Shenandoah National Park

The Human Cost of Conservation

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Located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia 75 miles from Washington D.C., Shenandoah National Park is a popular tourist destination known for its dense wilderness, abundant wildlife, and breathtaking vistas. From a description on the National Park Foundation's website, it is where the "nation's most special places are just outside your backdoor."[1] It offers 500 miles of trails, four campgrounds, and the scenic roadway Skyline Drive, which winds its way 105 miles through the park.[2] What people might not know about this idyllic landscape is that the creation of this protected area involved the condemnation of homes and the eventual eviction of local families and inhabitants.

One of the first national parks was Yellowstone National Park, situated in the territories of Montana and Wyoming. Established by an act of Congress on March 1, 1872, it was touted as "a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people."[3] In the following years, more parks were authorized by the United States, created from the expansive federal lands that made up a large portion of the West. These early national parks were administered by either the Department of the Interior, the War Department, or the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture. On August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Organic Act of 1916, establishing the National Park Service, which would control and manage the increasing number of national parks in the new system. At the time the NPS was created, there were 35 national parks and monuments, and all of them were west of the Mississippi River.[4] When Stephan Mather was appointed director of the National Park Service, he decided the southeastern United States would be the next location. A park located in the Blue Ridge Mountains would provide easier access for the urban populations of the eastern United States.[5]

The Blue Ridge Mountains

In an act of Congress approved February 21, 1925, the Secretary of the Interior was authorized to determine the boundaries in a portion of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia that could be attained and administered as a national park. He was also instructed to receive donations of land or money and "to secure such options as in his judgment may be considered reasonable and just for the purchase of lands within said boundaries."[6] In order to carry out these instructions, the Secretary of the Interior, Hubert Work, appointed a commission of five members to research the area and create a report on the suggested boundaries of the new park. Over the course of a year, this group known as the Southern Appalachian National Park Committee would explore this area, receive monetary donations, and gather signed options for a sizable amount of land.[7]

During a meeting of the House of Representatives on February 20, 1926, a representative from Virginia, Joseph Whitehead, read from the report made by the committee in which they noted, "The site in the Blue Ridge Mountains selected by the committee is within a three-hour ride of the National Capital and readily accessible to a population of 40,000,000 people."[8] The report also mentions a "possible skyline drive," describing it as "the single greatest feature."[9] When reflecting on the National Park System, Whitehead alludes to the fact that so many of the nation's parks are located in the west because the government owns large tracts of land "which could be easily converted into parks."[10] However, in this same meeting, he attests to the local Virginians' excitement and willingness to donate the land needed.

> My information is that the Old Dominion is arousing herself rapidly to the realization of the importance of this wonderful opportunity. The valley counties and

> northern Virginia have naturally been more active and enthusiastic than other parts of the State, but other sections and localities are becoming more and more interested as the time draws near for the report of the Secretary of the Interior. . . . Committees are being formed in the counties and cities of the several congressional districts throughout the State for the purpose of converting this proposal into an assurance of success.[11]

These local Virginians would become a significant driving force and many Shenandoah Valley residents welcomed the boost in tourism a park would bring.

In 1924, when the Southern Appalachian National Park Committee had first started gathering information for their report, an additional one thousand locals formed their own group, Shenandoah Valley, Inc., whose slogan was "A National Park Near the Nation's Capital."[12] Trying to gain attention and support for the area, the group inaugurated an Apple Blossom Festival in nearby Winchester. Another member, Harry Byrd, invited the committee to visit his Skyland resort in the Blue Ridge mountains. Later, in a show of solidarity, more than five hundred local residents went to Washington, DC, to show their support for the park.[13] In May 1926, President Calvin Coolidge signed the act that would establish Shenandoah National Park.[14] However, because the bill specified that no federal funding could be used to buy the land, it would be up to Virginia to obtain it. When members in charge of the land acquisition worried that purchasing it from the owners would cause delays, they turned to other methods.[15]

In 1926, the Virginia Assembly created the State Commission on Conservation and Development to help with the land acquisition.[16] To give them the power to acquire any land condemned, in 1928 the Virginia Assembly passed the Public Park Condemnation Act and the National Park Act. With the National Park Act, the commission was to "have full power and authority to acquire by gift or transfer property or funds to be so expended" as well as "vested with the power to give, grant, convey and transfer to the United States of America, for national park purposes, all right, title, and interest . . . it may acquire."[17] With these acts, Virginia now had the authority to take the land needed from those mountain residents.

The Mountain People

Accordingly, those residents living in the proposed boundaries would be the most affected by these acts. They also would become fodder for a massive land grab campaign. Officials began claiming that condemning the land and relocating the people would be to their benefit. Starting in the early 1920s, reports and accounts began to surface detailing what life was like in the remote hollows of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The locals were not portrayed in a favorable manner. An article from the Evening Star, dated September 3, 1929, described the people living in those parts as undernourished, lazy, and illiterate. When a social worker visited to assess the living conditions, they described the area as worse than a New York City slum. Their social structure was determined to be "broken down" with people living in small isolated groups spread out through the different hollows. Their homes were described as being without basic furniture like chairs or tables and even lacking cutlery. One visitor observed the mountain people as "modern day Robinson Crusoes without his knowledge of civilization."[18]

Corbin Hollow, an area located within the proposed park boundaries, was singled out as having particularly bad conditions with no roads and a lack of transportation creating even more difficulties. One trip was reported when the Director of the National Park Service, accompanied by Secretary of the Interior, Dr. Ray Lyman Wilbur; a social worker, Miriam Sizer; and a physician, visited the hollow in 1932. According to an article, they described instances of intermarrying, a strange, unintelligible "Chaucerian English," and a "lack of soap or basic hygiene."[19] While visiting, a plan was organized by federal and state officials to help relocate the people of Corbin Hollow. As they discussed the plans for relocation, Secretary Wilbur was quoted as saying, "No matter what is done with these people, they will be better off. They have nothing to lose."[20] George Freeman Pollock, the owner of the nearby Skyland Resort, employed many of the locals at his establishment and would sometimes send doctors to make house calls. When reflecting on the residents of the "hollows," Pollock commented on their simple way of life and remarked they would be "unequipped to make adjustments when the time comes for their removal from the park area."[21] Later accounts would dispute these allegations of extreme poverty and blame the owner of the Skyland resort, Pollack, for exaggerating his claims and manipulating authorities.[22]

Displacement

From the creation of the State Commission of Conservation and Development in 1926, it took Virginia more than nine years to acquire and clear the land for the park. Starting in 1929, over 141,000 acres were condemned and purchased without appeal. Any homes or structures were often demolished. Over the course of the 1930s, large swaths and sections of private land were either purchased or, in some cases, condemned under the new laws. This land was then presented to the Federal

Government by the Commonwealth of Virginia. In this way, Shenandoah National Park was slowly pieced together from more than three thousand individual tracts of land. With this land, about five hundred families were displaced from their homes.[23]

In July of 1931, court proceedings had begun in Albermarle County to condemn several parcels of land under the 1928 Public Park Condemnation Act. One of those parcels belonged to Robert Via, a wealthy landowner and resident of Pennsylvania whose land was appraised at $2,320 and set to be taken. On November 10, 1934, after his land was condemned and he was to be evicted, Via filed a suit against the State Commission on Conservation and Development of the State of Virginia. In his suit he claimed that the Acts of the Virginia Legislature of March 22 and 23, 1928—The National Park Act and the Public Park Condemnation Act—were unconstitutional, depriving his right to due process, and therefore in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.[24] By this time 130 landholders of 19,000 acres had challenged the appraisals, causing the process of obtaining land titles to come to a standstill for the Commonwealth.[25] This not only led to frustration for the park officials but for the landowners who were still hoping to remain on their properties.

By 1934 the National Park Service had enacted a "total removal" policy in order to clear out the last of the residents.[26] It was during these years, 1934 to 1938, that the families without the means to relocate got left behind while the park was developed around them. Some of these residents either didn't have an alternate home to go to or needed assistance. In some cases, the residents no longer had the deeds for their land and were waiting in limbo, hoping for a miracle.[27] The park's superintendent at the time, James Lassiter, was put in charge of managing this group of residents and all the issues they and park officials were dealing with. In letters from many of these local inhabitants, there is a surprising lack of resistance to the park officials. Most were often asking for assistance or more information.[28] In one letter sent by missionary Wiley R. Mason, he requests he be able to remove dead and down wood from the property. This was a question often asked because rules in a national park are strict when dealing with cutting or removing wood; one of the many changes that residents had to endure when their private land became federal land.[29] Many of the letters asked if they could take their building materials with them so they wouldn't be destroyed by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Others asked if they would be able to harvest crops before leaving. All of these questions hinted at the feeling of uncertainty as to what the future would bring.[30]

Shenandoah National Park is Established

Shenandoah National Park was formally established December 26, 1935, with just over the minimum amount of land required by Congress. The park comprised a narrow and jagged strip of land with a boundary that ran unevenly along a mountain ridge. The final product was not what the National Park Service had envisioned.[31] In a dedication ceremony on July 3, 1936, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke about the need for recreational areas and parkways and the importance of a national park system. He noted that the system was established not only for preservation and conservation but for creating useful work during the difficult times of the Great Depression.

"The creation of this Park is one part of our great program of husbandry—the joint husbandry of human resources and natural resources. In every part of the country, local and State and Federal authorities are engaged in preserving and developing our heritage of natural resources; and in this work they are also conserving our priceless heritage of human values by giving to hundreds of thousands of men the opportunity of making an honest living."[32]

After the opening and dedication, the park continued to acquire more lands to try and fill out the originally intended boundaries. In August 1937, the United States assumed police jurisdiction over the national park and an act was established directing the Secretary of the Interior to send notification if any other lands were ceded to the United States.[33] Shenandoah National Park was still claiming land more than a decade after the act establishing it was passed.

Remembering the Displaced

Nowadays, groups like Children of the Shenandoah and The Blue Ridge Heritage Project are working to educate the public on Shenandoah National Park and how it was pieced together from the land of local inhabitants. Created by descendant Lisa Custalow, Children of the Shenandoah is a committee dedicated to sharing news and stories related to Shenandoah National Park's history. They also work to bring awareness to the history of the mountain people and their way of life. On the group's Facebook page, Custalow describes members as "former Park residents, descendants, and other like-minded individuals who support the preservation of human history inside Shenandoah National Park."[34]

This passion for preservation isn't just relegated to sharing stories though. A lot of time and energy is put towards holding the park accountable for their less favorable interpretations of events in their exhibitions and displays. Anger at the "whitewashing" of the park's history has led to numerous complaints and accusations of incorrectly portraying the mountain

families. One such incident arose over a welcome video made by the National Park Service called *The Gift*, which is shown to two million visitors each year at Big Meadows visitor center.[35] In the movie, the displaced residents are generally shown in a demeaning manner, rustic and poor. Even the title itself seems to suggest that the park was given willingly as a "gift." From the movie, lines reference the evictions but do so lightly without any in-depth explanation.[36]

The Blue Ridge Heritage Project is also shedding light on the park's less than ideal history. Established in July of 2013, the nonprofit organization aims to bring awareness to the story of the displaced through memorials. From their website, the mission is "to honor and memorialize the families displaced from the Blue Ridge Mountains when Shenandoah National Park was established in the 1930s."[37] Their goal is to erect memorials in each of the eight counties that had land taken and used for the park: Albemarle, Augusta, Greene, Madison, Page, Rappahannock, Rockingham, and Warren. As part of the memorial: a plaque listing the surnames of all the families and landowners evicted from the land along with a monument. One monument was chosen to be used in all eight locations; a single stone chimney, often all that remained of the condemned homes so many years ago.[38]

With the help of government documents, letters, and thorough research, the complex history of Shenandoah National Park can be uncovered and remembered. Today, those interested in the histories of places like national parks can find those stories, and it is my hope that this paper provides a window into the wide variety of information waiting to be discovered.

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Notes

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