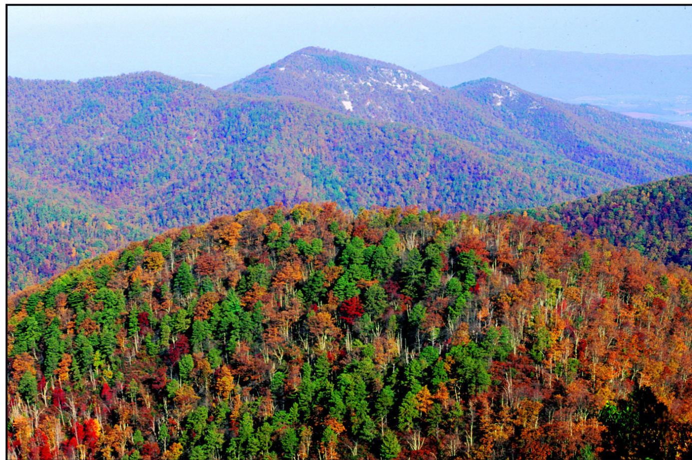
Displacement in Shenandoah National Park:

In the Shadow of the Park

Background & Geography

Shenandoah National Park (SNP) spans about 200,000 acres of northern Virginia's scenic Blue Ridge Mountains, encompassing parts of eight counties (Albemarle, Augusta, Greene, Madison, Page, Rappahannock, Rockingham, and Warren)[5]. The park is long and narrow and boasts over 500 miles of trails (including 101 miles of the Appalachian Trail), numerous waterfalls, 75 overlooks, 654 campsites, and 60 mountain peaks. Two of the peaks reach elevations greater than 4,000 feet. The highest peak is Hawbill Mountain at 4,051 feet. Skyline Drive bisects the park from the northern tip at Front Royal to the southern tip at Turk Gap, Virginia, providing visitors easy access to the park's trailheads, campsites, and overlooks.



Courtesy of US National Park Service

Brief History

The National Park Service (NPS) proposed the idea for an eastern national park in 1924.[1] It was the support of wealthy businessmen and politicians in Washington, DC, that brought attention to Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains as a prospective site. This elite group endorsed the park with the primary intention to boost Virginia's economy in times of a great economic depression. George Freeman Pollock (owner of the Skyland Resort in the Blue Ridge Mountains), Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr., and Governor E. Lee Trinkle saw commercial opportunity in Virginia's Blue Ridge.

In order to win congressional approval, the Southern Appalachian site had to offer both scenic beauty and economic potential. The Southern Appalachian National Park Commission searched for a landscape with, "outstanding scenery, picturesque natural elements, and an untouched wilderness suitable for protecting."[10]

George Pollock quickly assembled a lobby group to promote the Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains. The Northern Virginia National Park Association strategically portrayed the Blue Ridge as a mountain range that had, "been preserved in its virgin loveliness."[10] Assuming the land was pristine and untouched, Congress passed the Shenandoah National Park Act authorizing the creation of the first eastern national park in the State of Virginia in 1926.[1]

However, Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains were not untouched. Areas of the proposed parkland were spoiled by years of settlement since the first white European settlers that inhabited the area in the mid 1700's. Agriculture abuse, extraction activities, severe erosion, and the clear-cutting of forests from iron production and other industry had been practiced for generations. The land was home to thousands of mountain ranchers and farmers who worked in the cattle pastures, resorts, mines, and orchards that served the surrounding areas.

> "There was no schedule for when they (the CCC) would come. A few weeks later, they came for Harold's grandparents. His grandmother was eight months pregnant with his father. The CCC and park officials brought the sheriff because they thought Woodward would resist. He did, saying the family wasn't prepared to move. The officials assured him they could come back to get their things, and on that basis, they left. When they went back several weeks later, the house had been burned."

October 1991 newspaper article.[7] Ms. Martin-Perdue, president of the Folklore Society, tells the story of how Harold Woodward, a Madison County Supervisor, remembers the story of his family's displacement.

A Partnership Program of the University of Virginia Institute for Environmental Negotiation,
the Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Department of Forestry, and the Department of Conservation and Recreation
Phone: 434.924.1970 Address: 2015 Ivy Road, PO Box 400179, Charlottesville, VA 22904 Online at: www.virginia.edu/ien/vnrli

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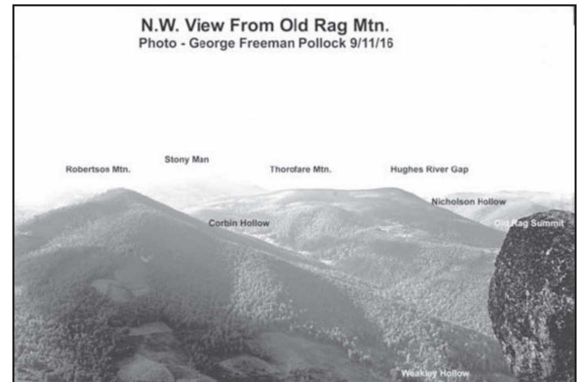
Segregation in the Park

The Civilian Conservation Corps constructed separate park facilities to accommodate the white and African American visitors. Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Interior, Harold L. Ickes, insisted upon separate facilities to cater to Virginia's long-lasting custom of segregation. In 1932, before the final establishment of the park, preliminary plans segregating the races were underway. These plans included a "development for colored people" that offered a separate lodge at Dickey Ridge, two public buildings, a gas station, visitor cabins, picnic grounds at Lewis Mountain, and a campground. Park Rangers handed out Shenandoah literature, maps, and brochures identifying Lewis Mountain and the other park facilities as "for colored visitors."

On December 8, 1945, the National Park Service mandated the desegregation of facilities in all national parks. This was 9 years before the Supreme Court reversed the separate but equal doctrine from the Brown v. Board of Education case. Virginia Sky-Line Company, who managed Shenandoah's concession operations, protested the regulation and threatened to rescind their contract with the National Park Service. The Park Service accommodated Virginia Sky-Line's request to remain segregated and responded in a memorandum that, "General Manager [of Virginia Sky-Line]... has been, or soon will be, given assurance, through Senator Byrd, that the Company may continue its operations this summer without any change in its plans with respect to taking care of Negro visitors." It was not until the summer of 1950 that park facilities were fully desegregated. For more infomation: *http://www.nps.gov/shen/historyculture/segregation.htm.*

Courtesy of US National Park Service



A number of cleared pastures and orchards near Old Rag Mountain in 1916. Courtesy of US National Park Service.

Virginia Policy & Eminent Domain

The park encountered numerous financial, legal, and social obstacles throughout the 9 years of its establishment. The economic troubles due to the Great Depression made it difficult to purchase privately owned land for park purposes. However, legislation was put in place to make the acquisition of thousands of acres of private land possible.

The Shenandoah National Park Act denied the NPS the ability to purchase land with public funds or acquire lands through the power of eminent domain. Therefore, the land was to be acquired by the State of Virginia and ultimately given to the federal government to be accepted in the national park system. In 1928, The State of Virginia passed the Public Park Condemnation Act to allow the Commonwealth to purchase land in the Blue Ridge by right of eminent domain for the purposes of the public park. The "blanket condemnation" made land acquisition easier than purchasing the 3,000 privately owned parcels individually. Less than 1% of Virginians contributed to the funding for the Park; most of the land was obtained through condemnation proceedings.

Opposition by local landowners failed. A number of unsuccessful lawsuits challenged the constitutionality of the Public Park Condemnation Act. One proceeding, appealing the Supreme Court of Virginia's ruling, made its way up to the US Supreme Court. The Court

ultimately upheld that the condemnations were a valid exercise of the State's right of eminent domain.[1]

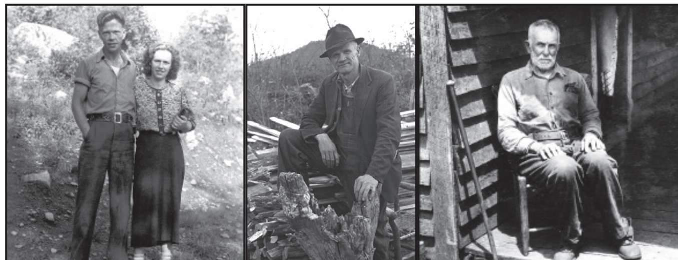
The State of Virginia transferred the rights to the parkland to the federal government in 1935. President Roosevelt officially dedicated Shenandoah National Park in July of 1936.

Continuing Legacy of Anger and Bitterness

Out of the thousands of park visitors that drive along the 105 miles of Skyline Drive every year, few know Shenandoah's often shaded history of displacement, segregation, and the continuing battle between private versus public interests. Controversies over the questionable policy and decision-making have left a legacy of bitterness and anger among mountain natives and their descendents.

The National Park Service's "total removal" policy required the relocation of all residents from parklands. In total, 465 families (about 2,200 people) were removed from their mountain homes, often by force, and relocated between the years of 1924-1936[4]. The Civilian Conservation Corps volunteers dismantled and burned natives' homes on their mission to restore nature.

Remnants of the mountain culture that once existed still remain today. Log cabin foundations, chimneys, stone fences, tools, barbed wire, roads, and cemeteries are peppered across the parkland. The ruins of Weakley Hollow, once a well-established village in the Blue Ridge, display the footprints of a post office, two churches, two stores, and a school that served its community long ago.

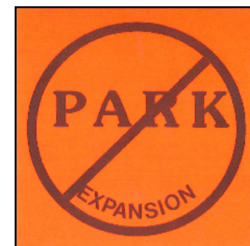


> "An investigation has been made by a Washington physician and social worker of the condition of the people, and shocking are the results… There are six families living in the hollow, all named Corbin or Nicholson. All the adults are cousins. The ancestors of these two families settled there at the close of the Revolution and their descendants have intermarried and had very little to do with the outside world since… Ray Lyman Wilbur, Secretary of the Interior, visited Corbin Hollow and heartily approved of the plan to move the Corbins and the Nicholsons… They will be out of the national park then, and better located."

May 1932 newspaper article.[6] The physician and social worker were hired by wealthy park promoter George Pollock to perform the study of Corbin Hollow.

People were made to believe that the mountain natives needed to be removed. Newspapers articles and state officials destroyed their reputations, portraying them as uncivilized, uneducated, lazy, filthy, immoral, inbred, and promiscuous.[8] Studies and interviews to date have found the stereotypes false. Letters and writings have been discovered that convey many of the natives as eloquent and familial people. The fear of displacement by the state officials left them angry and scared.[7]

The emotional distress inflicted upon mountain communities during the establishment of the park is still felt today. In the spring of 1990, the National Park Service requested the University of Virginia School of Architecture to conduct a Related Lands Study. The study would create a database of land uses in the eight counties that surround the Park for the purpose of Concurrent Jurisdiction. Blue Ridge descendents were suspicious of the study and voiced their resentment and mistrust in the Park Service and the outside scholars at the public meetings that were held for the study.



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Created September 2010 by Ellie James

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Phone: 434.924.1970 Address: 2015 Ivy Road, PO Box 400179, Charlottesville, VA 22904 Online at: www.virginia.edu/ien/vnrli