

Blue Ridge Parkway

Virginia and North Carolina

Photographs by Alan Ward 1996, 2020-2024

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The Blue Ridge Parkway is a recreational and scenic drive built over a fifty-year period, that traverses 469 miles from Virginia to North Carolina, connecting Shenandoah National Park to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Design and engineering began in 1933, when landscape architect Stanley Abbott was hired by the National Park Service to lead a team of planners, landscape architects, and civil engineers to delineate a route through the diverse ecosystems and cultural landscapes of the Blue Ridge Mountains, followed by its layout, grading, and design. It was funded under the National Industrial Recovery Act to provide employment during the Great Depression when construction began in 1935, however the extensive project was not completed until 1984. The most impressive features of the parkway are the overall simplicity of the design expression, along with its fit to the varied and often challenging topography. Abbott and team identified the alignment, which led to the acquisition of a broad right-of-way to protect views and the parkway from private development. The corridor was purposely aligned to reveal a range of landscapes, even if it required a longer route over steeper grades.

The parkway winds between crests and peaks, alternating between the east and west sides of slopes; as a result, the landscape varies from being fully illuminated, or back-lit by the sun, and sometimes immersed in foggy conditions at higher elevations. In Virginia, views

overlook small towns and the rural landscape. Along the lower elevations, the parkway curves through terrain flanked by agricultural fields, that are perpetually maintained by scenic easements (10-12). Scenic easements are used to protect lands that are visible, but not acquired outright; the easements restrict constructing buildings (other than for agricultural purposes), utility poles, billboards, and other structures, as well as inappropriate uses. With scenic easements, the cultural landscape of cultivated fields and regional places of history, such as the preserved Mabry Mill, are prominent along the parkway (10-12,21,22).

In the higher elevations of North Carolina, there are panoramic vistas from overlooks extending over layers of mountains to the horizon (28). Occasionally dropping into valleys paralleling stream corridors, the parkway is varied by passing through lowland habitats along relatively level grades (6-8). Commercial traffic is prohibited on the parkway; the two-lane undivided road has limited access points and no crossings of intersecting roadways at grade, requiring stone bridges or overpasses for crossing traffic (16,20,29). It is narrow by contemporary standards, which eases its fit into the topography. The edges of the parkway have continuity through the design of fences and mileposts, as well as the consistent use of stone for retaining walls, bridges and overlooks (4,26,28, 30).

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The Blue Ridge Parkway is an early example of a relatively new type of landscape design. The earliest documented use of the term “parkway” was in 1870, referring to a broad road, or carriageway, through a park. While the origins of parkways are related to the design of park landscapes, the automobile age led to an adaptation of the term to be applied to a road for recreational and pleasure driving. The Bronx River Parkway was the first modern parkway built in 1923. A few years later, planning began for the George Washington Memorial Parkway, to honor the bicentennial of Washington’s birth in 1932, which connects Mount Vernon to the nation’s capital. These examples in New York and Virginia established the precedents and standards for the design of the Blue Ridge Parkway as a scenic, recreational highway.

It is rare to see such beauty in a simple, well-designed road that is embedded in the topography and free of the numerous distracting elements, that so frequently accumulate along American roadsides. The complexity of visual information along a typical road make it very challenging to frame simple, expressive photographs, however, the reduction of elements and simplification of the design of the Blue Ridge Parkway, creates the potential for views that can express the symbolism associated with a road or path in the landscape. Roads have been a symbolic form in art and literature for centuries,

representing a way forward, passage of time, or journey and path to the future. The formalization of direction by means of a path or road is a way of rendering the world ordered and meaningful, and as such, it is one of the most significant functions of making a landscape, as well as the expressive opportunities in landscape architecture. Well-designed roads that are sensitively fit into the land give direction and orientation, while representing an affinity and harmonious connection to nature. Roads and paths are the connections between places and centers, and in our conceptual scheme of the world, the difference between grasping the world within an overall order, or wandering aimlessly.

The Blue Ridge Parkway demonstrates how landscape architects can design a beautiful road, fit to the land and planned at a regional scale to reveal a range of natural and cultural landscapes, that in a few years will celebrate the centennial of its design. The decision to build a parkway through two states, along with the commitment to complete the construction, was an act of political will that benefited from the belief that roads also represent a certain freedom and the pursuit of a better life, just as the family in John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* followed a road west, aiming to improve their lives during the Great Depression. The Blue Ridge Parkway was more than a road, it symbolized a path to a better, more promising future.

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Mountain Building and Mountain Erosion

Before you stands one of the most popular sights along the Blue Ridge Parkway, Looking Glass Rock. This granite monolith reflects both the mountain building and destruction process throughout the Appalachian region. Looking Glass has weathered the test of time as the mountains around it, made of softer rocks, succumbed to the elements, eroding into lower elevations. The name "Looking Glass" comes from its appearance when the sun reflects off of rainwater or ice, reflecting like a mirror.



Looking Glass Rock in winter with sheets of ice

Photo © 2011 David G. Thompson - "Blue Ridge Parkway" LLC



Red salamanders: common in the area



Looking Glass Falls

The land along the Blue Ridge Parkway offers a great diversity of habitat and thus supports more plant species than any other park in the United States. The overall geology of ancient mountains, varied topography, and elevation, along with a temperate climate has given rise to a wonderland of natural heritage in Western North Carolina.

In fact, botanical studies have documented over 4,000 species of plants, 2,000 species of fungi, and 500 species of mosses and lichens in the region. The North Carolina mountains are home to more species of salamanders than any other place in the world.



The North Carolina mountains and foothills were designated the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area in recognition of their natural beauty and living traditions of music, craft, agriculture, and Cherokee culture. This location is part of a regional trail of distinctive heritage sites. Ask for information at area visitor centers.

More information online at: www.blueridgeheritage.com







Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Ward, Alan, *American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic Interpretation*, 1998

Simo, Melanie, *100 Years of Landscape Architecture*, 1999

Ward, Alan, "American Designed Landscapes," *View Camera: The Journal of Large-Format Photography*, January/February 1999

Exhibitions of the Photographs:

"Luminous Landscapes: Photographs by Alan Ward" The National Building Museum, 2016

"American Designed Landscapes: Space and Light" Sarasota Center for Architecture, 2018