

Reed L. Engle

Shenandoah National Park

A Historical Overview

The drive to establish a large national park in the East dates to meetings held in Washington in the first year of this century between Virginia and Tennessee congressmen. In attendance was Virginia's Henry D. Flood, uncle of future Virginia Governor (1926-1928) and Senator, Harry Flood Byrd. Although a bill to establish a park was drafted, nothing came of this early effort.¹

The concept languished until 1923 when National Park Service Director Stephen Mather approached Calvin Coolidge's Secretary of the Interior, the former Colorado psychiatrist Hubert Work, with a request to establish a national park in the southern Appalachians. Work asked Congress to authorize an unpaid Southern Appalachian National Park Committee (SANPC), which resolution passed on February 24, 1924. The five-member Committee was immediately appointed by Work.² By spring, the Committee had developed and published a broadly distributed questionnaire inviting public input into suggested sites for the new park area.

The timing of the establishment of the SANPC could not have been more advantageous

for Shenandoah Valley boosters. In early January 1924, businessmen in Harrisonburg, Virginia, had put out the call for a convention to be held on January 15, "for the purpose of rallying all the resources of the Valley together in a program that would tell the world of the scenic, historical, industrial, and other values of the famous Shenandoah Valley."³ Almost 1,000 delegates, representing 13 Valley counties, attended the convention. A regional Chamber of Commerce, henceforth known as Shenandoah Valley, Incorporated, was established; and a 30-man Board of Directors, composed of the most influential businessmen, bankers, and politicians, was elected. The first Board meeting, held on February 25, 1924 (the day after the SANPC was authorized by Congress), passed a resolution calling for the creation of a new national park in the Shenandoah Valley on lands owned by the Forest Service and private parties, but to the west of the future Shenandoah National Park.

By June 1924, George Freeman Pollock, founder and manager of Skyland, the 19th-century resort located in the heart of the future park; Harold Allen, Criminal Investigator for the Department of Justice; and George H. Judd, owner

The Southern Appalachian National Park Committee was authorized by Congress in 1924 to review and propose sites for the first large national park east of the Mississippi River. The Committee, seen here leaving from Skyland on their visit arranged by Shenandoah Valley Inc., recommended new parks in the Great Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains embracing Skyland.



of Judd & Detweiler Publishing Company (both property owners at Skyland), filled out a SANPC questionnaire advocating the creation of a national park along the Blue Ridge spine with a central focus of Skyland. By September, Pollock's group had formed its own Northern Virginia Park Association, sharing two officers with Shenandoah Valley Inc. By this time, the earlier group had joined in advocacy of the Skyland-centered park.

Between September and December of 1924, the members of SANPC visited the proposed park sites individually and in groups. The business boosters from the Valley and Skyland had been busy in preparation:

We have already ridden several hundred miles over the area, we have seven towers built upon high points, several trails blazed the whole length of the Blue Ridge ... and we have the whole country-side aware to the fact that the Commissioners [sic] are coming⁴

Shenandoah Valley Inc. spent over \$10,000 in its campaign to sell the Blue Ridge site; and in December, the Committee presented its report to the Secretary of the Interior. The report recognized that the Great Smoky Mountains were the most picturesque of the visited areas, but concluded that the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia had the greater advantage of accessibility to the 40,000,000 visitors within a day's drive of the area. They noted that

The greatest single feature, however, is a possible skyline drive along the mountain top, following a continuous ridge and looking down westerly on the Shenandoah Valley ... and commanding a view [to the east] of the Piedmont Plain Few scenic drives in the world could surpass it.⁵

Politics being politics, Congress passed legislation on February 21, 1925, allocating \$20,000 for the survey and evaluation of proposed parks in the Great Smoky Mountains, Mammoth Cave (Kentucky legislators would not support the bill without this inclusion), and the northern Blue Ridge Mountains. The SANPC became an official Commission. The authorization envisioned Shenandoah as a park with a minimum of 521,000 acres, a figure soon reduced to 400,000, and with a stipulation that "Virginia purchase the land and present it to the federal government for such purpose."⁶ Up to that time, Congress had created parks only on government land or on land donated for park establishment—it was not about to break precedent.

On July 7, 1925, the Shenandoah National Park Association, Incorporated, was formed in Charlottesville for the sole purpose of collecting funds and donated land for the proposed park. The organization formed by the Virginia Chamber of

Commerce and Shenandoah Valley Inc. set a goal to raise \$2,500,000, a figure estimated to be the cost of purchasing 400,000 acres at \$6.00/acre. By April 1926, \$1,249,154 had been pledged; and the SANPC felt confident enough to recommend that Congress authorize Shenandoah National Park. The bill passed on May 14 and was signed by Calvin Coolidge on May 22, 1926. Shenandoah would become a reality when Virginia donated a minimum of 327,000 acres in fee simple to the federal government.⁷

Governor Harry F. Byrd established the Virginia Conservation and Development Commission in April 1926 to take over the management of funds collected for the park. The new Commission was headed by William Carson, Byrd's former campaign manager, and had a mandate to survey, appraise, and purchase the estimated 4,000 properties within the authorized boundary. As time passed, landowner resistance mounted, and actual property values became more evident or inflated due to government purchase. Carson convinced the Commonwealth legislature to enact a blanket condemnation law. The legislation was passed in Virginia in December 1927 and survived Commonwealth Supreme Court challenges in October 1929, but was not finally resolved until the United States Supreme Court refused to hear the case in December 1935. On December 26, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes officially accepted the legally cleared deeds.

Because of the unresolved legal status of the park land, National Park Service planning and development of Shenandoah from 1931-1935 was confined to the 100' Skyline Drive right-of-way purchased from willing landowners happy to see modern road access to their adjacent properties, to the more than 6,000 acres at Skyland and Whiteoak Canyon owned by booster George Pollock, and to the lands purchased by the Commonwealth at Big Meadows.

From 1931-33, President Herbert Hoover (intimately familiar with the park area because of his fishing camp on the Rapidan River within the park boundary) supported the expenditure of significant sums of drought relief and public works funds to build the initial 32 miles of Skyline Drive from his Camp Rapidan to Big Meadows, to Skyland, and to Thornton Gap (Virginia Route #211). After FDR's inauguration in 1933 and the establishment of six Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps in Shenandoah by year's end, construction and development exploded—primarily as highly visible public relations efforts to bolster Roosevelt's campaign to fight the negative psychological impacts of the Great Depression.

The historian will search in vain in public and private archives in an attempt to find an indi-

Melancthon and Carrie Cliser ran a successful gas station and store on highway #211 near Thornton Gap (now the Panorama entrance station on the Skyline Drive). As early as 1929, Cliser fought the condemnation of land for the creation of Shenandoah, citing the Constitution and Magna Carta as the basis for individual property ownership.



cation that there was an official master plan, an overriding philosophy, behind the development of Shenandoah in the years 1926-36. The Commonwealth of Virginia and private business interests sought to have a national park because of the economic stimulus it would provide; George Pollock naively thought that he would retain his Skyland;⁸ and many of the commercial lodging and mineral-rights owners of park land thought that they would share in a harvest of greatly inflated land values. Few seemed to have given serious thought to the 400-500 mountain families who had no desire to move from their homes.

The actual number of residents in Shenandoah will never be known precisely because many moved before December 1935. Herbert Hoover's Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur had expressed the Washington policy that park residents would not be disturbed unless they were in the direct path of development. Then on February 1, 1934, the new Director of the National Park Service, Arno Cammerer, stated that "all inhabitants of the park lands whether landowners, tenants, or squatters, would have to leave"⁹ At first, Washington attempted to dump the entire problem on Virginia officials. A flood of letters to the White House, in part instigated by extensive coverage of the issue by the *Baltimore Sun*, soon brought reaction; and the Department of Agriculture Resettlement Administration purchased 6,291 acres in seven locations bordering the proposed park to establish resettlement homestead communities. By the spring of 1938, 42 elderly residents had been given life estates, 175 families had been moved to

resettlement communities, several families had been physically evicted and their houses burned, and the majority of the mountain residents had left on their own.

Visitor service facilities also seemed to be an afterthought in the new park. Although the CCC developed trails, picnic areas, overlooks, and Skyline Drive features, the water and sewer systems tied to comfort stations and drinking fountains and other development remained unplanned when the park was officially established. The Service—which only had experience with the development of the western parks where the railroads had the primary role in the development of accommodations—followed that precedent in a 1936 advertisement for a concessioner. A contract was awarded in February 1937 to the Virginia Sky-Line Company Inc., a consortium of Richmond businessmen, which immediately began plans for the design and development of the lodges, cabin camps, gas stations, riding stables, and other recreational facilities that today comprise the majority of the buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places within the park. At the insistence of the new concessioner, George Pollock ceased to manage Skyland. The park Master Plans for the years 1937-42 were driven to a large extent by the needs and desires of the Virginia Sky-Line Company.

In 1935, with park establishment pending, Director Cammerer gave thought to the many buildings being removed by the Commonwealth for salvage lumber that was being used to construct outbuildings in the resettlement communities. He sent Edward Steere, Washington Office junior historian, to survey park structures. Steere's 88-page

“The Shenandoah National Park, Its Possibility as an Historical Development” was produced in January 1936.¹⁰ Steere recommended the preservation of over 40 buildings, including a saw mill, a grist mill, and several log homes in Corbin and Nicholson Hollows. Cammerer strongly endorsed the report, in spite of Superintendent Lassiter’s protests that “there was nothing culturally significant in the mountains,”¹¹ and directed the Superintendent to preserve the structures as they were vacated.¹² The Director’s action established unequivocally that Shenandoah was not intended solely to be a “natural” park. Yet for the Service of the 1930s, building preservation and restoration was an infant art. Time passed, Lassiter left, World War II began, and labor and budgets went the way of the CCC. Buildings decayed—and with the rot went the chance to interpret the full spectrum of physical fabric representing 200 years of permanent occupation of the Blue Ridge.

Scientific natural resource management also was non-existent. Quasi-scientific vegetative surveys did not begin in Shenandoah until 1937, long after the CCC began planting tens of thousands of specimens of “decadent”¹³ species. Fraser fir, red spruce, Canadian yew, table mountain pine, and fragrant sumac were started from park seed purchased from commercial nurseries or imported from other parks. Deer, trout, turkey, and possibly black bear were introduced to Shenandoah to help establish “a wild game preserve.”¹⁴ Extensive efforts were made by the CCC to remove dead wood, obliterate exotics, control pine bark blister rust, and, generally, to beautify and reestablish “nature.” Site-specific records of the 12 years of natural resource activities from 1931-42 are scant, making modern assessment of “natural communities” difficult.

Shenandoah National Park today approaches 200,000 acres. Forty percent of the area is Congressionally-designated wilderness. Hiking in some wilderness areas of the park, a visitor can easily feel alone—the first to brush past the mountain laurel, to spook a flock of turkey, or to stop and examine the trailing *Arbutus* in the thick humus and duff of the forest floor. But then the same visitor stops at a row of fieldstones, unmarked but linearly precise—mute testimony to a cultural past.

Much remains to be learned about this intimately interwoven legacy.

Notes

¹ Simmons, Dennis Elwood, “The Creation of Shenandoah National Park and the Skyline Drive, 1924-1936,” (unpublished dissertation, Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia, 1978), p.1

- ² Benchoff, H.J., “Report to Arno B. Cammerer, Director, NPS, Washington, DC, August 20, 1934,” (Shenandoah Valley Inc.), p. 3. The composition of the selected Committee is of interest. The Chairman was the Honorable Henry W. Temple, congressman from Pennsylvania. He was assisted by Col. Glenn S. Smith, topographic engineer, U.S.G.S., Major W.A. Welch, general manager of the Palisades Interstate Parkway, William C. Gregg of the National Arts Club of N.Y.C., and Harlan Kelsey of the Appalachian Mountain Club of Salem, Massachusetts, the foremost advocate of a national Appalachian Trail (who would soon express strong objections to the development of the Skyline Drive).
- ³ Benchoff, loc. cit.
- ⁴ Quoted from a letter of Dan P. Wine, secretary of Shenandoah Valley Inc. and editor of *Harry F. Byrd’s Harrisonburg Daily News-Record*, November 6, 1924, in Benchoff, op.cit., p.9
- ⁵ “Report of the Southern Appalachian National Park Committee,” Zerkel Papers, SNPA
- ⁶ Benchoff, op. cit., p. 10
- ⁷ The minimal acreage requirement later was adjusted downward to 160,000 acres. Harold Ickes accepted 176,429 acres on December 26, 1935.
- ⁸ Pollock wrote to all former Skyland guests and present property owners on October 15, 1925, requesting that they contribute to the Shenandoah National Park Association. He stated that although “[i]t is true you will have to share the joys of this lovely retreat with many others ... [there is] enough for all for many years to come.” Copy of letter in Zerkel files, SNPA.
- ⁹ Cammerer quoted in the *Harrisonburg Daily News-Record*, February 1, 1934, Zerkel files, SNPA. The paper, owned by Senator Harry Byrd, initiated an editorial campaign against the decision, which was picked up by the national press.
- ¹⁰ Copy in SNPA, Box I, N.P.S. file #103
- ¹¹ Lassiter, J.R. to Verne E. Chatelain, December 27, 1935, loc. cit.
- ¹² Cammerer to Lassiter, January 7, 1936, loc. cit.
- ¹³ The phrase is Lassiter’s and refers to those that we would today call “Rare, Threatened, or Endangered.”
- ¹⁴ Sixteen deer were donated by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and released near Skyland in 1934. George Pollock discussed this and other “preserve” efforts in the 1934 “Skyland, Virginia” advertising brochure. SNPA.

Reed L. Engle is Cultural Resource Specialist in the Division of Natural and Cultural Resources, Shenandoah National Park. He served as guest editor of this issue of CRM.

Photos copied by John Amberson, courtesy Shenandoah National Park Archives.