

Part 2: Blue Ridge Parkway at 75 - buried history

David Roquemore held up his arms as he waded into waist-high brambles and wildflowers at the edge of the Blue Ridge Parkway. "What are we going to do?" called his wife, Susan, from the roadside. "We're going to go try to find this thing," he answered. "Well, we will find it." Then the parkway enthusiasts plunged into the pine woods in search of a grave where a black man - and probable Confederate soldier - is buried, a little bit of local history that the parkway's designers passed over.

For many years, the cultural aspect of the road, with its visitor centers and wayside exhibits, showcased the pioneer life of rural Appalachia. Winding forest trails led to rough cabins, presenting the illusion of isolated mountain homesteads subsisting on farming and backwoods skills such as making brooms and spinning wool. It was a theme-park feel of frozen time that ignored the modern life led by mountain families in the 1930s. Erased was all mention of the area's black residents. Gone, except for paleo-history exhibits of arrowheads, was Native American culture. "Travelers get presented with a version of rural Appalachia that admittedly was contrived," said Steven Kidd, a cultural resources specialist and archaeologist with the parkway. "That's one of the things that we're trying to correct now in our interpretation." That neglected history is still out there, although, as the Roquemores were discovering, it's not easy to find.

The designers of the Blue Ridge Parkway intended to showcase the culture of the Appalachian region through which the 470-mile road passed. Park structures copied the notched-log construction of barns and cabins. Buildings on land purchased for the road were stripped of modern roofs and siding, and some were moved to new locations, such as Humpback Rocks and Mabry Mill, to create farm museums. "One of the principal opportunities that we have," wrote lead designer Stanley Abbott, "is to preserve something of the backwoods feeling that otherwise may disappear from the mountains."

The story told by the parkway became that of frontier families, as hard as the blue granite bedrock of the mountains they conquered. Except it wasn't complete. The National Park Service, which manages the Blue Ridge Parkway, in recent years has attempted to rectify omissions and misrepresentations. It has commissioned surveys of significant cultural sites and updated museum exhibits. "We want to tell the story of the people who lived in these areas before the parkway, during the construction of the parkway and after the parkway," Kidd said. Park managers have a lot of work to do, because the designers focused on a single point in time. "They loved the lore of the mountains," said Abbott's son, Carlton, an architect and park planner who lives in Williamsburg. "They tried to follow these themes."

Near Meadows of Dan, there is Mabry Mill, a grist mill beside a tranquil pond, said to be the most photographed site along the parkway. A whiskey still, sawmill, blacksmith shop and other mountain artifacts were moved to the site to create a tourist attraction. The Mabry family's modern house was demolished and replaced with a log cabin moved from another location. It is not inaccurate. It just doesn't tell the whole story. And the parkway designers did acknowledge that the Blue Ridge was an industrious place, with logging, mining and farming, unlike the adjacent Shenandoah National Park, where mountain residents were evicted for what was said to be their own good and all traces of their lives removed.

"That's the kind of thing that really annoys descendant families," said professor Philip E. Coyle of Western Carolina University, about Shenandoah. "It's not simply that they're being misinterpreted, but their entire history is being eradicated, like they didn't even exist. "It wasn't a wilderness." Nor was the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The parkway may appear verdant and lush, in part because it runs through two national forests, but it is planned beauty. When Abbott's crew began work, it had to cope with mountains that had been overtimbered and soil that was eroding. They restored the landscape and the vegetation along the road corridor, and in doing so they

controlled it. The designers had a reason for every tree planted and every structure maintained. The mountain views feel unbounded, but the parkway itself is manicured.

Coyle, who conducted an ethnographic survey of significant cultural sites along the road, said people love the Blue Ridge Parkway. "They make their own houses resemble the Blue Ridge Parkway," he said. "The parkway even has a lot of mowed lawns, and we love mowed lawns. It's the connection of the city and the country, that 'city beautiful' idea of creating a harmonious place to live with nature."

The designers were influenced by the Hudson River school of landscape painting, he said, as well as by their own time period, which was one of segregation and discrimination. On the parkway's southern tip in North Carolina is an interpretive sign about Griffith Rutherford's military campaign against the Cherokee Indians in 1776, he said. It talks only about the brigadier general's military strategy and victories. From a Cherokee point of view, however, "the Rutherford expedition was a brutal, genocidal campaign," Coyle said. "The Cherokee have taken a strong lead in trying to interpret their own history these days," he said, and they have the political clout to do so because the parkway crosses their reservation.

Near Floyd in Virginia, some people would like to see new attention on the Pine Spur cemetery. **The Roquemores pushed their way through** the tangled brush on the road bank and emerged into a forest only slightly less obstructive. They kept their eyes on the ground to watch for copperheads among the dead leaves and were rewarded by finding instead a slight depression with small stones at either end. "Well, look what we have here," David Roquemoire said, and read aloud, " 'Confederate soldier, Humphrey Claytor.' Well, I never would have known that this was here."

In the nearby town of Floyd, Claytor had applied for a pension as a disabled Confederate soldier, saying he was paroled after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox. And although a hearse parked outside the town's public library on a recent day bore a sign reading "Prepare to Meet Thy God," Claytor had taken his time about that, living to a ripe old age, although his actual birth date was unclear.

District Court Judge Gino Williams, who has appointed trustees for the Pine Spur cemetery, said he would like to see it cleaned up. "When I get out of this job, it's one of the things I'd like to do," he said. "It's a shame, because it's a pretty unique cemetery in a pretty unique place."

Many cemeteries were ignored by the parkway's designers even though they lie within its boundaries, Coyle said, but others were incorporated as focal points. He mentioned one near Peaks of Otter, about 60 miles north of Pine Spur. "It's right in the parkway; the parking area actually encircles the cemetery," Coyle said. "It's very much included in the design. It wasn't an accident, you know."

Directly across the road from Claytor's grave is the Pine Spur overlook, which was intended in the 1930s to be a recreation and picnic area specifically for African Americans. Because of World War II, it was never completed, and by the time construction geared up again, segregation was becoming a thing of the past. The location was chosen because a black community was nearby, Coyle said. As his report to the park service notes, it still is, and the Pine Spur cemetery remained an active burial site into the 1980s. "The recommendation is to try to be sensitive about those places and maybe try to cultivate some connection with those communities," he said. "The idea is to point out the places that are meaningful to contemporary people."

As the parkway prepares for its next 75 years, reports such as Coyle's aid planners. A cultural landscape survey also is under way to see whether maintenance and repairs completed over the years at parkway facilities - say, the replacement of a campground's wooden picnic tables with plastic or metal - are true to the original design. Elements such as stone drinking fountains with copper basins are historic now, but difficult to maintain. The buildings that were moved and altered to create farm museums and exhibits have become historic in their new locations. Protecting history while correcting it is a balancing act.

In addition, parkway managers must consider future needs - younger visitors prefer interpretive information to be delivered electronically, but cell towers don't fit the cultural landscape. "In 75 years, coming down the parkway, what would you expect to see?" Kidd asked. "That is something we're working through. I would like it to remain a green space where you can get away from civilization. I don't live without power or a cell phone, but there's a place for those." Cell-phone coverage is spotty, at best, along the parkway. It remains very much a place to get away from it all, as was Peaks of Otter long before the parkway got there.

In the 1800s, the Hotel Mons was a popular tourist destination. A small community grew up around it. African Americans and whites lived nearby and worked at the hotel; farmers sold apples, produce and cut flowers to the restaurant. Since the parkway came, the hotel and all but two of the surrounding buildings have vanished. An interpretive sign next to some foundation stones marks the hotel's former location. Tourists can walk from the Peaks of Otter Lodge through a little tunnel shared by a stream, across a meadow and through the woods to the Johnson farm. "They artfully created this meandering trail through the forest to get to the Johnson farmhouse," Coyle said. "They created this illusion of the farm being an isolated mountain cabin. "In fact, the people who lived there worked at the Mons Hotel. It wasn't isolated at all."

Just below the present-day Peaks of Otter Lodge, somewhere in the woods, is the farmstead of George Saunders, a black farmer. He terraced his mountainside property to grow tomatoes for the local cannery, and he could afford to put a metal roof on his house, which, the park service noted in a 2005 report, "was no small investment." But the designers passed over the cabin. "There's good reasons not to preserve the Saunders cabin," Coyle said. "It's very difficult to access, and there's a bear that lives in the cellar, or at least that's what we were afraid of when we went up there." He pointed out that another nearby cabin, owned by a white farmer, was not preserved, either.

"The parkway did take people's land, and it did convert some people's land into scenic easements, but they didn't remove communities," Coyle said. "They selectively removed places, but the end result of the landscape design is a rather pretty, pleasant scene. It's something a lot of people can relate to."

The parkway in 1974 restored the Johnson farm. The log cabin once again was covered with white siding, as it was when the family last lived there. The porches and room additions were put back on. On a hot afternoon in July, park guide Dave Meyer, dressed in denim and a white shirt, stopped planing a piece of black walnut he was making into furniture to tell a group of sweating tourists about the house. The tourists wandered around and took pictures. "What were these cabins made from?" one asked. "Pretty well chestnut," Meyer replied. "These were chestnut forests. 'Course, they're gone. Once they cut all the chestnuts down and the blight came, it was done. The forests changed."

They're still changing. The tree-wrapped Blue Ridge is balding and, in another 75 years, many of today's iconic trees may have vanished.