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Parkway repairs will take a while

Will Hofmann
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - A series of sequential landslide repairs are well underway along the Blue Ridge Parkway's tallest peaks, as the National Park Service aims to reopen major sections of the parkway from Asheville to Craggy Gardens and Mount Mitchell in coming months.

But park service staff have indicated the long-term parkway repairs from Tropical Storm Helene are still without a timeline and major sections could be closed through 2026.

The park staff identified 57 landslides along the parkway after Helene, with the the highest concentration occurring from Linville Falls, near Milepost 317, south to Mount Mitchell State Park overlook, near MP 349. Restoring just one mile of the parkway has cost over \$2 million, according to a June 25 park service

presentation to the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority.

More than 312 miles of the 469-mile parkway that winds from Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Cherokee have reopened since the storm and repairs are expected to cost between \$1 billion and \$2 billion, the Citizen Times previously reported.

In the first phase of repairs, 12 landslides along nearly 50 miles of the parkway were targeted to reopen access from Asheville north to Craggy Gardens and Mount Mitchell State Park and restore full connectivity to the Pisgah Inn in Haywood County. The first phase has a target completion date of fall 2025, when visitors are expected to return to view fall color across Western North Carolina. Fall is typically the busiest season for the national park unit, which is usually the first- or second-most visited in the country.

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National Park Service repair crews have begun repairing a landslide at Milepost 401 near Ferrin Knob Tunnel #3. PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

New trail connects visitors with African American history



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays

In a shaded clearing near Mingus Mill lies a cemetery. Small, unmarked rocks sit at the head and foot of each plot, adorned with shimmering coins visitors have left as tokens of respect. • The names, life stories, and even the exact number of people occupying Enloe Cemetery in Great Smoky Mountains National Park have long been lost to history, but interest in this plot of ground has increased in recent years as pieces of the story have come to light. The cemetery is believed to be the final resting place of at least half a dozen Black people who were enslaved by the Mingus family.

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The new trail leading to Enloe Cemetery is 150 feet long and starts at the back of the parking lot for Mingus Mill. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE



President Donald Trump has directed Republican lawmakers to stay in town and skip a planned recess heading into the July 4 holiday if they must, in order to get the tax bill to his desk on his preferred timeline. CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

Trump pushes Senate to pass tax bill

Plan hits snags after parliamentary rules out key provisions

Francesca Chambers
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON - President Donald Trump's first order of business after returning to the White House after a trip overseas is to shore up support for a tax bill he's been pushing to have on his desk by July 4.

Trump's administration said it still expected Congress to meet the ambitious timeline, even as the bill ran into hurdles in the Senate that could delay its potential passage.

"We hope so," the president told reporters, as he left an East Room event.

The president's June 26 arrival in Washington, DC, after attending a NATO Summit in Europe capped a two-week period in which Trump's focus was on foreign affairs.

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Trail

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In 2023, two new interpretive signs were installed to illuminate the site’s history, and their presence highlighted the need for a better way to reach the cemetery, which sits atop a steep hill. The path from the parking lot was difficult to climb, often slippery, and prone to erosion. Thanks to a \$31,600 contribution from park partner Friends of the Smokies, a new access trail has been in place since December 2024.

“The Smokies trail crew did a phenomenal job in creating a sustainable trail to the cemetery along steep and challenging terrain so that future visitors can safely visit and honor the people there, without causing damaging erosion,” said Friends of the Smokies president and CEO Dana Soehn.

At just 150 feet, the trail is quite short, but it presented the park’s skilled trails crew with a worthy challenge. They had originally hoped to reroute the path to achieve a gentler incline but had to abandon that idea due to the potential for resource damage. The park pivoted its plan to use the same footprint as the existing trail, building steps of rot-resistant black locust logs filled with crushed gravel to alleviate erosion issues. Now, visitors can step sure-footed up the hill to reach the cemetery.

“When people say they don’t like stairs, it’s usually because they’re poorly built and you’re stepping up 12 inches with each stair, so taking care to make lower-rise steps goes a long way,” said Acting Trails supervisor Adam Monroe. “Aesthetically, using local materials like locust versus something like dimensional lumber is going to go a long way toward people accepting it as blending into the landscape.”

A crew of about five people finished the trail within three weeks. They used chainsaws to cut miter joints, joining the logs together so that the whole construction looks like one solid piece of wood. The final product “really blends into the area,” Monroe said.

The site’s easy-to-reach location also made it valuable as a teaching tool.

“We used it as a mentoring opportunity, because instead of hiking four miles in to reach a project, it’s right there,” Monroe said. “So we were able to use some newer folks and help teach them the construction methods.”

The new trail is the latest milestone in an ongoing effort to uncover the long-overlooked legacy of the Great Smoky Mountains’ Black residents. Funded by Smokies Life, one of the park’s four official partners, this research has been ongoing since 2018 under the auspices of the African American Experiences in the Smokies Project. The work has turned up a treasure trove of stories and connections catalogued on the park website, now woven into many wayside signs and interpretive programs.

Friends of the Smokies has also supported the effort. In addition to making the trail possible, the organization funded the new signs at Enloe Cemetery as well as ground-penetrating radar studies to better understand who is buried at Enloe and other African American cemeteries in the Smokies.

The project has turned up some surprising connections.

“Growing up, I did not envision myself or other Black people in the stereotype of what Appalachia is,” said Natrielfia Miller, education technician for the park and a native of the Piedmont region of North Carolina.

Through the AAESP, she’s come to know that both free and enslaved Black people thrived in these mountains — albeit in smaller numbers than their white or Native counterparts — and that they created one of the region’s most iconic sounds. A blend of African and European traditions, the banjo was “exclusively known as an African American tradition with West African influences” through the 1830s, according to the Smithsonian Institution.

“It’s become one of my passions, to try and get people out here who are like me, who had no concept of the National Park, and if they did, didn’t realize they could find connections in that space,” Miller said.

One person who discovered previously unexplored connections to the Smokies through the AAESP was blues and jazz musician Eric Mingus.

“I’d always heard about Mingus Mill and this area, but it wasn’t exactly a place we felt we had a piece of,” Mingus told Smokies Life in 2023, when he visited Enloe Cemetery with legendary cellist Yo-Yo Ma to perform a song he’d written inspired by the people buried in the cemetery. “Historically, this was the place my grandfather fled.”

Eric Mingus is the great-grandson of Daniel Mingus, a man whose early years were spent enslaved by the Mingus family, the white family that once



Eric Mingus, the great-grandson of Daniel Mingus, a Black man who was once enslaved on the Mingus property and continued to live there as a free man following the Civil War, visits Enloe Cemetery in 2023. PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE



Left: No names are etched in the stones marking gravesites at Enloe Cemetery, but the site is believed to be a burial ground for Black people enslaved by the Mingus family. Right: Coins left atop grave markers at Enloe Cemetery near Mingus Mill symbolize respect and visibility. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE



A hiker begins the steep, short walk up to Enloe Cemetery on the new trail. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

owned the land where the cemetery lies. Daniel Mingus continued working for the family after slavery was abolished, and in 1870 he married a white woman named Sarah. By 1880 the couple had five sons.

Eric Mingus’ grandfather Charles Mingus, however, was born around 1877 following an extramarital affair with Clarinda Mingus, a 19-year-old white woman. When Charles was six years

old, his mother married and moved to Sevier County, Tennessee, leaving him to be raised by his grandfather John Mingus, a white man.

This was evidently a difficult upbringing for Charles, who left home when he was just 14 years old and returned only once, for a visit in his early 20s. At age 16, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and began a long military career, including about 20 years in the

24th Infantry Regiment, a segregated Black regiment known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

Charles Mingus was stationed at a variety of sites throughout the American West, and while in New Mexico he married a woman named Mary Taylor, with whom he had two children. They later divorced, and the children stayed with their mother. Soon afterwards, Charles Mingus married Harriet Sophia Phillips, a woman of African and Chinese heritage. Shortly after bearing their third child and moving the family to Los Angeles, California, Harriet died of myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle.

Their youngest child, Charles Mingus Jr., would grow up to become a pivotal figure in 20th-century American music, a renowned bass player, pianist, bandleader, and composer who played and recorded with leading musicians from the 1950s until his death in 1979, at the age of 56.

Uncovering the Daniel Mingus family story doesn’t dispel the mystery surrounding the identities of the people buried at Enloe Cemetery, as Daniel Mingus is not believed to be among them — he is likely buried in the Cowee community of Macon County, North Carolina, about 18 miles away as the crow flies. But it does point to the richness and complexity of the legacies those humble headstones memorialize. With the new trail in place, those connections are more accessible than ever.

Learn more about the African American Experiences in the Smokies Project at [NPS.gov/grsm/learn/history-culture/african-american-experiences-in-the-smokies-project.htm](https://nps.gov/grsm/learn/history-culture/african-american-experiences-in-the-smokies-project.htm). To learn more about how Black musicians have contributed to the songs of Southern Appalachia, check out the Smokies Life mini-series Sepia Tones, available through most major streaming services as part of the Smoky Mountain Air podcast.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.