

Blue Ridge Parkway's 75th Anniversary Celebration Begins

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By amwdew (/users/amwdew) on October 20th, 2008



As the country careened toward what is beginning to look like a second Great Depression, citizens in North Carolina and Virginia paused on October 9 and 10 to consider the history of one of the great public accomplishments of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal 75 years ago: the scenic **Blue Ridge Parkway** (<http://www.nps.gov/blri>).

It doesn't matter whether you view the "birth" of the Blue Ridge Parkway as falling in 1933, 1935 or 1936, the 75th anniversary celebration is now under way. Photos courtesy NPS and Blue Ridge Parkway Historic Photograph Collection, Asheville, NC.

The 469-mile parkway, which winds through the high mountains of the southern Appalachians and joins **Shenandoah** (<http://www.nps.gov/shen>) and **Great Smoky Mountains** (<http://www.nps.gov/grsm>) national parks, has since after World War II been the most visited site in the National Park System. It was built over a 52-year period from the turning of the first shovelful of dirt in September of 1935 until

its completion in 1987.

And although it has lived since its legislative authorization in 1936 under the National Park Service, its construction was a collaborative effort of NPS, the federal Bureau of Public Roads (later known as the Federal Highway Administration), New Deal agencies like the Public Works Administration, Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and Resettlement Administration, the state highway departments of Virginia and North Carolina, and dozens of private road-building contractors.

It all began quietly, 75 years ago this past August, when FDR traveled through Shenandoah National Park to visit a new Civilian Conservation Corps camp with his Interior secretary, Harold L. Ickes, and U.S. Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia.

Seeing the success of the newly-built Skyline Drive in Shenandoah, someone in the party is said to have suggested extending Skyline Drive south to the Smokies. A few weeks later, Sen. Byrd convened a meeting of supporters in his Washington office, where they crafted a proposal for such a road. By November, it had been approved for federal funding under the Public Works Administration. And by 1935, diesel shovels were moving dirt.

Since the birth of the Parkway took place over a three-year period from idea (1933), to construction (1935), to legislative authorization (1936), it is somewhat hard to pinpoint the “beginning” for the purposes of the anniversary celebration. Even the specific date of the initial groundbreaking is in dispute, as it passed with next to no media attention.

For more than two years, a group of more than 30 people from Virginia and North Carolina have been working to figure out how to celebrate “the” anniversary, or anniversaries. They – or I should say “we,” since I am part of this group – have established an independent nonprofit organization, Blue Ridge Parkway 75, Inc., to manage the plans.

The board of directors, on which I serve, is led by retired Blue Ridge Parkway superintendent Dan Brown and retired Roanoke County, Virginia, administrator Elmer Hodge. The state of North Carolina and Roanoke County donate the services of two full-time, very capable staff members, Leesa Brandon and Penny Lloyd.

The board is a microcosm of all the interests that have had a stake in the Parkway since the beginning: NPS, the states, conservationists, and people associated with the tourism and travel industry in both states.

It should be noted that the aim of promoting and propping up the mountain tourist industry figured prominently in the Parkway’s origins – so much so that a name suggested for the project in 1934 was the “Shenandoah-Smoky Mountain Parkway and Stabilization Project.” Thankfully, Interior Secretary Ickes scotched the idea: “I do not approve,” he wrote an NPS official, “of this suggested name and I wish that some shorter and characteristic name could be proposed. I especially object to the word ‘stabilization’.”

Although the 1936 establishing legislation named the road the more poetic Blue Ridge Parkway, the notion of the park as pillar of the regional tourism industry retains substantial currency, as reflected in the makeup of the Blue Ridge Parkway 75 Board.

The board hopes to orchestrate a celebration – most of which will take place during 2010, the anniversary of the beginning of construction – that highlights the Parkway’s past in ways that help us think about its future.

As any reader of National Parks Traveler will know, there is no guarantee that we will have the Blue Ridge Parkway as we know it 75 years from now. The challenges that lie ahead are substantial: encroaching development and suburbanization, creeping and wafting pollution, insect blights, commercialization pressures, deteriorating infrastructure, and a decimated staff to deal with it all (about one-fifth of the Parkway’s full-time positions are vacant, unfilled due to budget constraints)

And we knew all of that before the national economy began its recent downward spiral.

With these things in mind, we kicked off our celebration Thursday afternoon with a panel discussion of Parkway history and present management dilemmas. With my colleagues Ian J. W. Firth, retired from the landscape architecture faculty at the University of Georgia, Gary W. Johnson, the longtime head of the resources management division of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Neva Jean Specht, history faculty member at Appalachian State University (just off the Parkway at Boone, North Carolina), I organized a two-hour discussion that presented the Parkway as the complicated park that it is and always has been.

Titled *A Living Past on a Borrowed Landscape: The Blue Ridge Parkway at 75*, our symposium aimed to focus on the struggles this park faces as a narrow corridor threaded through a populated region. The scenic views that are key to the Parkway traveler's experience stretch from the NPS-owned lands to the horizon, and maintaining the Parkway's magic always entails ongoing negotiations with those from whom the views are, in a sense, "borrowed."

My presentation, based on the research for my 2006 book **Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History** ([/review/2007/super-scenic-motorway](#)), explored the Parkway's social, cultural, and political history. I reminded the audience that this project – for which the states took lands through a long-populated region via the power of eminent domain – entailed significant and often protracted conflicts, especially with disgruntled landowners.

Those who were well-connected and powerful sometimes forced planners to reshape Parkway plans to benefit their own private interests. And bitterness lingered.

I tried to show that the Parkway lies on the land the way it does partly as a result of how those conflicts got resolved. Many similar conflicts rage on today, and my point was that our decisions about the Parkway will shape its future configuration in the same ways.

Ian Firth, meanwhile, opened a new window on the Parkway's design history, based on years of research in writing the Parkway's Historic Resource Study. Although I sometimes think an overweening focus on design elements has obscured our view of the socio-political context, I think my frustration is mainly with conventional popular histories that appear from time to time in glossy tourist magazines. Those histories often imply that the Parkway represented the near-seamless implementation of a single unitary design vision imagined by the park's first resident landscape architect, Stanley W. Abbott.

But Mr. Firth takes a whole different approach. Looking closely at the historical record, he finds that design itself was contentious, characterized as much by compromise and experimentation as by overarching vision. And while Abbott's initial ideas were critical, the Parkway (built over a 52-year period with sometimes conflicting input from many engineers and landscape architects) exhibits a striking variation of bridge styles, culverts, landscape treatments, guardrails and other features.

Mr. Firth does argue that an overall unity persists, nevertheless – that there is an essential "Parkway-ness" that is evident, and that therefore should be recognized and preserved.

Gary Johnson leads the NPS team that now manages and plans for the Parkway's present and future. Loaded with creative graphics, his presentation illustrated how the physical reality that planners are coping with today still reflects all of this interlinked and overlapping decision-making in the past.

Understanding, for instance, the very different histories of land acquisition in the Virginia and North Carolina (where completely different approaches to eminent domain prevailed) makes the deed reservations and scenic easement arrangements that continue to complicate relationships with adjoining landowners make sense. And thinking about design features, it is helpful to remember that the Parkway is not one parkway, but many, as it winds its way through multiple geophysical subregions along its 469 miles.

The wealth of information presented caused us to run overtime, but historian Neva Specht coordinated a foreshortened discussion period that, based on audience response, could have gone on much longer. The audience seemed riveted by the panel discussion, and several people

approached us afterward to say how much they had learned, and how they looked at the Parkway in new ways.

Others, I suspect, wished we had been more celebratory, sticking to the old romantic story about a Parkway that was an uncomplicated “Godsend for the needy,” that was “painted with a comet’s tail” by one visionary landscape architect (Abbott) across the southern Appalachian landscape without substantial conflict, compromise, debate, or opposition.

The problem is: it simply wasn’t so. And a history that denies how hard-won this or any of our national parks were in the face of many competing demands and private interests is a history that doesn’t serve us well going forward.

In the coming months, I hope the continued preparations for the Parkway’s 75th will help us envision a set of events that celebrates the park’s full and complicated past in a way that helps us turn, clear-eyed, to the vexing challenges that lie ahead.

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Comments

Submitted by **Bob Janiskee (/users/bob-janiskee)** on **(/comment/5541#comment-5541)**
October 20, 2008 - 12:14pm.

Great article, Anne! Deep history beats shallow history every time. It's a pleasure to get the word from someone who really knows what she's talking about.

- **reply (/comment/reply/982/5541)**

Submitted by **amwdew (/users/amwdew)** on October 20, **(/comment/5544#comment-5544)**
2008 - 2:49pm.

Thanks, Bob! As you no doubt know, sometimes people just prefer the romantic old stories, though. Keep up your good work, too!

Cheers,
Anne

Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Ph.D.
Historian & Author of Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History
Chapel Hill, NC

- **reply (/comment/reply/982/5544)**

Submitted by **dapster (/users/dapster)** on October 22, 2008 - **(/comment/5565#comment-5565)**
8:07am.

Fascinating article! One can just imagine the obstacles that construction of 469 miles of highway along mountain ridges through several states would meet. Thanks for bringing that facet of this marvelous highway to light!

My family will be taking a drive along the portion between Routes 33 and 250 in Virginia this weekend to view the fall foliage. This has been a tradition in our family for many years, and we look forward to it as soon as the cool weather arrives every fall. The views are spectacular, and the nearly seamless way the road threads along the ridges is awe inspiring. What a feat of engineering.

I have posed this question before about this road in all seriousness, and shall do so again:

Could this road be built today, under the countless EIS's that would be required, and following NEPA protocols? (Let's assume budget constraints do not exist, and lands are acquired as they were back then, for simplicity).

Please, I would like to hear your thoughts on this hypothetical question.

dap

- [reply \(/comment/reply/982/5565\)](/comment/reply/982/5565)

Submitted by [amwdew \(/users/amwdew\)](/users/amwdew) on October 23, [\(/comment/5596#comment-5596\)](/comment/5596#comment-5596)
2008 - 11:52am.

That's a great question, and one that I get asked all the time. I usually say a couple of things in answer:

1. You are certainly right that due to NEPA especially (1969), there would be *vastly* more requirements that the impacts of this project be considered than were in place when most of the Parkway was built. Now the good news of this would be that local people who were going to be adversely affected would have much more voice in the deliberations about what would be done. But the bad news, of course, might be the failure of the project. In the late 1960s/early 1970s, there was a proposal to extend the Parkway from North Carolina southward into Georgia, to a point near Marietta. The same standards were set out for the Parkway that had been applied up to that time on the NC and VA portions. But opposition soon arose, largely from the environmental community, it seems, who objected to more road building through wilderness areas. There were some public hearings, and maybe an EIS, and eventually the project foundered and died. So . . . in this regard, I can certainly say that this would be a much more difficult project to put forward today than in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s when a majority of the Parkway construction was done.

2. BUT, on the other side of this, it is the case that somehow as a nation we do manage to continue to build highways all over the country. New Interstate corridors are built, bypasses are put in, old roads are widened, etc -- all of which certainly entails quite similar "impacts" on property owners and local citizens, not to mention the natural environment. And all of this continues to go on the post-NEPA age. So from that standpoint, I'd have to conclude that it would not be *impossible* to build the Parkway today, although it would certainly be more difficult (though, as I said above, possibly more fair).

Does that help? I know that's a bit mushy, but these things are mushy. Enjoy your trip this weekend! The color should be just about at its peak, at least in some areas.

Best,
Anne Whisnant

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- [reply \(/comment/reply/982/5596\)](#)

Submitted by [admin \(/users/admin\)](#) on October 23, 2008 - [\(/comment/5597#comment-5597\)](#)
12:36pm.
dapster,

I would encourage you to look at two places to find the answer to your question.

First, think of the North Shore Road controversy over in Great Smokies.

<http://www.northshoreroad.info/index.htm> (<http://www.northshoreroad.info/index.htm>)

You can read about it for yourself but it basically boiled down to a 1947 agreement whereby the feds foreclosed on people's land to build a dam/lake and promised to build a road in return. The road was never built, and over time the environmental and monetary costs of building it skyrocketed. Did the government uphold its word? No, and people were justified in asking the road be built. But did we NEED said road? Not really.

Second, think of the Interstate 26 extension that runs from Asheville, NC northward to the Tennessee Tri-Cities area (Bristol, Kingsport, Johnsonville) near the TN/VA line. The extension is essentially a widening of the old US Hwy 23. Again, did we NEED the extension? Umm....probably not. But was it built? Yep. See <http://www.mountainx.com/news/2003/0716tennessee.php> (<http://www.mountainx.com/news/2003/0716tennessee.php>)

What's this mean? If the proposed road can be sold to the right people and shown to have a positive impact on the economy, chances are that it'll go through.

Also, as a footnote, construction on the Foothills Parkway on the TN side of the Smokies is still proceeding. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foothills_Parkway (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foothills_Parkway) The government owns the right-of-way, so it's being built as money allows.

- [reply \(/comment/reply/982/5597\)](#)

Submitted by [dapster \(/users/dapster\)](#) on October 23, 2008 - [\(/comment/5601#comment-5601\)](#)
3:24pm.
Anon,

Thanks for your input to my question. I had never heard of these instances, I'm guessing mainly do to my location in Richmond, VA. It does clearly show that lobbying and PAC donations can produce results, both desired and undesired.

My hope is that the people of the area have reaped at least some benefit from the costly construction of these roads, and it was not done in vain.

It is interesting that such large amounts of time have been spent on all of these projects. 20-60 years to complete some stretches? Astounding...

Thanks again!

dap

- [reply \(/comment/reply/982/5601\)](/comment/reply/982/5601)

Submitted by **dapster (/users/dapster)** on October 23, 2008 - (</comment/5603#comment-5603>)
6:00pm.

Anne,

Thanks so very much for your answer to a challenging and quite "Mushy" question!

I agree that the fairness aspect to landowners through public comment periods would be better today, and newer construction techniques could be less invasive, but the environmental concerns would certainly trump all others in regards to being built or not. I was amazed to see the previous posters reference to the Foothills Parkway in the Smokies that is still under construction that began in 1944!

It is a true statement also that roads are currently built and expanded, and the restrictions in place today are beneficial, such as the new construction techniques and water drainage control systems that are utilized in my area of Virginia to help protect the Chesapeake Bay.

We appear to have good weather for Sunday, and near peak foliage conditions! This trip should be quite memorable, as we are taking out 2 year old son for this first trip along the parkway, and cannot wait to see it through his eyes.

Thanks for your article and thoughtful answers. I'll look for your book at the bookstore!

dap

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