RESEARCH

The Mountain People and the *Washington Post*: Conflicting Narratives in the Relocation of Shenandoah Families

Caroline Harvey
Virginia Tech, US
harveycl@vt.edu

Congress authorized the creation of a conservation area in the Shenandoah Valley on May 22, 1926, and that same year the secretary of the interior declared that residents in the region had to leave the new Shenandoah National Park. This essay examines competing perceptions of the relocation of those residents, known as mountain people, in the creation of Shenandoah National Park by comparing the narratives of the *Washington Post* and the families who were forced to relocate. The editors and writers of the *Post* characterized the region as isolated, underprivileged, and in need of outside help and federal programs to build habitable homes. However, this discourse reflected trends of modernization within American society at large that differed from mountain people’s vision of their own life; the ideals of “modern” life were reflected in the *Post*’s discourse about mountain people, who the *Post* thought represented the antithesis of “modern” life. This narrative of a “modernizing” America versus an “outmoded” mountain way of life serves as important historical context for this conflict. This belief allowed *Post* writers to tell a narrative that belittled and disregarded the region’s inhabitants as they were removed from the park area. By contrast, relocated mountain people did not think of themselves in that way. Furthermore, despite promises of aid and support, they struggled socially and economically during and after their forced relocation, which proved to be both logistically difficult and emotionally trying for them. Despite these challenges, mountain people were adept at working the land and some learned to navigate and petition the bureaucracy themselves.

Just seventy-five miles from Washington, DC, the Shenandoah Valley in northwestern Virginia cradles a two-hundred-thousand-acre protected wilderness area. Congress authorized the creation of this conservation area on May 22, 1926, and that same year the secretary of the interior declared that residents in the region had to leave

the new Shenandoah National Park. By 1931 construction of the park’s Skyline Drive, a scenic roadway that would be the feature tourist attraction of the park, was underway. A large portion of the park’s labor was supplied by the Civilian Conservation Corps, a program funded through New Deal legislation during the Great Depression during a time of high unemployment. Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the park on July 3, 1936, and shortly after, the Shenandoah National Park opened to the public.

The park’s proximity to Washington, DC, meant that large numbers of out-of-state tourists who visited the capital often also made the trip to the national park. Indeed, the Shenandoah National Park Association promoted the location of the park to potential tourists through brochures that described beautiful scenes of waterfalls, streams, trees, and cliffs. Promotional materials drew on the language of national officials and local boosters who claimed that the region was scarcely inhabited and separated from civilization. For example, George Pollock, a business owner in the region advocated for the project in 1924 in order to benefit his Skyland mountain resort. Although four to five hundred families lived in the area, Pollock claimed that there were a “few small mountain farms, of no great value.” Pollock made it clear early in the park project that he believed the mountain people and their concerns could be safely ignored because there were so few of them.

Others recognized that families lived in the area but sought to paint a picture of mountain people that would justify their removal. For example, Miriam Sizer was an educator who made recommendations to the commonwealth about relocation. In 1932 the National Park Service employed Sizer as a special adviser to gather sociological information on the mountain people. She reported that the mountain people were “steeped in ignorance” and were “possessed of little or no ambition [with] little comprehension of law or respect for law.” She also helped with the 1933 sociological study Hollow Folk, written by Mandel Sherman and sociologist Thomas E. Henry, which painted the mountain people of the Shenandoah Valley as isolated, othered, and in need of outside help. Sherman and Henry wrote, “Both in time and space it seems to be isolated. … [The tourists] had stopped at the lonely cabins, given pennies to the children and old clothes to the women.” Thus, I argue that outsiders to the region like Seizer, Sherman, and Henry presented images of an isolated and poverty-stricken region that ultimately gave the National Park Service rationale for the removal of the mountain people.

Sizer’s, Sherman’s, and Henry’s descriptions of mountain people paralleled images of Appalachians disseminated throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Appalachians, through the color fiction movement, were depicted as backwards and isolated, similar to how outsiders viewed residents of the Shenandoah Valley. In the context of a fictional story, the local color movement often drew upon stereotypes of violence, otherness, and feuding, perceived as elements of traditional Appalachian culture, and it highlighted themes of cultural and geographic isolation, economic lag, and instability, as did Hollow Folk. Mountain people, regardless of the region, were stereotyped, and those stereotypes were mobilized for the benefit of outsiders; the local color fiction movement provided economic gain for authors, for example, while the Shenandoah National Park would provide money to local businessmen and the state.

Katrina M. Powell has contributed the most research about the families impacted by the creation of Shenandoah National Park. Her book The Anguish of Displacement investigated literacy among park-area residents as they communicated with US government officials during their removal. Other scholarly research by Powell includes Writing the Geography of the Blue Ridge Mountains: How Displacement Recorded the Land, which described the rhetoric of both the mountain families and national park officials during the creation of Shenandoah National Park.

This essay, further building on Powell’s work, examines competing perceptions of the relocation of mountain people in the creation of Shenandoah National Park by comparing the narratives of the Washington Post and the families who were forced to relocate. Evaluating the Post and comparing its narration of the park to letters and interviews of park families will answer the following question: How was the narrative of relocating mountain people different between accounts generated by outsiders and accounts from local residents of the region? Like the authors of Hollow Folk, the editors and writers of the Post characterized the region as isolated, underprivileged, and in need of outside help and federal programs to build habitable homes. However, this discourse reflected trends of modernization within American society at large that differed from mountain people’s vision of their own life; the ideals of “modern” life were reflected in the Post’s discourse about mountain people, who the Post thought represented the antithesis of “modern” life. This narrative of a “modernizing” America versus an “outmoded” mountain way of life serves as important historical context for this conflict. This belief allowed Post writers to tell a narrative that belittled and disregarded the region’s inhabitants as they were removed from the park area. By contrast, relocated mountain people did not think of themselves in that way. Furthermore, despite promises of aid and support, they struggled socially and economically during and after their forced relocation, which proved to be both logistically difficult and emotionally trying for them. Despite these challenges, mountain people were adept at working the land and some learned to navigate and petition the bureaucracy themselves.

This essay will rely on oral histories and letters of mountain people. They offer a direct narrative to the story of their removal and day-to-day life. The oral histories collected in the Shenandoah National Park Oral History Collection contain interviews with park residents that took place between 1964 and 1999. Additionally, letters produced by the mountain families between 1934 and 1938 were collected in Powell’s Answer at Once. The differences between these
narratives reveal that the Post and mountain people held starkly different ideas about the identities and literacies of the mountain families of the Shenandoah region. While the Post portrayed the mountain people to be isolated, ignorant, and easily and happily removed, the mountain people were independent, innovative, faced hardships, and resented their forced removal from the land.

**Backwards and Disadvantaged**

The Post described the Shenandoah Valley region as isolated, matching the general conceptions of western Virginia mountain people. News articles repeatedly insisted that the people of the region lived remote and secluded lives, casting them as somehow different from other Americans. For example, in an article published on June 25, 1934, during the first year of removal, the Post stated that the park project would benefit “many of whom have lived in great isolation.”

The article’s headline, which described these residents as “Hillmen,” simultaneously highlighted and promoted a perception of these people as distinct from the paper’s readership and as somehow left behind by the modern age, people whose habits were an impediment to fruitful lives.

The Post took advantage of the region’s cultural and geographic differences by emphasizing the residents’ separation from civilization and making them seem completely isolated.

The newspaper’s description of the residents’ farming practices similarly cast the Shenandoah mountain families as backwards, and the Post suggested that they suffered because of this. Several articles in the Post described traditional small-scale farming practices in the region in order to imply that farmers faced difficulties in gaining access to commercial farming mechanisms. During the discussion about relocation plans, the Post stated that mountain families would “have a house and approximately ten acres of land” so that they could continue to practice small-scale agriculture just as they had before the relocation.

The newspaper suggested that even after being moved beyond the park boundary, mountain families continued to suffer in isolation by featuring their small-scale farming practices that, in reality, worked for the residents. However, another article promised that “each homesteader would have a garden or farming plot of land, a house, livestock and farming equipment, and an interest in community grazing and wood land.”

The article indicated that although the mountain people continued to use small-scale farming practices, their lives could be improved if outsiders provided them with commercial equipment, modern techniques, and community land. In the eyes of the Post, the residents’ relocation from the parkland would only improve their isolated and impoverished lives.

Since these “isolated” people were forced to relocate by outsiders, the Post reported on programs that would transition the mountain people to a supposedly more civilized lifestyle with assistance from those that did not live in the region. The newspaper promoted a view that, thanks to outside help, the mountain people would have better work opportunities. Employment opportunities in the park and guidance in farming practices would “give [mountain people] an opportunity such as they before never have had.”

The Post proclaimed that Shenandoah Valley residents would be able to find some employment in the park, which would provide opportunities for “self-support.” The implication that this region would become self-sufficient as a result of programs established by outsiders illustrated the Post’s narration of a transition from dependency to independence. Furthermore, mountain people received “guidance in subsistence farming” so that they would “raise their own land, their food, and forage crops.”

The Post explained that programs supplied these people with the opportunity to learn better farming skills, implying that they did not previously possess or practice these skills. In short, the newspaper suggested that the Shenandoah Valley people would benefit from the outside programs that were established during the transition to relocation and that the mountain people were provided with better opportunities than they had before they were disturbed.

The Post reported on programs that would help mountain people adapt to outside assistance, drawing on wider narratives of the need for social welfare intervention to improve and modernize the lives of Americans living in the twentieth century. Specifically, the Post reported efforts to “rehabilitate” the park inhabitants: “Relief authorities have expressed their willingness to assist in the rehabilitation of these families.”

The news company described the region as impoverished, and the topic of relief assistance frequently appeared when the newspaper reported the need for rehabilitation in mountain communities. One article reported that 35 percent of the residents were on relief rolls in 1934, which indicated the disadvantaged lifestyle on which the Post reported.

By stating the need for restoring mountain families through relief assistance, outsiders of the region like the editors and journalists of the Post perceived the region as more impoverished than the rest of the country. However, it was not unusual for families, even rural residents, to be on relief at this time. The Great Depression caused economic hardships across the country, not just in the Shenandoah Valley, and the unemployment rate climbed to over 20 percent nationwide.

To relieve the economic strain that all Americans faced, President Roosevelt created agencies and programs like the National Recovery Administration, Federal Home Administration, and the Federal Emergency Relief Act. Americans utilized these programs to help recover from the widespread unemployment and poverty during the Great Depression. In contrast to the narrative published by the Post, the number of people on relief assistance by the government in the Shenandoah Valley was not uncommon, as the entire country faced similar economic hardships during the Great Depression.

The Post reported the poverty of area residents not just in terms of rates of federal aid, but also by noting substandard
housing conditions and lack of education. A 1934 article noted that housing conditions in Shenandoah Valley National Park settlements were “poor”; the article included a picture of a mountain home, comparing it with a house plan for those being relocated. The new home appeared better than the “typical homes of the park region.” This comparison of a “modern” home and a mountain home implied that the families of park removal were penurious in their housing situation. The Post commented on the lack of schooling to again illustrate mountain people’s underprivileged way of life. It reported that the mountain schools in the Shenandoah Valley were bad, but after the park’s creation, access to quality schools became even more difficult. For whatever reason, in at least one aspect of the removal process, the Post recognized the negative consequences of uprooting mountain families. At least one writer reported about declining opportunities for children to receive an education after being removed. An article from February 25, 1935, explained, “Schooling for the mountain children is almost impossible since the removal of many of the schools following the condemnation of the land.” In the same article, a mountaineer said that moving out of the park was the only thing left to do after his children faced difficulty getting an education. Despite recognizing at least one negative aspect of removal, the Post’s coverage further portrayed the mountain people as chronically underprivileged, uneducated, and therefore ignorant.

The Post also described the Shenandoah region as in need of quality housing by reporting on the federal homestead project. One article from 1934 announced that the homestead project provided 340 homes to families that were forced to move from their previous residences that were within the park boundary. The announcement of the project suggested that without the help of the government, 340 families would have been homeless. The Post painted a picture of mountain people in need of federal aid to build better housing during the relocation. Other articles reported that Shenandoah residents received “modern homes” after relocating, and another 1934 article showed “the type of houses planned.” Again, the Post narrated plans to rebuild homes outside the park boundary, which suggested that without federal help, the mountain people would have been left with inferior housing conditions. Further, articles announced the Department of the Interior’s plan to offer loans between $1,000 and $1,500 at a low interest rate to help mountain families obtain residences after their relocation. Just like the homestead project, this announcement illustrated the idea that those in the Shenandoah Valley were in need of loans and support from the government. The Washington Post portrayed the idea that the mountain people were in need for federal aid through the homestead project and housing loans, again furthering the idea that the mountain people were not independent or self-sufficient enough to solve the problems of suffering created by the park’s creation.

**Self-Sufficient and Independent**

However, interviews and letters by the Shenandoah mountain people contradict the Post’s reports, especially in how it portrayed resettlement as well as the social and economic struggles park residents faced during removal. The Post failed to report the difficulties of completely resettling somewhere else, stressing instead the “better opportunities” to be found outside the park that drew people to leave voluntarily. The paper suggested that mountain people were satisfied with removal, reporting the testimonies of residents who wanted to leave the region for better educational opportunities for their children. This narrative is belied by the Shenandoah National Park Oral History Collection at James Madison University’s Special Collections, which consists of 135 oral and transcribed interviews that describe the lives of mountain people before and during the creation of Shenandoah National Park. An interview with John Bradley, a former resident of the park area, for example, showed “how [the mountain people] resented being moved out, how they resented a-having [sic] the land condemned.” Another victim of removal, Elmer Atkins, expressed that the relocation hurt some of his neighbors’ hearts and souls “pretty bad.” Despite promised opportunities, the mountain people faced economic problems, especially with finding work and feeding their families during removal. In a letter dated February 19, 1936, from resident W. D. Taylor to Mr. Lassiter, a park official, Taylor revealed the struggle to find work after he was forced to leave his home and previous employment: “I want to ask if you can give me some work of some kind as I have not had much work since I was gate gard [sic] I hope you may and can find me something to do.” Similarly, Elizabeth Seal, in 1935, conveyed the economic difficulty of feeding her family after they were forced to leave mature fruit orchards behind within the park boundaries. She asked park officials on September 25, 1935, “Will you please give me a permit to some of the fruit on my old place in the park. … There is two to three hundred bushels of apples will you please give me a permit so that I can get enough for family use.” Both accounts show that while the “better opportunities” on which the Post reported may have existed, these families faced severe economic problems of finding work and putting food on the table. The newspaper misrepresented the residents by suggesting that all mountain families wanted to leave their homes, and it did not accurately narrate the social and economic struggle of the people after having to leave their homes.

Residents that struggled socially and emotionally with the looming relocation stayed on their land and petitioned until the last possible moment, even after it was turned over to the US government. Many families faced trials as they navigated the federal bureaucracy and communicated with park and other government officials about how they could continue to survive on their land until they were forced to relocate for good. Letters from mountain families reveal requests to acquire property, move, and receive assistance in obtaining resources as they were forced to relocate. The
Nicholson family of Nethers, Virginia, wanted to know, in a letter dated April 18, 1938, if they could continue to garden on their homestead; E. B. Nicholson had to ask permission to replant the garden within the park boundaries so that the family would not “be starved.” The Post failed to report on how mountain people had to rely on the government to determine when they could grow their own food, as exhibited by the family from Nethers. John Bradley stated his confusion for the relocation: “They were settled there and it was theirs.” Bradley did not understand why he was relocated and lost his independence. Both Bradley and Nicholson capture the struggles of being forced to abandon the self-sufficient lives that were always theirs. The Post never addressed this struggle in its coverage of the removal; instead, the newspaper only reported on housing opportunities, reflecting the Post’s bias towards the benefits of “modern” life. It failed to recognize mountain people’s alternative to “modern” life as valid, and the Post did not discuss the conflicts that ensued when valley inhabitants had to uproot their entire lives.

In addition to ignoring the difficulties in the moving process, the Post focused on a positive conversion to “modern” housing that did not reflect the hardships of finding a new home. In contrast to the Post’s narrative about better housing, some mountain people did not know about the homestead project, and many found new homes on their own, regardless of the opportunities that the Post advertised. Helen Jeffries from Culpeper, Virginia, wrote in 1939 about not knowing of the homestead project, and she described a friend that did not have a place to move. Jeffries wrote, “She tells me that the Government has been buying places and moving people to them. I do not know anything about it.” The Post raved about housing opportunities, but they were not sufficiently advertised among people like Helen Jeffries, who did not know about the housing project. The Post minimized the suffering of Shenandoah Valley families and belittled their way of life as outmoded while ignoring the difficulties they faced during the moving process.

Finally, even though the Post reported that the mountain people needed “rehabilitation” and were “underprivileged,” it ignored local knowledge, expertise, and traditions that allowed families to sustain themselves on the land. George Berry, a former resident who lived near Fishers Gap, which was within the park boundaries, explained in an interview that traditional methods of making clothes, preserving foods, and making medical remedies. Berry described a method of getting sap out of a white oak tree to treat diarrhea, which he claimed was “better than you can get out of a store.” Despite not being connected to “modern” consumer culture, the mountain people were able to effectively care for their needs. Similarly, the newspaper considered these people to be “underprivileged,” but they were self-sufficient. As Harold Baugher described, the park families “got along fine” because people “had to learn to stand on [their] own feet.” Walter Carter, a former resident outside of Front Royal, Virginia, stated, “As we look at it today [life was hard for the mountain people], but it wasn’t as far as they were concerned because that’s all they knew.” Both former residents commented about the self-sufficiency of the valley residents, and Carter insisted that the mountain people did not see themselves as “underprivileged.” The Post’s narrative did not reflect the mountain people’s unique traditions that allowed them to live independently within their environment, because it did not fit with the country’s perception of modernization.

Conclusion
The Washington Post’s narratives about Shenandoah Valley residents and the creation of Shenandoah National Park contrast sharply with the residents’ understanding of themselves and the removal process. The Post described the mountain people as isolated and impoverished and went on to suggest that their lives would be improved by government programs that would relocate the families, allowing them to participate in modern life. However, Shenandoah residents emphasized their self-sufficiency and the importance of their traditions and connection to the land, and perceived removal as a difficult and jarring process that was a far cry from the rosy picture painted by the Post. The demeaning story illustrated by the Post facilitated the development of the park by justifying the decision to take the mountain people’s land. By making the residents seem that they were behind on the trends of “modern” life, the newspaper offered an illusion that the park would do nothing but benefit the people of the region. The Post justified the park’s creation through a narrative that privileged American ideas about modernization and described the region as indigent and behind on that modernity. This idea made it easier for the government to remove Shenandoah families from the declared park boundaries because of the notion that they could not possibly be more disadvantaged than they already were. This reveals that the published account framed perceptions of the region and ultimately shaped the creation of a national park by vindicating the removal of residents who once resided in the land for generations.

Notes
Harvey: The Mountain People and the Washington Post

While *Hollow Folk* is a rich source base for understanding perceptions of Shenandoah families and the justification for their removal, this paper will strictly compare the Washington Post's perceptions of park families to the Shenandoah families' perceptions of themselves.


Moore, "Place Identity," 62.


“Homes, Loans to Be Provided,” 6.


“Homes, Loans to Be Provided for Hillmen,” 6.


E. B. Nicholson, April 18, 1938, in “Answer at Once,” 151.


Helen M. Jeffries to Shenandoah National Park Service, November 28, 1939, in “Answer at Once,” 158.


Berry, “SNP013.”


**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources**


*Compared to unemployment rate in Shenandoah, the unemployment rate across the country skyrocketed between 1929 and 1933; the number of people unemployed rose from 3.2 percent to 24.9 percent. Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 214.*


*Sue Eisenfeld, Shenandoah: A Story of Conservation and Betrayal (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 158.*

*7 Powell, “Answers at Once,” 6.*


*10 While *Hollow Folk* is a rich source base for understanding perceptions of Shenandoah families and the justification for their removal, this paper will strictly compare the Washington Post's perceptions of park families to the Shenandoah families' perceptions of themselves.*


*13 Moore, “Place Identity,” 62.*


*15 “Homes, Loans to Be Provided,” 6.*


*19 “340 Families in Park Area,” 6; “Homes, Loans to Be Provided for Hillmen,” 6.*

*20 “Homes, Loans to Be Provided for Hillmen,” 6.*

*21 “340 Families in Park Area to Get Homes,” 6.*

*22 “340 Families in Park Area to Get Homes,” 6.*


*25 Compared to unemployment rate in Shenandoah, the unemployment rate across the country skyrocketed between 1929 and 1933; the number of people unemployed rose from 3.2 percent to 24.9 percent. Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 214.*


*30 “Homes, Loans to Be Provided for Hillmen,” 6.*


*33 W. D. Taylor, February 19, 1936, in “Answer at Once,” 73–74.*

*34 Elizabeth Seal, September 25, 1935, in “Answer at Once,” 51–52.*

*35 E. B. Nicholson, April 18, 1938, in “Answer at Once,” 151.*


*37 Helen M. Jeffries to Shenandoah National Park Service, November 28, 1939, in “Answer at Once,” 158.*


*39 Berry, “SNP013.”

*40 Herold Baugher, “SNP009,” interview by Dorothy Noble Smith, April 6, 1979, Shenandoah National Park Oral History Collection, James Madison University, http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/snp/112/.*


Secondary Sources


Moore, Tyrel G. “Place Identity, Regional Imagery, and Regional Policy Connections from Nineteenth Century Southern Appalachia.” Southeastern Geographer 55, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 57–69. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2015.0005


About the Author

Caroline Harvey is a junior at Virginia Tech majoring in history and minoring in Appalachian studies. Caroline works part-time at Special Collections and University Archives and enjoys learning more about Virginia Tech’s history every time she processes a new collection in the archive. In addition to being passionate about her university’s history, she enjoys researching Appalachian folk culture, listening to mountain music, and learning about her hometown history in the Shenandoah Valley. Caroline has completed internships with National History Day, the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, and StarrMatica Learning Systems, and she has worked on projects with Celebrating Patsy Cline Inc. and the Newtown History Center of the Stone House Foundation. Caroline plans to pursue a master’s degree in education so that she can share her love of research and history with the next generation of history students.