

MST Marker Installation Day – April 9, 2026

Danny Bernstein

It was a glorious day when I got a text from Preston Farabow, the sculptor, that we were going to the top of Kuwohi to install the MST Marker the next day. YES!! Finally.

“OK – Newfound Gap at 9:30am,” I said. “I will be there with coffee and snacks.”

“Skip the coffee. Everyone will have had their drinks by then,” Preston said.



For about four years, I have been working on getting a marker on top of Kuwohi in Great Smoky Mountains National Park to denote the western end of the Mountains to Sea Trail. A beautiful, huge marker had been installed in Jockey's Ridge State Park on the eastern end but a trail has two end points.

The top of Kuwohi, “on top of old Smoky,” is 20 degrees colder than the surrounding valley. It could be 15 degrees up there when we arrive. I packed all the warm clothes I had – hat, two pairs of gloves, thermals that I had bought for the Arctic, and a fleece jacket. What else should I take?

I got to Newfound Gap early to put on my boots, just for warmth since we were not doing any hiking. While double checking everything, a middle-aged man approached me and asked “You look like a local.

How do you get up to the tower?”

“The road is closed usually from December 1 to April 1.”

“But I saw people up there on Facebook,” he said.

“Yes. They walked the A.T or the road – about seven miles. You are free to do that.” I didn’t think he and his wife were going to attempt it. I sent them off to the stone balcony where President Franklin Delano Roosevelt officially blessed the park in 1940.

I wandered around and found a group of Tennessee women setting up to offer trail magic to Appalachian Trail thru-hikers. Yes, this is the season; the thru-hikers were coming through the park.

Jim Matheny, Communications Director for Friends of the Smokies, showed up with his camera and professional interview kit. I had my phone, a pad of paper and several pens.

Preston came up next driving his huge van where Jim and I settled in. Two guys from Tennessee Memorials with a truck and crane arrived; their vehicle had the MST marker in three parts. Those men were actually going to install the piece.

We drove to the entrance of the Kuwohi Road where we met Ranger Grant Fisher who would be our park escort for the day. Grant opened the gate and led the parade in a park vehicle. Grant is a biological science technician who services the air quality equipment in the park and reports to Jim Refro, Air Quality Specialist. It was a new experience for me; I had never been driven up the Kuwohi Trail.

So, we were as follows:

Grant Fisher, ranger at Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Preston Farabow – Sculptor, Knoxville, TN

Tyler Rambo – Owner of Tennessee Memorials and installer, Maryville, TN

Patrick Nelson – Tennessee Memorials installer

Jim Matheny – Communications Director for Friends of the Smokies

And me, from Asheville

Once I got to the top, I could see that the marker came in three pieces. Two pieces each with a huge screw formed the base; they were about one hundred pound each. The marker itself with the inscription was estimated at 500 lbs.

“That’s why we need the crane,” Preston said.

Preston and I came here last September to pick out the actual location. It had to be a gravel spot so that the vegetation would not be disturbed. Even so, Tyler and Patrick had to flatten out the base a little more and push aside the gravel. Preston directed the

effort while Jim and I took photos. When the soil looked flat, Tyler and Patrick checked the area with a leveler.



“The marker was created from Smoky Mountain Gray marble,” Preston explained. “I got it at Tennessee Marble in East Tennessee; that’s where I also did the carving. It’s a common indigenous stone.” The company’s website admits that “Tennessee marble is not true marble, but it is actually classified as a limestone since it is not a metamorphic but sedimentary stone.” The stone is beautiful and classy looking.

Once the location was leveled, Patrick and Tyler lifted each piece of the base and carefully set them down in the approximate location. These two pieces were going to support the actual vertical stone with the plaque. Much more measuring was required to guarantee that the top was going to drop in perfectly on the two huge screws.

Still the screws at the base and the hole on the top piece were lathered with an epoxy glue to ensure that everything stayed stable.

“What kind of glue are you using?” I asked Tyler.

He showed me the can – Tenax epoxy. “You need a license to buy this.”

“What? Is this a controlled substance?” I joked.

I later found out that this was a bit of an exaggeration; anyone can buy it for home use. You need a contractor license and insurance if you're going to use these products commercially.

The stone had to be put in place withing twenty minutes. Talk about “set in stone.” Once the five-hundred-pound top piece was fitted over the screws, nothing was moving. The guys declared the marker installed. Were we supposed to crack a champagne bottle on it?

Not quite done. This was the first time I was able to read the bronze plaque. Any misspelling, any extra spaces, any other errors?

Months ago, a group of us had spent email after email proposing changes to the wording. It felt like the famous quote from Oscar Wilde

“This morning, I took out a comma, and this afternoon I put it in again.”

But the day was not over. Everyone wanted to get a view and a photo of the marker from the top of the Kuwohi tower. On the way up we met several A.T. hikers walking from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Maine. By now, they had walked over two hundred miles. Even though the A.T. doesn't go to the tower, no one can miss such a landmark.

Once down again, I had my photo taken with my face through the hole in the marker. Everyone else did as well. This will be a classic picture for all visitors.

But how could we have an official unveiling in a few weeks if we didn't cover up the marker now? On April 1 specifically, the road will be open to all park visitors. We could not leave the marker exposed to everyone using social media.

Preston had come prepared with a plastic tarp and duct tape. It certainly looked like the cover was meant to stay on.

Jim, who had brought his tripod and recording equipment, insisted on interviewing Preston and me on site. Preston focused on the challenging weather that kept postponing the installation. He also elaborated on the quality and pedigree of the Tennessee Marble used in the marker.

I talked about the importance of having a marker on both ends of the MST. Though hikers can start the trail on either end – either at Jockey's Ridge State Park on the North Carolina shore or here on top of Kuwohi - most begin on this mountain. Now they will be able to take a photograph next to the marker.



MST Marker details from Preston

Width - 36 inches (3 feet)

Height – 40 inches (3 feet, 4 inches)

Thickness – 6 inches

Weight of base (estimated) – 100 lbs. each

Weight of marker (estimated) – 500 lbs.