Figure 16: Billboard located on Interstate 40 near Mile Marker 367 near Lenoir City, Tennessee. Courtesy of Google Streetview.

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Figure 17: Rock City Sign in the American Sign Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2023. Photo Courtesy of Holly Barnett.

The Rock City barns are perhaps one of the best-known advertising campaigns in U.S. history and certainly within the State of Tennessee. The signs are synonymous with traveling through the Midwest and South, alongside other well-known campaigns that used similar methods, such as those for Meramec Caverns show cave near St. Louis, Missouri; the Lookout Mountain Caverns and Castle (better known as Ruby Falls) near Chattanooga, Tennessee; and advertisements for such products as mail pouch tobacco and Burma-Shave shaving cream. A 1983 article in the Tennessee chapter of the Association Institute of Architects remarked that the “See Rock City” barns and birdhouses and Burma-Shave signs competed to fulfill the role of “relieving the monotony of south bound vacationers,” a role that has long been taken for granted but now has almost disappeared.²⁸ While Rock City signs and similar other roadside signs once covered the landscape, relatively few remain today to convey this significant history of roadside advertisement, making their designation and preservation that much more crucial and timely.

²⁸ “Bluecollar Paradise in Transition,” *Tennessee Architect* III (Fall 1983): 10.

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F. Associated Property Types: “See Rock City” Signs

Property Type Description

“See Rock City” Signs are typically located on the roof or a side elevation of a roadside building whose function was unrelated to the advertisement. The most common building type utilized as a canvas for the signs were barns, due to the fact that they were so common across southeastern and midwestern states whose major industries historically included agriculture. The majority of signs are located on the side elevations or roofs facing the highways that led towards Rock City, which was a deliberate attempt to attract passing motorists, as well as to direct people in the right direction or indicate how far they had to drive.

Prior to 2021, the signs primarily only used white paint to form written messages, usually with no other imagery. The few images used were limited to highway symbolization, such as the U.S. Route shield or an inverted triangle for Tennessee state routes. Beginning in 2021, a new partnership campaign with the Tennessee Titans NFL football team introduced signs that used the Titans’ logo and colors (red, blue, and white), representing a new campaign and era for Rock City roadside advertisements.

Regardless of era or design, all signs are united by reference to Rock City Gardens, as well as a clear directive to visit the property. The most common messages included “See Rock City” and “See 7 States from Rock City.” Most signs feature some variation of these messages, sometimes combining them, sometimes specifying the site’s location atop Lookout Mountain or near Chattanooga, and sometimes commenting on Rock City as “Beautiful,” “Beautiful Beyond Belief,” or the “World’s 8th Wonder.”

Many signs incorporated references to mileage or directions to convey to motorists how to get to Rock City or how far away they were. For example, one sign stated “100 Mi. to Rock City atop Lookout Mt.” while another stated “Stay on 58 and See Beautiful Rock City” with the 58 depicted within an inverted triangle, referencing the then-symbolization for Tennessee State Route (Highway) 58 and indicating direction to motorists. Another barn stated “Stay on U.S. 64 and see Beautiful Rock City” with U.S. 64 within the U.S. Route Shield symbol.

A lesser number of buildings had more unique signs, such as:

- “To Miss Rock City Would be a Pity”
- “Millions have seen Rock City Have You?”
- “It’s Fun for the Family in Rock City”
- “Bring Your Camera to Rock City”
- “When You see Rock City, You see the Best”

Another subset of signs was located on the sides and roofs of buildings facing the roads leading away from Rock City. These signs featured “Goodbye” messages with instructions to “Tell Your Friends about Rock City,” which reinforced the function of the signs as a tool to attract visitors, both those people passing but also through word-of-mouth networks of past visitors.

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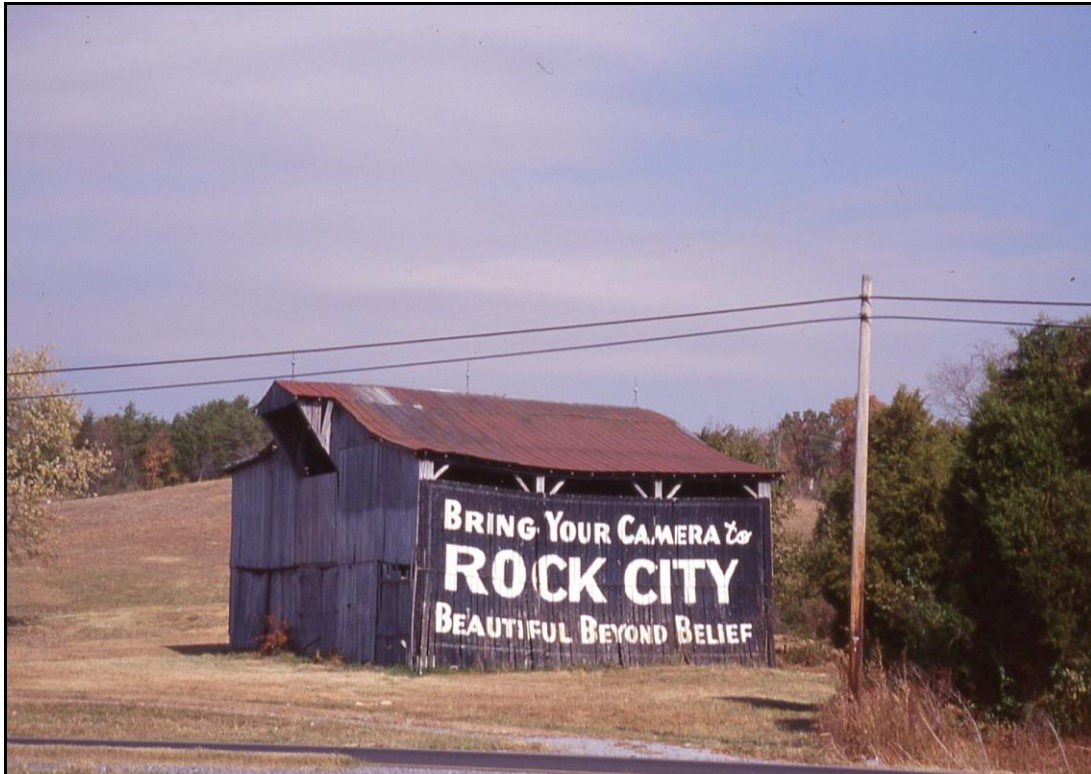


Figure 18: Rock City Barn near Greeneville, Tennessee on Highway 11E, ca. 1998. Courtesy of Claudette Stager.



Figure 19: Rock City Barn near Waverly, Tennessee, 2024. Courtesy of author.

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Figure 20: Rock City Barn near Chattanooga, Tennessee, ca. 1998. Courtesy of Claudette Stager.

Significance

“See Rock City” signs are significant under Criterion A in the area of Commerce. The signs played an important role in the advertisement campaign of Rock City Gardens, which is connected to broad patterns of American history, particularly the intertwining themes of vehicular transportation patterns, commercial advertisement, and automobile tourism, which all contributed to the development of American roadways into ‘buyways’ in which advertisers saturated the roadside with short directives to purchase products or visit tourist sites like Rock City Gardens.

“See Rock City” signs were historically ubiquitous, part of a large network of hundreds of signs across several states which continuously reinforced their message to motorists. While once common, “See Rock City” signs are relatively scarce today. The majority have been destroyed, either through painting over them or through the destruction of the associated building. Some signs have been removed from their building and installed in museums, which indicates that public historians have recognized the signs’ historically significant role and see value in preserving and interpreting them for public education, just not in situ. As explained below, such signs that have been removed from the location and have become museum artifacts are not eligible under this MPDF.

To be eligible under this MPDF, the sign should be at least fifty years old. National Register criteria allows resources less than fifty years old to be eligible, as long as the requirements of Criterion Consideration G can be satisfied. Criterion Consideration G requires establishing the resource as exceptionally significant in

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comparison to similar property types. This MPDF establishes that all “See Rock City” signs played an important role in the overall Rock City Gardens advertising campaign, but no information currently suggests that any one sign is exceptionally significant in comparison to the others. Therefore, this MPDF does not provide justification for listing signs that are less than 50 years old under Criterion Consideration G.

The Period of Significance for each sign begins when the sign was painted and began to play a role in Rock City Gardens’ commercial advertising campaign. Intact signs continue to play an important role to the present-day as they continue to remind motorists to visit Rock City, but the National Register Period of Significance will usually end at the default 50-year cutoff from the time of nomination, in keeping with National Register guidance.

Integrity

National Register criteria of integrity is defined by seven aspects: location, setting, materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and association. To be eligible under this MPDF, the “See Rock City” sign should retain the majority of these aspects but there is allowance for some aspects to be diminished, as specified below. These aspects of integrity are typically only regarding the sign itself. The building on which the sign is located can experience changes without affecting integrity under this MPDF, as long as those changes do not substantially affect the sign itself. Any changes that affect the sign must be evaluated following the guidance of this MPDF described below.

Location: “See Rock City” signs must remain in their same location as they were during the Period of Significance, meaning that the sign must remain on the same location on the building on which it was painted, and the overall building must remain at the same location as it was at least fifty years ago. Signs that have been moved, such as through overall movement of the building or through just movement of the sign portion, will not be eligible under this MPDF until they have been at their new location for fifty years and meet all other requirements of this multiple. Signs that have been moved for use as a museum artifact and therefore have lost their connection with the roadside are not considered eligible under this MPDF.

Setting: Most “See Rock City” signs were painted in rural areas near roadways. Ideally, the rural setting should remain but development in the setting will not prevent a sign from being eligible if most other aspects of integrity are reasonably intact as outlined in this MPDF. Ideally, the sign should retain its sightline to the roadway, but the sign can still be eligible under this MPDF if the road has been realigned or if intervening development has broken the sightline.

Materials: “See Rock City” signs were historically comprised of white and black paint on the roofs or sides of roadside buildings. The surface materials varied but most commonly were wood or metal. A later campaign incorporated red and blue paint. The majority of the sign’s materials should be intact. Periodic repainting of the signs occurred throughout the history of the Rock City signage campaigns and is considered routine maintenance, provided that the design of the sign is not substantially changed by the repainting. Faded signs that have not been repainted will be considered eligible if the sign is discernable. Signs that have

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completely faded and are essentially non-extant will not be considered intact and therefore will not be eligible.

Since the signs were not just decorative but were painted on part of the structure of buildings, they may include some surfaces that have been repaired or replaced as a necessary intervention to allow the building to fulfill its primary function. Repaired or replacement materials will not necessarily prevent a sign from being eligible as long as the repairs/replacements were done in-kind, in keeping with the Secretary of Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. Changes to the building itself, such as replacing doors or making new openings, will also not affect the eligibility of the sign, provided that the sign is still discernable and meets other requirements (see Figure 21 for an example of a barn with alterations that could still be eligible).

There may be instances where the function of the building may necessitate a more substantive change to the surface on which the sign is painted. For example, many signs were painted on the roofs of buildings, which play an important role in sheltering human activity. If the roof fails and cannot be repaired, it may be necessary to install a new roof. Creative preservation solutions can allow the sign to still be eligible. For example, this MPDF allows the signs to be temporarily dismantled to install a new roof. If the sign is reinstalled above the new roof, then it will still be considered eligible. If the surface of the original sign is completely removed and destroyed, then that constitutes destruction of the sign. If completely repainted on all new materials, that new sign will have to reach fifty years of age before it would be considered eligible under this MPDF.

Design: The signs should retain their same overall design and message as they had more than 50 years ago. Over time, some signs were altered or repainted with new messages, such as those that incorporated mentions of Rock City’s website or for the new Tennessee Titans campaigns. Such newer designs could be eligible once they reach fifty years of age.

Workmanship: A “See Rock City” sign must retain evidence of workmanship to be eligible. Workmanship includes the technique in which the sign was created (painted sign using the structure of a building as a canvas).

Feeling: “See Rock City” signs evoke a feeling of the historical past where motorists used roadside advertising to guide them towards recreation and amusement opportunities. The signs must retain their integrity of feeling, which is essentially an amalgamation of the other aspects of integrity that speaks to the abstract culmination of these resource as physical evidence of earlier roadside advertising and tourist patterns of history.

Association: A “See Rock City” sign must have been associated with the formal Rock City advertising campaign more than 50 years ago to qualify for listing under this MPDF.

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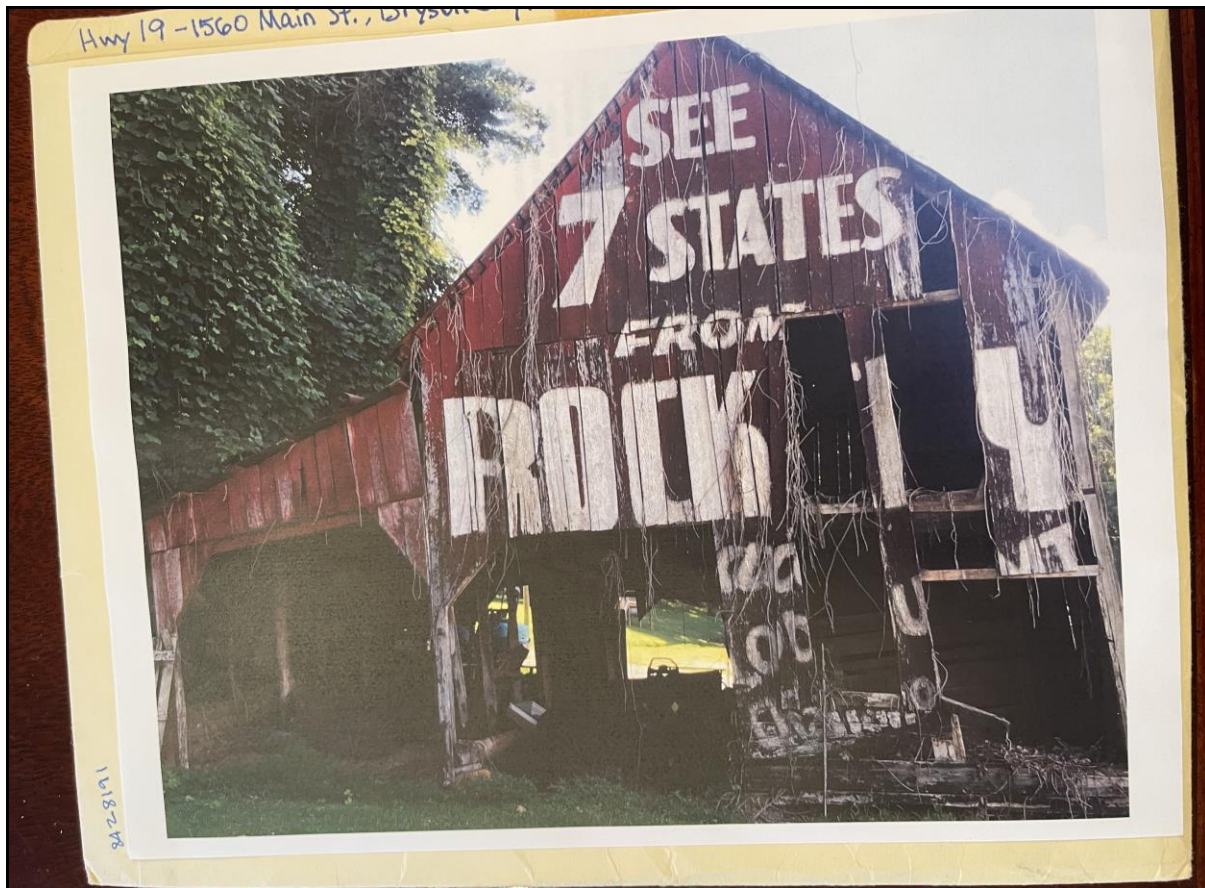


Figure 21: Example of a sign that has been affected by changes on the barn (new openings and generally poor condition) but is still discernable and would therefore still have enough integrity to be eligible it were extant. Barn was located in Bryson City, North Carolina but is not extant as of 2021. Photo Courtesy of See Rock City, Inc.

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G. Geographic Data

The “See Rock City” signs MPDF is limited to the political boundaries of the State of Tennessee, the state in which the majority of “See Rock City” signs were historically created and the state which still features newer Rock City advertising campaigns.

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H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

“See Rock City” Signs have inspired a devoted fanbase of people who nostalgically remember the signs from past decades as part of their life experiences engaging in automobile tourism. As a result, numerous hobby websites, social media groups, and published books have been created to document the signs and tell their important story. Due to concerns and restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning stages of drafting this MPDF in 2020-22 utilized these sources, which included historic and current images of the signs, historical narratives, and often georeferenced locational data, though many signs’ locations have been lost if they are no longer extant. The author also solicited examples of surveyed signs from other State Historic Preservation Offices but received no replies, suggesting that these signs have largely flown under the radar of most professional preservationists. In early 2024, See Rock City, Inc. president and CEO Doug Chapin granted permission for TN-SHPO staff to access Rock City’s archive of barn files, which provided crucial information on the barn maintenance program, past advertising campaigns (such as free-standing billboards that are all not extant), and photos to substantiate the existence and history of many barns. The author wishes to thank Doug Chapin and his staff, particularly Laura Prince and Meagan Jolley, for providing access to the files as well as other information such as the then-current list of extant barns.

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J. Extant Barns List

The list below was provided by See Rock City, Inc. and records the forty-two barns that are known to be extant, as of November 2023. This list should not be considered exhaustive or comprehensive as incomplete records make it difficult to precisely determine if other barns may also still be standing. Attempts were made in Fall 2024 to find every barn listed here and provide GPS coordinates, but not all were found due to limitations of the study.

SIGN#	LOCATION	COORDINATES	CITY	COUNTY	STATE	ROAD	ORIGINAL LEASE DATE
5169/5170	LITTLE RIVER CANYON RD. E		FORT PAYNE	DEKALB	AL	AL35	10/1/1960
5217	18 MI S TRENTON, GA		HENEGAR	DEKALB	AL	AL75	6/1/1961
5703	AUTO JUNKYARD		VALLEY HEAD	DEKALB	AL	US11S	
5704	US11S VALLEY HEAD, AL		VALLEY HEAD	DEKALB	AL	US11S	
5210	12 MI S TRENTON, GA	34.76061, -85.60310	FLAT ROCK	JACKSON	AL	AL75	6/1/1961
5103	5 MI S OF MADISONVILLE		HUNTSVILLE	MONROE	AL	US411	7/1/1968
5108	14 MI N WEDOWEE, AL	33.45918, -85.55711	WEDOWEE	RANDOLPH	AL	US431	7/1/1955
5109	7 MI S OF ROANOKE		FIVE POINTS	RANDOLPH	AL	US431	7/1/1955
5245	7 MI S FAIRMOUNT, GA		RYDAL	BARTOW	GA	US411	4/1/1957
5706	.1 MI S M/P 228	34.94793, -85.41623	WILDWOOD	DADE	GA	Pope Ck. Rd.	
5006	F		ROCK SPRING	WALKER	GA	US27S	4/1/1968
5015	BLOWING SPRINGS FARM - Rock City's only owned barn	34.977936, -85.334916	FLINTSTONE	WALKER	GA	Old Chattanooga Valley Rd.	N/A
5069	BETWEEN LAFAYETTE & ROCK SPRING, 5200-5300 BLOCK OF HWY 27	34.783313, -85.252898	LAFAYETTE	WALKER	GA	US27S	5/1/1951
5031	6 MI E FLORA, IL		CLAY CITY	CLAY	IL	US50	6/1/1951
5028	3 MI S OF VIENNA, IL	37.367741, -88.888995	VIENNA	JOHNSON	IL	US45N	10/1/1949
5074	12 MI N LOUISVILLE, KY		SELLERSBURG	CLARK	IN	I65	8/1/1961
5034	3 MI N SPENCER at 2665 N US Hwy. 231	39.32821, -86.74542	SPENCER		IN	IN67	9/1/1951
5152	18 MI N EVANSVILLE, IN	38.22026, -87.56499	PRINCETON		IN	US41N	9/1/1949
5044	5 MI N OF PRINCETON, KY		PRESTON	CALDWELL	KY	KY91	11/1/1967
5042	1 MI S BONNIEVILLE, KY		BONNIEVILLE	HART	KY	US31W	7/1/1958
5701	LORETTO, KY		LORETTO	MARION	KY	BURKS SPRING RD	
5702	US31E SPENCER CO. KY				KY	US31E	
5128	13 MI W OF MURPHY	35.03072, -84.21097	MURPHY	CHEROKEE	NC	US64E	1/8/1949
5700	IN ROBBINSVILLE, NC		ROBBINSVILLE	GRAHAM	NC	US129	7/1/1964
5260	8 MI N OF PIKEVILLE	35.706947, -85.101941	PIKEVILLE	BLED SOE	TN	US127N	9/1/1959
5098	3 1/2 MI FROM JCT. 129 & 411	35.72387, -84.00193	MARYVILLE	BLOUNT	TN	US129	7/1/1964
5099	10 MI SE OF MARYVILLE	35.72437, -84.00236	MARYVILLE	BLOUNT	TN	US129	7/1/1964
5009	1 1/2 MI S OF HILLSBORO, TN		HILLSBORO	COFFEE	TN	US41N	3/1/1952
5000	9 1/2 MI SE OF CROSSVILLE	35.862889, -84.922258	CROSSVILLE	CUMBERLAND	TN	TN68	4/1/1953
5003	10 MI SE OF CROSSVILLE		CROSSVILLE	CUMBERLAND	TN	TN68	4/1/1953
5705	S.R. 282-5 MI W CROSSVILLE		CROSSVILLE	CUMBERLAND	TN	TN282	10/6/1986
5241	4 MI E OF RUTLEDGE		RUTLEDGE	GRAINGER	TN	US11W	8/1/1965
5064	11410 HIGHWAY 58	35.262346, -84.992130	GEORGETOWN	HAMILTON	TN	TN58N	5/1/1953
5085	2 1/2 MI E OF MCEWEN	36.095978, -87.583653	MCEWEN	HUMPHREYS	TN	US70	1/1/1953
5068	NEAR JASPER		JASPER	MARION	TN	I24	11/1/1967
5182	2 MI S OF SWEETWATER	35.563614, -84.506180	SWEETWATER	MCMINN	TN	US11N	6/1/1952
5066	8 MI S OF KINGSTON	35.787351, -84.576676	KINGSTON	ROANE	TN	TN58N	8/1/1950
5070	JUST W OF BUTTERMILK RD.	35.86130, -84.40472	KINGSTON	ROANE	TN	I40	7/1/1964
5087	2 MI S OF EAGLEVILLE		EAGLEVILLE	RUTHERFORD	TN	US41A	1/1/1965
5219	AT WINFIELD		WINFIELD	SCOTT	TN	US27N	12/1/1964
5095	18 MI E OF KNOXVILLE at GARNER HOLLOW RD.	35.85727, -83.72423	SEYMOUR	SEVIER	TN	US441	8/1/1950
5067	NEAR JASPER		JASPER	MARION	TN	I24	11/1/1967