

The Boxley Valley of Buffalo National River: A U.S. National Park Service Historic District in Private Hands

Jim Liles

*Assistant Superintendent
Buffalo National River
Harrison, Arkansas*

When Buffalo National River came into the U.S. National Park System on March 1, 1972, it included a settlement composed of 24 bottom-land farms, with more than 50 inhabitants. Most are descended from the early 19th-century pioneers who settled the seven-mile stretch of river once known as "Big Buffalo Valley"—now called "Boxley Valley."

Think of Boxley Valley as a Cades Cove, transplanted from east Tennessee to north Arkansas, because the two valleys are quite similar in size, heritage, and historical aspect. However, the human community of Cades Cove was displaced by land acquisition prior to the establishment

of Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1930. As with other U.S. National Parks established earlier in the century (especially in the eastern half of the country), little or no recognition was given to the value of cultural landscapes—or their human creators.

Today the little valley of Abrams Creek in the Smokies is a ghost settlement, and, however poignantly attractive to park visitors (as evidenced by the numbers hiking, motoring, and bicycling the Cove's trails and roads), that remnant landscape conveys but a suggestion of the cultural vitality a visitor to the Cove would have experienced between 60 and 160 years ago.

Unlike the legislation establishing Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Buffalo National River's legislative history actually favored the retention of a living community and its lifeways. To help secure passage of a bill for the National River's establishment, former USNPS Director George B. Hartzog articulated the concept of setting aside a "private use zone," including Boxley Valley, where land could be left in private ownership and the USNPS acquire only scenic easements for maintenance of the rural community and its pastoral landscape. This concept, in addition to being clearly enunciated in the park's legislative history, was made part its master plan: "A private use zone containing 9407 acres, including some farmlands, should continue in private ownership subject to scenic controls and necessary rights-of-way for roads and trails." In an earlier day, this would be labeled heresy: a unit of the U.S. National Park System (and a natural area, at that) authorized to embrace ecologically sustainable human activities, on perpetual private holdings!

Following establishment of the park, however, for various reasons fully 75% of the lands within the private use zone were acquired in fee simple by the U.S. National Park Service. This destabilized the Boxley community and led to deteriorating relations. The USNPS was about to lose the opportunity to keep the Ozark folkways alive in a seven-mile stretch of the Buffalo River, where the rural community of Boxley had flourished for the preceding 150 years.

By 1982, ten years after the National River's establishment, Superintendent Alec Gould had decided it was time to come to grips with the challenge of perpetuating the park's most impressive cultural landscape, while improving relations between the park and the residents of Boxley Valley. Many of the once-proud houses and farms had been purchased by the USNPS, vacated, neglected, and some even removed. The remaining population of the valley, number some forty in all, was unsettled, even embittered, by a decade of land acquisition. Land status in the valley was a crazy-quilt of vacant USNPS-owned farms and structures, occupied farms acquired by the USNPS and leased back for up to 25 years under life estates and "rights of use and occupancy," farms for which the USNPS only acquired scenic easements, and others for which the no interest was acquired at all. Beginning in 1983, the USNPS Southwest Regional Director agreed to support the park in developing a formal plan to guide the agency toward improved management of the valley.

With much input from Boxley citizens and cultural resources specialists from the USNPS Denver Service

Center and the Regional Director's staff, a "Land Use Plan and Cultural Landscape Report" for the valley was completed and approved in 1985. Out of this planning effort came the realization that Boxley Valley was eligible for the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. Boxley Valley contains over 200 structures contributing to its historical significance. Some of its houses and barns, a grist mill, and a community building are considered fine examples of vernacular architecture; many date from the last century. In 1987, Boxley Valley was entered onto the National register as the "Big Buffalo Valley Historic District."

The two years of resources assessment, meetings, and informal talks with the Boxley citizens confirmed park managers' early inclinations that those Boxley Valley bottomland farms and associated houses acquired by the USNPS should indeed be returned to private ownership. With approval of the Boxley Land Use Plan, the stage was set for offering the former landowners—those who stayed on as life or term tenants—the opportunity to reacquire their lands, except for forested slopes and the river itself. The USNPS would also retain easements for farm management, water quality protection, historic structures preservation, and appropriate visitor access (the valley contains several historic features of value for interpretation, as well as a beautiful natural area, known as "Lost Valley," to which access is gained by a very popular hiking trail from a trailhead campground.)

The intent of the plan is not to require the people in Boxley Valley to rearrange their lives to serve any broader public interest, but to preserve the opportunity for the continuation of a population that has

developed distinctive ties to the land, as manifested in the valley's cultural landscape.

Since the plan's approval, negotiations have proceeded with a dozen families interested in buying back their farms and houses. The first such conveyance was successfully completed in June 1987 and two more land exchanges were executed in January 1990. (An "exchange" occurs in that the right of use and occupancy—a legal interest—is quit-claimed, in exchange for fee-simple title, after a cash payment is made to the United States, equalizing values set by an appraisal.) Four more such exchanges are awaiting appraisals, as are four "sell-backs" of vacant, USNPS-owned farms, which are expected to be sold on the open market in 1991, subject to easements for farm conservation and historic preservation.

Not all the valley is to be returned to private ownership. Along about one mile of the valley's north end there are no occupied farms; rather, there are open fields overlooked by uninhabitable structures of interpretive value, including two log houses pre-dating the Civil War. Near the valley's center stands the two-story grist mill (built in 1870) and the log house and barn of the first miller. The lands associated with these significant resources will be kept in USNPS ownership, made accessible to visitors, and maintained by "historic leasing," pursuant to the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act. Three such leases covering 100 acres were awarded in February 1988, and three more covering 96 acres in February 1990. This mechanism for land management is resulting in visible improvements in the landscape, such as more neatly maintained historic clearings and

associated fence rows, because the terms of historic leases are an incentive for performance by the lessees.

An equally gratifying effort is being put forth by the Boxley community on lands and for historic structures in private ownership. Owners of lands under the new historic preservation and farm conservation easements have worked in partnership with the park staff to not only rehabilitate historic structures, but to build new barns, fences, and other farm structures—and, in one case, a fine new family house. (The Boxley Land Use Plan allows for construction of some additional houses, on selected sites and in accordance with several restrictions in the easement, promoting construction that is in harmony with traditional landscape features.)

With ownership of land comes more pride and effort in its caretaking. Boxley's population and the amount of care given its structures and farms had declined for a decade and a half before the start of sell-backs. Now, things are definitely looking up for this 5% of Buffalo National River called Boxley Valley, a striking community of farms and houses, flanked by designated wilderness units. (Some 36,000 acres, or 37%, of the National River is designated by legislation as wilderness; almost all the rest is essentially a natural area.) The resulting landscape is a pleasing mosaic of contrasting patterns: forested slopes ascending from the pastoral valley floor, composed of small farms graced by historic houses and barns. From a valley vibrant with human activity, one can canoe, walk, or ride horseback into relative solitude in a matter of minutes. Thanks to the National River's non-traditional leg-

islative history, some of the river's pioneer tradition lives on. The river and the park are made all the more interesting by virtue of that variety and diversity.

Ed. note: The author, Jim Liles, has been charged with carrying out the Boxley plan at the park level for the last five years. Just as several people contributed to developing the plan, several have put forth an extra effort to make it work. On November 10, 1989, at an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C., Liles and Ric Alesch, a park planner with the Denver Service Center, accepted on behalf of the USNPS a Presidential Design Excellence Award for the "Boxley Valley Land Use Plan and Cultural Landscape Report." A start has been made in what promises to be a long-term but certainly worthwhile endeavor—applying this innovative plan to a special place.