

Audrey Horning

“Almost Untouched”

Recognizing, Recording, and Preserving the Archeological Heritage of a Natural Park

The precipitousness of the range ... has saved for us through centuries of civilization more than 600 square miles of almost untouched native forest within 90 miles of the nation's capital.

While promoters of Virginia's Shenandoah National Park extolled the virtues of a virgin mountain landscape, they faced the sobering reality that the park area was home to at least 500 families. Examining how a populated region could be promoted as pristine wilderness and how its residents and their physical traces were “erased” is critical to any understanding of the nature of present-day Shenandoah National Park and the difficulties of evaluating and protecting its archeological resources.

One solution to the promoter's dilemma evolved from the recent history of the Southern mountains. Following the Civil War, upland resources promised the industrial salvation of the war-ravaged South.

Entrepreneurs flocked to the hills, preceded by a cadre of fiction writers known as local colorists. As the writers penned amusing stories about the backward nature of the hillfolk, described as “strange and peculiar people,” existing “in a colonial era,” industrialists seized upon the potential of these characterizations in the dawning progressive era. However, romantically portrayed as “children of nature,” mountaineers still stood in the way of progress. Their removal meant their salvation. Their removal allowed development.

A half century later, a Chicago sociolo-

gist and a Washington journalist teamed up to write a book about the Blue Ridge during the fight to “develop” the scenic resources of the Shenandoah National Park area. According to the book, *Hollow Folk*, the Blue Ridge was peopled by “families of unlettered folk” who were “much closer to the animal level than the population at large.” The authors were able to conclude their exposé on a hopeful note: “For a century the hollow folk have lived almost without contact with law or government. But soon the strong arm of the federal government will fall upon them...the mountaineers must abandon their cabins.” And so they did. Over 3,000 individual land tracts were purchased or condemned to create Shenandoah National Park, officially dedicated in 1936.

Once the families left, Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees dismantled their homes, farms, stores, churches, schools, and mills. As a nod to the park's human history, several log structures in the vicinity of Nicholson Hollow, a broad hollow cut by the Hughes River on the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge, were retained. Yet, removing frame, brick, and stone structures from the landscape only denied the complexity of architectural forms once present, just as the retention of small cabins over large homes (several hollow farmhouses contained up to nine rooms) enhanced popular images of mountain hardship.

Because Shenandoah was destined to be managed as a “natural” park, the surviving log structures were not maintained. Instead, the declining traces of historic occupation have been celebrated. “Where else,” asked one writer, “has the supposedly inevitable trend of civilization, toward more and more consumption of earth's resources, been so completely reversed by democratic decision on so large an area?” But how can a region be “returned” to its “natural” state in 60 years? Furthermore, what is its “natural” state? For Shenandoah, the aim has been to return the land to its condition before European settlement. Beyond the environmentally questionable nature of this decision, the notion that the land was pristine wilderness 200 years ago denies the impact of Native American occupation and suggests that such prehistoric activity was not really “cultural.”

Haywood Nicholson home, Weakley Hollow (destroyed). Photo courtesy Shenandoah NP.

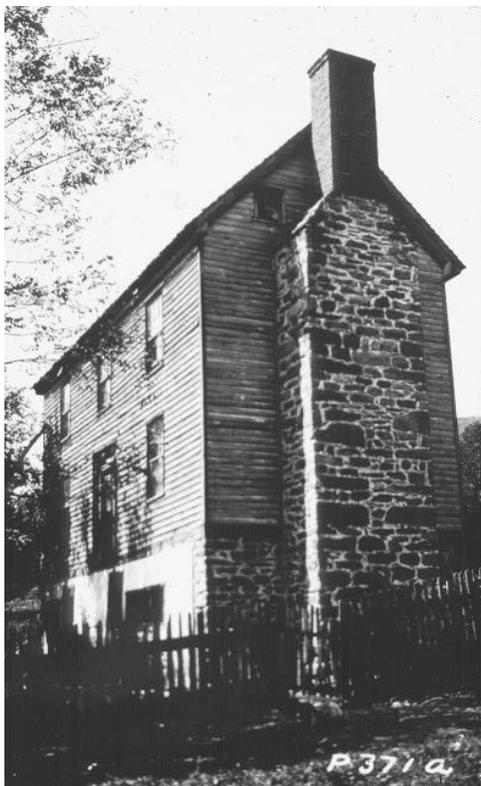


Image of Corbin Hollow poverty
Photo courtesy
Shenandoah NP.



In the 1930s, the three hollows were home to at least 460 persons who were predominantly descended from 18th-century settlers of English, Scots-Irish, Welsh, German, and French Huguenot background. While no family in these hollows in the 20th century claimed African extraction, slavery and free black communities did exist in the Blue Ridge. In fact, physical and documentary sources identify one foundation in Nicholson Hollow as an 1820s slave quarter.

Today's "natural" landscape is as much a cultural creation as were the farms of the 1930s, the base camps and stone quarries of 10,000 years ago, and the dichotomy between the "cultural" and "natural." The past belief in the separation of the cultural and the natural has placed the park's archeological resources at great risk.

In 1995, a National Park Service project, designed to catalog and assess cultural resources in Nicholson Hollow and adjacent Corbin and Weakley Hollows was begun in cooperation with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. In addition to possessing standing architecture, the three hollows formed the core of the communities described in *Hollow Folk*. Examining the physical traces of these communities would test the book's presentation of 20th-century mountain life, provide an opportunity to investigate the depth of historic settlement, evaluate the extent of Native American activity, and serve as a starting place to understand the nature of cultural resources throughout the park.

Toy ray gun found
on a Corbin Hollow
site. Photo by
Andrew Edwards.



Archeological evidence suggests that Weakley Hollow, a long valley separating the geologically-distinct Old Rag mountain from the Blue Ridge, was settled by the 1770s. It had grown into the village of Old Rag, complete with a post office, two stores, two churches, and a school by the 20th century. Residents during the previous century had capitalized upon their proximity to a through road by operating commercial sawmills, gristmills, and distilleries—all part of the hollow's archeological heritage.

Documentary and archeological sources indicate that nearby Nicholson Hollow was settled in the 1790s, with the fertile bottomland along the Hughes River inviting intensive farming. As settlement density increased, farmers engaged in extensive landscape engineering, clearing and terracing slopes to create fertile land. Nineteenth-century agricultural censuses indicate that hollow farmers produced significant surpluses, which provided the cash necessary to purchase the diverse consumer goods evidenced in the archeological record.

Steep and rocky Corbin Hollow did not evolve into a distinct community until the establishment of the nearby Skyland resort in 1886. Families relied upon wage labor and craft sales at Skyland, leaving themselves wide open for disaster when the Depression struck and the cameras of park promoters began clicking. The poverty in Corbin Hollow spoke for the entire park. Stark photographs circulated through the media, and politicians were dragged to the hollow to gawk at the dismal condition of the natives. Yet, the recently-examined material record indicates that even in Corbin Hollow, popular descriptions of mountain isolation and degeneracy were overblown. Typical assemblages range from decorative tablewares, pharmaceutical bottles, and automobile parts to mail order toys, furniture, shoes, and even fragments of 78 rpm records. Far higher percentages of commercial food containers

Surviving log structure with trail blaze. Photo by the author.



are recovered from Corbin Hollow sites than on Nicholson or Weakley Hollow sites, indicative of wage-labor subsistence. Not only did Blue Ridge residents actively participate in the national consumer culture, they made choices regarding their subsistence and economic lives—choices and decisions that changed over time and were tempered and shaped, but not determined by, the natural environment.

Seventy-seven sites have been located in the three hollows, covering approximately 2,500 acres. The high density of multi-component sites along hiking trails warns against backcountry development throughout the park. In a mountainous environment, sites characterized by relatively level land near a water source were and are repeatedly used. Today's perfect campsite was yesterday's perfect homesite and, earlier, someone else's perfect campsite. These locations are found even at the highest elevations. The Blue Ridge—punctuated by numerous gaps affording transportation, characterized by well-watered valleys and hollows, and possessed of a variety of natural resources—has always attracted human populations. As a result, Shenandoah National Park contains an unrecognized wealth of archeological sites—sites that are under threat.

Damage to archeological sites in Nicholson, Corbin, and Weakley Hollows is readily apparent. Generations of hikers have disturbed or pocketed historic 'souvenirs.' Others have carved their initials into surviving log structures, built fires inside houses, or robbed foundations to construct campfire circles. Trail crews have dismantled stone walls to construct water-bars, and one overzealous over-

seer blazed a standing log house. Repeated use of some campsites has abraded the ground surface to the extent that stratified deposits have been compromised, and prehistoric resources damaged.

Other threats to cultural resources are "natural." Severe weather, including one hurricane and two catastrophic floods, has riddled the park with downed trees, creating a widespread fire hazard. Any conflagration in the Nicholson Hollow region would destroy the precious traces of vernacular log architecture, while

subsurface deposits could be destroyed by fire breaks. Falling trees themselves have toppled unsupported stone chimneys, already choked by vines, and crushed log structures. Implementation of sensible fire management and a backcountry camping policy requires the immediate recognition and assessment of the park's cultural resources.

Shenandoah National Park is not a testament to humankind's power to restore nature. Instead, the park should be a laboratory in which to study the interconnectedness of human culture and the natural world. The Blue Ridge environment has long both constrained and been constrained by human activity. The recognition, preservation, and analysis of the park's extensive and varied cultural resources in combination with continued research into its biological and geological diversity would greatly enhance the park's appeal to visitors by addressing the struggle to define the relationship of modern society to the natural world.

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View of a Weakley Hollow henhouse before it was crushed by a falling tree in Autumn 1996. Photo by the author.

