

# Reconciling Competing Visions in New Deal Parks: Natural Conservation, Historic Preservation, and Recreational Development

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MY CENTRAL QUESTION IS, WHY DO PARKS LOOK THE WAY THEY DO? It is a deceptively simple question that is really quite complicated. Take a park like Great Smoky Mountains National Park as an example. This park conjures images of mountains and wilderness. If you look beyond the surface, however, you find places like Elkmont Historic District, which challenge these assumptions and remind us that parks are cultural constructions. We make them and project our own cultural values onto the landscape.<sup>1</sup>

I find that there are three ingredients, so to speak, that are constantly in play in park development: natural conservation, historic preservation, and recreational development. I believe that the balance of these assets—sometimes contentious, sometimes parallel—shape how parks look, feel, and function. The thought park planners, managers, and boosters give to these decisions reflect their own values and reveal how they believe parks should function in American society. The New Deal period is especially revealing as the National Park Service (NPS) solidified its role as a national agency and institutionalized the park “master plan.” I have explored this issue on the park level through several case studies, which contribute to my thesis that New Deal park planners struggled to reconcile these assets and this conflict greatly transformed state and national park landscapes.

The New Deal period is essential to understanding park development. The NPS became a true national agency during this time by expanding east of the Mississippi River to reach the majority of the US population. A 1933 executive order transferred all the battlefields and a number of monuments from the War Department and US Forest Service to NPS. New Deal relief programs, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA), funded the creation of hundreds of new parks and entire state park systems such as that of Texas. The rapidity of this expansion solidified the importance of park planning in which a multi-disciplinary team of specialists gathered baseline data prior to any development. NPS developed new kinds of professionals that shaped visions for parks, including historians, historical architects, and archaeologists who worked with traditional

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NPS employees such as landscape architects, engineers, and naturalists. Additionally, NPS planners created new types of parks to diversify the system, including national recreational demonstration areas and parkways. These new types of parks took the agency further away from its traditional affiliation with great western scenic parks.<sup>2</sup>

The public has associated NPS with being a safeguard for America's natural areas, particularly western scenic parks, since the agency's inception. However, NPS has dramatically changed its management of natural resources since the passage of the Organic Act in 1916. Initially, NPS managers believed in preservation through development or sustaining use of a space through careful use. They were concerned with maintaining the visual aesthetics of nature, not ecological integrity, in order to attract visitors. They wanted to keep the landscape looking "natural" and conservationists did not have a problem manipulating the environment to achieve that goal. During this time, wilderness areas were simply considered roadless, natural areas. In general, roads were okay in parks as long as they harmonized with their natural surroundings. Additionally, NPS allowed the eradication of predatory animals, while preserving more popular species and stocking water sources for fishing.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1930s, NPS entered fully into the business of historic preservation and remains a leader today. Verne Chatelain became the first chief of the new History Division in 1931. Two years later, NPS received all the battlefields from the War Department. That same year, Congress created the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) as a New Deal program to fund unemployed architects and photographers. The Historic Sites Act of 1935 ordered NPS to undertake a national survey of historic sites and develop thematic studies. Archaeologists undertook excavations on an unprecedented scale in national parks, and these projects became the basis for the new field of historical archaeology. Chatelain instructed that historical research must precede any type of development work. Therefore, historians, historical architects, and archaeologists became integral parts of planning efforts.<sup>4</sup>

During this time, park planners reconciled nature and history by blending them together. They usually singled out historic sites to develop into day-use areas. They loved the idea of freezing sites in time by taking them back to a period of significance. This technique holds a powerful appeal but is fraught with problems and ignores change over time. They were also very interested in preserving sites that conveyed ideas of primitiveness and humans conquering nature. In fact, park planners loved the concept of the "frontier village," and had the tendency to "naturalize" these sites even further. Cades Cove in the Great Smoky Mountains is a great example. HABS architects recorded structures but focused mainly on log structures and largely ignored frame buildings that appeared more modern. Workers restored a select number of log and frame structures and removed others. They also restored a mill and built a tour road that are both still used by visitors today. However, park planners paid little attention to the historic agricultural landscape and created an illogical landscape.<sup>5</sup>

I have reconsidered the term "recreational development" in favor of a broader concept, "human conservation," that allows us to look at parks as reform landscapes. The New Deal made apparent more than any other time the potential of park recreation as a measure of social reform. Park planners addressed this in three different ways. First, they intended park recreation to rejuvenate the urban masses, build individual character, promote nationalism and consumerism, and show proper conservation techniques through "demonstration areas." Park planners established Catoctin Mountain Park during the New Deal as a recre-

ational demonstration area with several organized campgrounds. The first organized camp was specifically designed for the Maryland League of Crippled Children. Last summer, the league celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary at Camp Greentop. Park planners envisioned another camp that was never constructed because the park expended its New Deal funds. It was a segregated camp specifically for African Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Second, New Deal relief programs put thousands of people to work in state and national parks physically transforming the landscape. These projects also transformed the workers themselves by instilling life skills and giving them job training. The CCC is the clearest example. The government created a program specifically for young men to perform manual labor in mostly remote, rural areas away from the sins and vice of cities. They lived in camps managed by the War Department where they received room, board, and education and vocational instruction. This program not only offered young men temporary relief in the Great Depression, but trained them to be better citizen-consumers.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, human conservation programs in parks transformed the lives of those whose land was acquired to create these places. Some reformers linked land degradation to poverty. Oftentimes, reformers believed people who lived on “submarginal” land were really getting a golden ticket out of rural poverty when the federal government offered to purchase their land. Historian Sara Gregg shows that park planners at Shenandoah National Park removed some residents directly to resettlement communities outside the park. New Deal reformers intended these resettlement communities to improve the quality of life of those who subsisted on submarginal land.<sup>8</sup>

These ideas play out differently at every park, and this paper provides two case study examples to show this interplay between natural conservation, historic preservation, and human conservation.

### **Case Study 1: Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park**

The federal government purchased the C&O Canal in 1938 for the bargain price of \$2 million primarily for its proximity to urban populations in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland. The canal is 184.5 miles long and follows the Potomac River from Georgetown to Cumberland, Maryland. The canal offers terrific scenic views and has a very rich history and tremendous recreational potential.<sup>9</sup>

Park planners did not know initially what to do with the canal but needed to put unemployed people to work immediately. This park does not have a 1930s master plan, which reflects the haste and urgency of New Deal relief programs. NPS committed two African American CCC companies and Public Works Administration (PWA) workers to re-water the first 22 miles of the canal. The workers preserved the historic lock houses in this area and developed historic Great Falls Tavern into a day-use area. NPS planners and New Deal workers restored the tavern back to its period of significance. NPS used historians and HABS architects to research the resources prior to development. This section of the canal is an excellent example of how park planners managed to blend nature and history together, but still put recreation and human conservation at the forefront.<sup>10</sup>

However, NPS made another important precedent when in fact they did not do anything with the remaining 164 miles of the canal and allowed nature to reclaim this portion. NPS considered making this a parkway but a grassroots movement demanded in the 1950s that it

be preserved. Today, the C&O Canal is two very different parks. The first 22 miles remains re-watered. The rest remains in ruins. The park remains a value judgment for the four million visitors that recreate on the canal every year of which section they prefer. However, neither section resembles anything like the canal's historical appearance, which reminds us that C&O Canal "the park" is a cultural construction. It owes much of its identity to that initial New Deal period.<sup>11</sup>

### **Case Study 2: Cumberland Gap National Historical Park**

I believe that park planners and managers continue to deal with the legacies of the New Deal, which they recast to meet changing needs. I decided to expand my study up through the Great Society to continue charting how park planners, managers, and boosters deal with natural conservation, historic preservation, and human conservation. The Great Society is generally defined as the set of domestic policies developed by President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration from 1964 to 1969, which included significant antipoverty and environmental legislation that had a tremendous impact on parks. This has led me to my current case study on Cumberland Gap National Historical Park.

NPS conceived Cumberland Gap late in the New Deal, but the park came of age in the late 1950s. It is a bridge between the conservation and environmental eras. It is also a historical park that commemorates westward expansion through a natural feature—the gap. The park encompasses land in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. The Department of Interior dedicated the park in 1959 and constructed basic park infrastructure with Mission 66 funding.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity and Wilderness acts in 1964 and the National Historical Preservation Act in 1966. The War on Poverty came to Appalachia and so did wilderness and preservation advocates. A new discourse emerged at Cumberland Gap.

First, the Office of Economic Opportunity placed a Job Corps Conservation Center at Cumberland Gap, which is the Great Society version of the CCC. Unlike the CCC, the Job Corps conservation program was a political failure and is not as well known or commemorated. However, during its short existence, enrollees, much like their CCC predecessors continued to transform the park landscape, and also transform themselves in this age of liberal idealism.<sup>13</sup>

Park managers held wilderness hearings after the passage of the Wilderness Act, which asked NPS units to evaluate roadless areas over 5,000 acres. These hearings are an interesting view into the environmental movement and the pressure for ecological integrity in national parks because they opened park planning to public scrutiny. The hearings show that the public was interested in expanding the wilderness areas in Cumberland Gap beyond what NPS had envisioned. Wilderness advocates also strongly opposed the proposed Allegheny Parkway, which they feared would degrade the park's wilderness areas. Ironically, the public also advocated the preservation of Hensley settlement as a primitive frontier village, even though it was a 20th-century community. These discussions of wilderness and roads also prompted NPS planners to tunnel US Highway 25 underneath the gap to return the feature back to its late-18th-century appearance.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the interplay between natural conservation, historic preservation, and recreational development helps us decode the landscape and understand the cultural values

it embodies. It helps us chart important debates in state and national parks that are still discussed today, including the issue of roads in parks, the concept of wilderness, and managing cultural resources in wilderness areas. Further, it forces us to be self-reflective about what kind of visions park planners, managers, and boosters are driving forward today.

## Endnotes

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