

Preserving the ‘Sky Railroad’: The Keane Wonder Mine Aerial Tramway

The Keane Wonder Mine, located in Death Valley National Park, was one of the largest mining operations in California’s Funeral Mountains during the gold boom of the early 1900s. The mine’s gravity-powered aerial tramway transported ore down the mountain using the weight of the descending ore-filled buckets to raise empty ones back to the surface of the mineshaft. At the time of its construction, the 1.5-mile-long tramway was both an engineering feat and a tourist attraction.

The mine closed in 1912, but the defunct tramway remained a popular destination for visitors to the National Park until recently, when the area was closed due to safety concerns. Over the years, the massive timber structures that support the tram’s cables have been subjected to rot and decay; stabilization is required to ensure that these historic resources remain to help future generations interpret the rich history of gold mining in California.

The National Park Service has partnered with the University of Vermont’s School of Engineering in an endeavor to preserve the tramway structures. Beginning in March of 2010, a team from the University will travel to Death Valley to develop a treatment program of research, structural assessment, and repair techniques necessary to preserve the tramway.