

Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance

Highway Name: U.S. Highway (US) 491

CDOT Route Nos. and Milepost (MP) Limits:

<i>CDOT Route</i>	<i>Route Description</i>
491A	From the New Mexico State Line North To SH 160A South of Cortez
491B	From SH 160A in Cortez northwest via Dove Creek To the Utah State Line
491C	From Cortez Spur Connection-From SH 160-A in Cortez Northwest To SH 491-B

Highway Location:

Counties: Dolores, Montezuma
Length (Miles): 50.052

OAHP Site Numbers (for previously recorded segments, if applicable)*:

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Assessment Date</i>	<i>Site Name</i>
5MT.22131.1	Field eligible		US HIGHWAY 491

Discussion of Site Forms (for previously recorded segments, if applicable):

One Colorado Cultural Resources Inventory form (5MT.22131.1) was identified for previously recorded segments of this highway. 5MT.22131.1 corresponds to a three-mile segment of US 491 that generally extends along the west edge of Cortez and then north of the city. US 491 was previously recommended as field eligible and this segment was recommended as contributing to the eligibility of the overall linear resource.

Historic Districts located within 250 feet of highway (OAHP Site Number and Name)*:

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>District Name</i>	<i>Assessment (If Applicable)</i>
None	No historic districts are found on or adjacent to this highway	

*Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP

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Historical Data:

US 491 is approximately 50 miles long and consists of two distinct segments each with its own history.

The northernmost segment extends between Cortez and the Utah state line west of Dove Creek - this segment has an earlier association with US 160 because it was designed and functioned as part of that route until around 1970. US 160 is recommended as possessing significance as an early and prominent transportation route across southern Colorado constructed by the Colorado Highway Department. The evaluation of US 160 notes the entire route as it existed historically in southern Colorado is significant as an early highway that opened western Colorado for automobile transportation by providing a vital link between southwestern Colorado and the southeastern portion of the state. See the Colorado Historic Highway Inventory form for US 160 for more detail.

Historic state highway maps indicate that the northernmost segment of US 491 was established by the early 1920s and continued through the mid-1930s with various alignments, including stair-step patterns at various points, and designations of US 450 and US 160. By 1937 historic highway maps show the general alignment of the current highway in place and co-signed US 160 and State Highway (SH) 10 until 1970.

The southernmost segment travels north from the New Mexico state line for approximately 6 miles before being cosigned with current US 160 for approximately 20 miles until reaching Cortez. Within Cortez, the highway is surrounded by commercial and light industrial development that dates to the post-World War II period. In areas to the north and south of Cortez the highway passes through lands used for farming and ranching.

Southwestern Colorado is a generally mountainous region that owes much of its history to mining. The earliest transportation corridors in southwest Colorado were wagon roads that often followed trails established by Native Americans, explorers, fur trappers, and traders. Later, the Colorado Gold Rush of 1859 brought an influx of people to Colorado's southwestern region in search of fortune and led to the establishment of mining camps and farms and ranches through the area to supply activities at the mines and those working in the mines with goods and services. Notable, early mining towns like Silverton, Placerville, and Ouray are generally located northeast of US 491 and this highway does not have an association with an early trail or mining activities in this part of the state.

US 491 travels through ranch land where livestock-raising persists and is supported by towns like Cortez, Dolores, and Dove Creek; however, US 491 does not provide a direct or important connection to regional markets as a farm-to-market road. Other routes in this region, such as US 160 and US 550, provide direct access to regional markets for agricultural goods.

In 1956 the Aneth Field, a large oil field bordering southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah and northeastern Arizona, was developed by Texaco, Superior, Phillips, and Shell. Major drilling and development activities began in the 1960s in coordination with the Navajo Nation (Colorado State Planning Commission 1941; 141, 426; Ubbelohde et al 2006; 175-177; Resolute Energy Corporation 2011; McPherson 2016). This expansive oil field is located to the west of US 491 and is accessed by numerous highways and local roads in Utah, Colorado and Arizona. While this segment of US 491 passes between Hovenweep National Monument/Canyons of the Ancients National Monuments and Mesa Verde National Park, it does not provide direct or primary access to either of these destinations. US 160 east of Cortez provides direct access to Mesa Verde National Park and was specifically promoted as the route to reach this important tourist destination. Hovenweep National Monument/Canyons of the Ancients National Monument is accessed by other highways in bordering states and indirectly via US 491 from a local road south of Cortez.

Site form 5MT.22131.1 notes that the US 491 possesses significance in southwestern Colorado, for its role in oil production, uranium mining, and tourism. However, as noted above, research did not reveal that the highway provided early, direct, or critical access to the Aneth Oil fields, uranium mines, or to important recreational destinations; oil extraction and area mining activities were accessed by other highways, such as SH 141 and US 160, which have a stronger association with these themes.

A road following the general alignment of the southernmost segment was established by 1924 and designated US 560 by 1926. By 1927 the southern segment was part of US 666, which extended south from Cortez and into New Mexico. In 2003, the State of Mexico spearheaded an effort to fix geometric problems with US 666 and renumber the route. The entire route was changed to US 491 in Colorado on July 1, 2003.

(Unless otherwise indicated, sources used in the preparation of this section included state highway maps, the

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Highways of Colorado by Matthew Salek, Highways to the Sky: A Context and History of Colorado's Highway System, Colorado State Roads and Highways, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Submission, plans in the Online Transportation Information System (OTIS), and site forms for previously surveyed resources in Compass when available.)

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Not Significant - No historical significance identified

Significant - Historical significance identified (see details below)

Property Type and Areas of Significance:

A detailed explanation why this highway possesses historical significance is provided in the Significance Statement below.

Cultural:

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)

Engineering:

Subtypes

- Farm-to-Market Road
- Limited Access, Multiple-Lane, Divided Highway/Freeway
- Highway Bypass

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)
- Engineering achievement (Engineering)

Aesthetic:

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)
- Engineering achievement (Engineering)
- Landscape architecture (Landscape Architecture)

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Historic periods of highway construction:

- Pre-territorial (pre-1861)
- Territorial and pre-automobile state roads (1861-1890)
- Automobile age (1890-1930)
- Depression and World War II (1930-1945)
- Postwar Interstate Era (1945-1973)
- Completion and Augmentation of Interstate System (1973-2000)

Level of Significance:

- Local
- State
- National

Significance Statement:

The northern portion of US 491 from Cortez to the Utah border formed a portion of US 160 until 1970 and is historically associated with the early history of this route. The northern portion of US 491 is classified as a Cultural Route and an Engineered Route - the same as US 160 (see inventory form for US 160 for details) - under the classification system in the MPS, while the southern portion is classified as an Engineered Route.

Criterion A

Under Transportation, the portion of the US 491 associated with the earlier history as a portion of US 160 and is noted as a Cultural Route for its use as an early Native American trail under the area of Transportation at the state level. As an Engineered Route it also represents efforts of the Colorado Highway Department (CHD) by the 1920s to open the southern portion of the state by linking those segments of US 160 in the southwest and southeastern portions of the state together across the continental divide/San Juan Mountains. As such, this portion of US 491 is an example of a prominent project by the CHD in the area of Transportation. This portion of the highway functioned as part of US 160 to provide direct and important east-west connections serving as a link for conveying agricultural goods in southern Colorado to market centers and other prominent transportation corridors within the region and state.

The southern portion of US 491 south of Cortez does not possess significance under Criterion A. This portion of the road functioned to supply and support towns and area industries, such as mining and tourism, by providing links to regional transportation corridors, towns, and cities. Research, literature review, and historic mapping does not indicate that this portion of the current highway provided direct access to destinations related to important historic themes. Overall, research did not indicate the any Depression-era federal relief program improvements associated with SH 491.

Criterion B

Research did not reveal this highway to be directly associated with the events or work of a person important in history, nor does research indicate the highway represents the efforts of a specific individual to secure construction of this highway for the economic development of a community or area of the state. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion B.

Criterion C

Historically the northern portion of US 491 was associated with the history of US 160 (See the Colorado Historic Highway Inventory form for US 160 for more detail), which serves as an example of a prominent project by the CHD and was among the first roads designed and constructed for motorized vehicular traffic across the continental divide in the state. However, the portion of US 160 crossing the continental divide is located to the east of US 491. Research and literature review yielded no evidence to indicate that US 491 represents the application of innovative or important engineering design or construction techniques based on topography or challenging site conditions. Significance under Criterion C for its early history and association as one component of US 160 is better demonstrated by those portions of the US 160 crossing the continental divide and specifically noted on the Colorado Historic Highway Inventory form for US 160. US 491 does not possess significance under Criterion C.

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Criterion D

For a property to possess significance for information potential, the information yielded by the property must answer specific important research questions that cannot be otherwise answered. The technology of highway construction is well understood and documented. As such, this highway is unlikely to yield important information that cannot be discerned from archived plans and other records. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion D.

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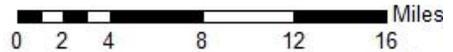
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- SH 491
- State Boundary
- County Boundary



Map indicates the extent of the highway based on CDOT GIS data; portions co-signed with other highways may not be indicated.