

# Georgetown – Silver Plume

National Historic Landmark District

Colorado

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Photo: Gary Register

Located in the high mountains of Colorado's Front Range, the Georgetown - Silver Plume National Historic Landmark District conserves and interprets the architecture, ambience, lifestyles, and setting of two of the best-preserved 19<sup>th</sup> century silver mining boom towns of the Rocky Mountain West.

## Contact Information

For more information about Georgetown Silver Plume National Historic Landmark District, call 303-569-2405, email [info@georgetowntrust.org](mailto:info@georgetowntrust.org) or write to: Georgetown Trust Box 1037 Georgetown, CO 80444



## Significance

Significance statements express why the Georgetown – Silver Plume resources and values are important enough to merit national historic landmark designation.

**Leading Silver Mining District** – The Georgetown – Silver Plume mining district was among the most important silver camps in Colorado between 1859 and 1878.

**Architecture** – The neighboring towns of Georgetown and Silver Plume retain a high density and variety of late 19<sup>th</sup> century public, commercial, and residential architecture.

**Lifestyles and Cultural History** – During the silver mining era Georgetown and Silver Plume developed into permanent communities that reflected a high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity, inhabited by first-generation immigrants and multi-national investors alike.

**Transportation and Industry** – The Georgetown Loop Railroad, with its famous Devil's Gate High Bridge rising more than 90 feet above Clear Creek, was an engineering marvel when it was completed in 1884. Georgetown's 1900 hydroelectric plant, which still functions, was one of the earliest sources of hydroelectric power in Colorado.

**Tourism and Recreation** – Scientists, nature-seekers, and tourists have been attracted to the Georgetown – Silver Plume area since the inception of the mining district, fostering the towns' long histories of hospitality.

**Post WWII Revival** – After the decline in silver mining and tourism, Georgetown – Silver Plume underwent a post-World War II revival due to the rise of the ski industry, automobile tourism, and interest in historic preservation.

**Historic Preservation** – Preservation efforts in both towns continue to protect their architecture, ambience, and setting within 21<sup>st</sup> century living communities. Georgetown's 1970 comprehensive historic preservation ordinance established a legal precedent for historic preservation in the State of Colorado that has been emulated by other historic cities and towns statewide.



*Georgetown Loop Railroad*

## Key Resources

Key resources are those features, systems, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration because they are all essential to achieving the purpose of the district and maintaining its significance.

**Mountain and Valley Views and Landscapes** – Georgetown and Silver Plume are located in a narrow L-shaped high mountain valley intersected by two creeks. The yellow mounds of mine tailings, waste rock piles, wagon roads, burro trails, and aging mine structures and equipment tell the story of the mining district below. This dramatic landscape was recognized as a tourist attraction from its earliest mining days.

**Historic Mines and Mills** - Georgetown and Silver Plume were both important mining centers in the earliest days of Colorado mining. Mines and mills were examples of the most progressive technologies of their time, including electricity, telephones, pumps, and transportation such as railroads and aerial trams. The sound of the mills was called the heartbeat of the mountain – the pulse of the district. Their remains dot the mountainsides, and Georgetown's 1929 Centennial Mill stands as a testament to the end of the mining era.

**Industrial and Engineering Features** - Vestiges of early technologies and mining remnants are visible in the landscape. The Georgetown Loop Historic Mining and Railroad Park, in the valley between the two towns, interprets the industrial history with the narrow-gauge train, Lebanon mine, and remains of the Lebanon mill. Innovations in mining expanded in the district with the creation of the famous Burleigh drill and later the use of a Sigafos electric powered tunneling machine that bored an 8-foot-wide circular tunnel into the side of Democrat Mountain. The first long-distance telephone line in Colorado ran from Denver to Georgetown. Water provided the mines and mills in both towns with power. The 1900 Georgetown Hydroelectric Plant on 6<sup>th</sup> Street still operates today on the original Pelton Water Wheels.



*Silver Plume and Upper Clear Creek Valley*

## Key Resources

**Architecture** - While Georgetown showcases a higher variety of architectural types, Silver Plume retains a more rustic mining town appearance. Both towns together reflect the development of the society, from miners' cabins to ornate Victorian residences and elaborate commercial and public structures reflecting the various origins of the population. The towns have developed walking tours to share these resources.

**Hospitality, Recreation, and Tourism** – The district's dramatic landscape was recognized as a tourist attraction from its earliest mining days. The arrival of the Colorado Central Railroad in Georgetown brought visitors who lodged at the Barton House and the Hotel De Paris, which became known for its elegant cuisine. The Georgetown Loop Railroad, Silver Plume's Sunrise Peak Aerial Tramway, and the Argentine Central Railroad attracted even more visitors. When mining production declined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Georgetown's and Silver Plume's tourism became their economic mainstay. After the railroads closed, the communities relied on automobile travelers seeking majestic scenery, and later, skiing on nearby slopes. Today the district's mountain scenery, recreation opportunities, and cultural tourism continue to support the towns.

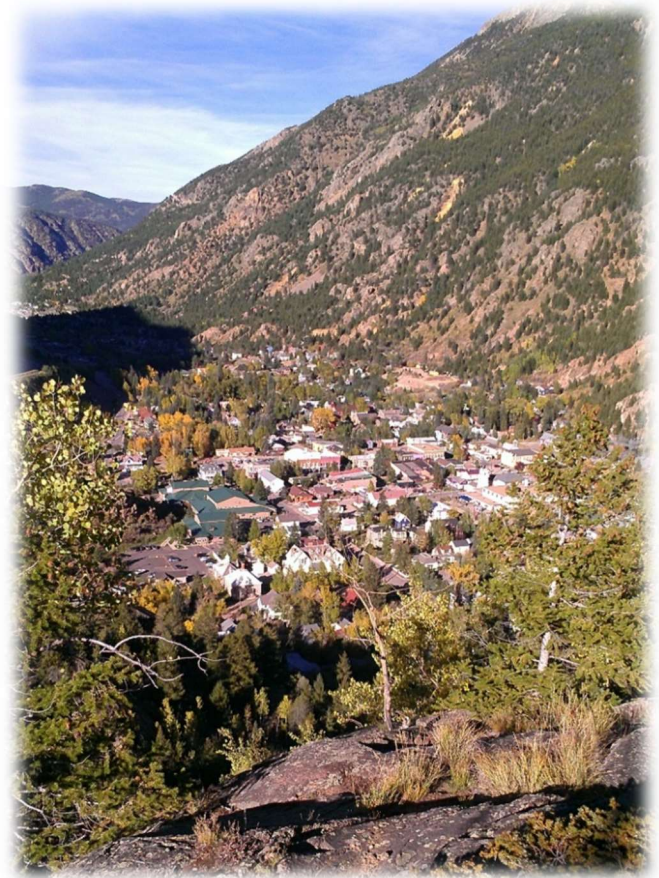
**Clear Creek Library and Archives** - The Clear Creek County Library District Local History Archives in the Heritage Center is a repository for local history and ephemera. Additional archival resources can be found in local libraries, museums, and government repositories as well as online.

**Collaborative Preservation** - Local governments, numerous non-profits, churches, and private property owners became involved in the preservation of the National Historic Landmark District following its designation. The towns both adopted design review ordinances, advanced preservation of historic public buildings, and joined together to protect the setting with the acquisition of mountainside lands and the creation of the Historic District Public Lands Commission. Non-profits, including, the Georgetown Community Center Ltd., the Georgetown Energy Museum, the Georgetown Trust for Conservation & Preservation Inc., Historic Georgetown Inc., the First Presbyterian of Georgetown, Grace Episcopal Church, People for Silver Plume Inc., and The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the State of Colorado undertook the preservation of sites contributing to the historic district. The Georgetown Loop Historic Mining and Railroad Park has been an ongoing project under the auspices of History Colorado Inc. for over 50 years.

## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are described as the key stories or concepts that visitors to the district should understand after visiting – they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors. Themes are derived from reflection of the purpose, significance, and key resources.

1. People were willing to leave behind the comforts of “civilized America” to travel West in search of wealth, new identities and adventure.
2. In this extreme mountainous environment, they overcame huge difficulties to develop highly successful mines, mills, and tunnels and established permanent communities.
3. The mountainsides and landscapes held riches beyond silver that drew visitors and scientists from all over the world seeking new experiences and discoveries.
4. Walking through Georgetown's and Silver Plume's historic settings, buildings and streetscapes provide a tangible sense of belonging to the past within a living present.
5. Through hard-fought preservation, these places continue to preserve the character of the mining West.



Georgetown



# Landmark District Description

The Georgetown-Silver Plume National Historic Landmark District encompasses the neighboring towns of Georgetown and Silver Plume, Colorado, connected by Georgetown Loop Railroad and located 45 miles west of Denver and 15 miles east of the Continental Divide. The historic district stretches along Clear Creek nearly five miles within a valley that rises from an elevation of about 8,450 feet to 9,280 feet on the valley floor to mountain peaks that rise to more than 12,000 feet. Nestled within this valley, Georgetown and Silver Plume feature a gridwork of streets and commercial, civic, and residential buildings dating from the 1860s to 1890s, when the district mines were a major source of gold and silver in Colorado. On the mountainsides surrounding the towns are remnants of historic mines, mills and a network of mining roads and burro trails.

The National Historic Landmark District was designated in 1966 by the US Secretary of the Interior. Its designation recognized the national historical importance of the mining districts and the exceptional quality of the towns' historic preservation, scenic views, and setting in telling the story of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mining Boom in the Rocky Mountain West. The historic district boundary encompasses the towns, the railroad connecting the two communities, and their historic and natural setting.

Much like its 19<sup>th</sup> century residents and tourists, visitors today come to Georgetown and Silver Plume from Colorado, the United States, and many foreign countries. The Gateway Visitor Center in Georgetown serves nearly 450,000 visitors annually. The towns support tourism by providing an immersive historic setting and by sponsoring cultural activities throughout the year, such as the Christmas market, Fourth of July celebrations in Georgetown, and the annual melodrama in Silver Plume. Heritage tourism includes the Lebanon and Everett mine tours, rides on the restored narrow-gauge Georgetown Loop Railroad, Georgetown Heritage Center, and museums including the George Rowe Museum, Hotel de Paris, Georgetown Energy Museum, Alpine Hose Fire Museum, and Hamill House Museum or simply walks in the presence of the past.

