Narratives of displacement: 
Reconsidering race and archaeological research in the Virginia Blue Ridge 
Audrey Horning 
Appalachian Studies Association March 2020

Introduction

In the 1930s, Shenandoah National Park was established in the Virginia Blue Ridge through the displacement of nearly five hundred Euro-American families. At the time, hackneyed stereotypes about backward mountaineers were mobilized to garner public support for the condemnation of family farms and the institutionalization and sterilization of some of the most impoverished residents. The anger felt by the displaced and now their descendants has barely abated. That said, in the 1990s, a park service-sponsored archaeological project that I directed helped to overturn the prevailing narrative and transform park interpretation. While I am proud of that work, what I want to discuss today is what we overlooked: namely, the role of racism in the construction of a Blue Ridge history. Because there were no African American families living specifically within the boundaries targeted for park inclusion, the history of the entire Blue Ridge was tacitly whitewashed.

Background

The focus of the 1990s Survey of Rural Mountain Settlement was on Nicholson, Corbin, and Weakley Hollows in the park’s central district and within Madison and Rappahannock Counties. These three Hollows featured in a 1933 book, *Hollow Folk*, by the University of Chicago eugenicist Mandel Sherman writing with a Washington-based reporter, Thomas Henry.. Sensationalized descriptions designed to galvanize public opinion in favor of removal emphasized lack of education, poverty, and supposed genetically-based character flaws (Sherman and Henry 1933; Sherman and Key 1933). But what lay scattered amongst former hollow homes readily contradicted *Hollow Folk*. Abundant tin cans, pharmaceutical and cosmetic bottles, ready-made clothing and shoe fragments, and even automobile parts spoke to full immersion in regional and national commercial networks. Far from living in a “medieval age” (Sizer 1932 unpaginated), mountain residents engaged with the popular culture of the 1930s, evidenced by the recovery of 78 record fragments and abundant toys, including a Buck Rogers’ style ray gun (Horning 2019).

Alongside the field survey and testing of 61 historic sites, and archival work to reconstruct the property histories in the c. 2500-acre study area, I conducted ethnographic research with the displaced and I worked hard to bring their perspectives into interpretation. But in so doing I added to an industry of examining the Blue Ridge from the lens of displacement (see for example Fender 2006, Gregg 2010, Perdue and Martin-Perdue 1979, Powell 2007, 2009, 2013). The stories of the historic Blue Ridge are now always about its end, not its beginning, negotiations, and nuances. What I also missed, as I pondered the othering of southern mountain Whites, is how this narrative of displacement doubly dispossessed African Americans (see also Barnes 2011; Dunaway 1995; Inscoe 1994, 2001).
Park records pinpoint African American landowners and tenants on lands adjacent to the park, and in earlier decades, within what became the park (Park Land Records; Lambert 1989: 178; Powell 2007: 174 n. 22; Engle 1998a: 10, n. 7). So generalizing about the Blue Ridge experience relying only on evidence from within the 1930's park boundaries denies a past in which Blue Ridge Whites were full participants within the antebellum slave-based economy as well as wholly implicated in the racist realities of postbellum Jim Crow Virginia. Those realities played out in very visible ways when park recreational facilities were segregated in deference to Virginia’s racist laws but in violation of National Park Service policy (Engle 1998b: 35; Lambert 1989: 266).

The early 20th-century population of the park area was less diverse than it had been during the century and a half beforehand, and less diverse than was all of the surrounding region. Throughout the 19th century, African Americans made up close to 50% of the population of Madison County. Through migration and White gentrification, African Americans now account for only an estimated 9.3 percent of the Madison county population (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/madisoncountyvirginia/PST045217 accessed 13 November 2018). The Whiteness of Madison County today is too readily back projected to further deny past complexities and the experiences of the once considerable Black population (see Brandon 2013 for a parallel case study from the Ozarks).

**African American imprints**

Many of the park’s antebellum historical features were the product of unfree African American labor, including the 18th-century Barbee and Belmont plantation houses. The major roads that traverse the park area were built by hired out enslaved laborers (Lambert 1989; Steere 1935), while other enslaved workers operated industries such as the 1830s Mount Vernon iron furnace (Horning 2007: 92-93; Ellis 2011). The exploitation of copper deposits directly above Nicholson and Corbin Hollows was dependent upon enslaved laborers. Author Bethany Veney (1889: 33), born into slavery in Luray, recounted how she was compelled to serve the copper prospectors: ‘It had been a dreary experience to me, and I was thankful when it was over.’ Slaveholders were present amongst the late 18th and early 19th century Euroamerican settlers, meaning that the tasks of forest clearance and construction central to the transformation of a formerly Native landscape was carried out principally by African Americans. While small scale slaveholding was the norm, there were some sizable plantations. Thomas Shirley owned over 48,000 acres stretching into the Hollows and incorporating slave-run mills and distilleries (Lambert 1989, 71).

The 1807 will of Weakley Hollow landowner James Hurt casually enumerated seven enslaved people between entries for “one smooth gun,” and a “copper skillet”: Judith and her daughter Tilda; Dafney and her son Moses; an adult and a boy both named Thomas; and a girl named Elizabeth (Madison County Will Book 2: 177). Hurt’s violently dispassionate will tells us little about the lives of these seven individuals, only that they accounted for the bulk of Hurt’s wealth: $444.00 of the total value of $512.00. James Hurt’s heirs sold Tilda, Dafney, Moses, the two Thomases, and Elizabeth. I have been unable to trace them further.

In the 1818 will and inventory of Nicholson Hollow property owner James Ward (Madison County Will Book 3: 444), his total moveable property was assessed at $2210.79, with 81 percent of that
figure bound up in the lives of “Lucy her two children Cealy and Lewis” and two boys, “Jack and Frank.” Their unpaid work provided the funds for Ward to fill his home with various chests, bedsteads, and chairs, and the time to read his “parcel of books.” Ward’s “time clock” presumably ordered not only his hours, but those of his involuntary workforce. Ward’s inventory tells us nothing about the ways in which Lucy and the children navigated the realities of their own disenfranchisement, before and after their lives were split between new owners: Ward’s widow Nancy, and his married daughter Margaret Berry.

In 1997, I conducted limited test excavations in the location of Ward’s home. I was initially attracted to the site because it was associated with the first residency of the Nicholson family in their eponymous Hollow. In 1799, John and Anne Nicholson purchased 170 acres, selling a 40 acre parcel to their son Shadrach in 1805 (Madison County Deed Book 2: 294; Deed Book 4, 128). Shadrach soon sold the land to William Berry, who sold to local mill owner James Ward in 1815. At the time of park establishment, the property was owned by Victoria and William Buddy Nicholson. Park photographs detailed the presence of two dwellings: a six room log and frame house with double chimneys and a stone foundation, and a small single room log dwelling. Excavation of the smaller dwelling recovered late 18th-century materials (creamware and a snuff bottle fragment, as well as an undateable modified pig tooth), suggesting it was built and inhabited when John and Anne Nicholson acquired the land. The more commodious log, stone, frame farmhouse was likely constructed during the Ward ownership, making the smaller dwelling a plausible candidate for housing Lucy, Cealy, Lewis, Jack and Frank.

So, what is most important about that small log structure? That it housed the first Nicholsons, (see Perdue and Martin-Perdue 1979, Horning 2004) or that it housed an enslaved woman, her two children, and two young boys (about whom the documentary record tells us next to nothing)? Given the realities of White privilege, structural inequality, and the need to decolonize archaeological practice, I was previously uneasy about my voice being employed to tell a story of African America, particularly one that is out of step with the need to shift emphasis from the period of enslavement to examining the myriad ways in which African Americans shaped their lives in the context of post-emancipation discrimination (Singleton 2010; Barnes 2011; Mahoney 2013). But I have a responsibility to Lucy, Cealy, Lewis, Jack and Frank, having unearthed fragments of their material lives. I cannot speak for those who endured enslavement, but I can speak of them to audiences who may otherwise be unaware of or even resistant to the reality of an African American imprint on the Virginia Blue Ridge.

While the Nicholson clan themselves were never slaveholders, they benefited from the system by being White and free. At the same time, they would have understood their subordinate position as non-slaveholders, underscored in an 1810 indenture in which William Nicholson (brother of Shadrach) delivered his son William to James Ward. In exchange for five years of the young man’s labor, Ward agreed to “bestow him with a liberal education such as befitting a poor man’s son” (Madison County Will Book 2: 251). William may have worked alongside Lucy in the service of Ward’s household, but he was promised the education and the freedom denied to Lucy and the children.
One of the signatories to William Nicholson’s indenture was Benjamin Lillard the Younger, scion of a slaveholding family resident in the Hollows vicinity since 1760 (Northern Neck Grant Book K, 148). In 1821, Lillard’s estate was appraised at $2449.34 (Madison County Will Book 4: 90). Listed after the livestock and before the farming implements are three enslaved individuals: Simon, Betty, and Sharlot (Charlotte). The monetary value of this African American family, totaling $565.00, represents nearly one-quarter of Lillard’s estate. Simon and Betty had long been held by the Lillard family, having been left to Benjamin’s mother Heziah in her husband James’ 1804 will, with the proviso that ownership revert to Benjamin Lillard following Heziah’s death. Benjamin’s heirs apparently felt no similar attachment, as Simon and Betty were both sold to a Mr. Biedler, probably of Frederick County in the Shenandoah Valley, in 1828.

While Simon, Betty and Charlotte are the last documented African Americans to reside within Nicholson Hollow, hollow residents would have been aware of, and some participants in, an evenly split vote over abolition in Madison County in 1832 (Davis 1976: 296). Divided opinions over slavery are reflected in the fact that during the Civil War, men from the Hollows fought for both the Confederacy and the Union. The racist violence of the Reconstruction era reverberated up the slopes, as in the unsolved 1868 murder of a Rappahannock County African American man, Arthur Lee (Freedmen’s Bureau records 1868, Case 72). In that same year, the African American community in Madison established its first school and the first of fifteen Baptist churches. In the 20th century, White hollow dwellers traveling into local towns not only witnessed segregated spaces, but by virtue of their Whiteness and irrespective of their economic status, they were implicated in the maintenance of race-based discriminatory practices. Meanwhile, from the 1880s until park creation, the Skyland resort run by George Freeman Pollock relied upon African American cooks and porters, who toiled alongside equally poorly paid White residents from Corbin Hollow.

**Conclusion**

Far from the kind of egalitarian, self-sufficient mountain lifestyle imagined by many, especially the descendants of the displaced denied their own opportunity to live on the mountain, community life across the Hollows from the 18th through early 20th centuries was characterized by hierarchy, inequality, and racial injustice (Horning 2000, 221-222). In the end, even Whiteness proved insufficient protection against the momentum of the park movement. But the creation of Shenandoah National Park not only displaced and traumatized White families, it also silenced and denied African American stories of persistence as well as displacement. The challenge is how best to tell those stories in the present, particularly as the descendants of the displaced gain greater voice. The leader of a current effort to erect memorials to the park displaced is a Lillard, descendant of the family that held Simon, Betty and Charlotte in bondage. Their story is not the story being remembered and commemorated. I think all stories of displacement in the Blue Ridge need to be told.
References
Barnes, Jodi

Battle-Baptiste, Whitney
2011  *Black Feminist Archaeology*. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

Brandon, Jamie C.

Brooks, Gracie Hart

Davis, Margaret
1976  *Madison County Virginia: A Revised History*. Madison County Board of Supervisors, Madison VA.

Dunaway, Wilma A.

Engle, Reed


Fulton, H.R.
1936  Letter to James Lassiter, August 12th. Shenandoah National Park Archives Box 99, Folder 4, Luray VA.

Gregg, Sara M.
2010  *Managing the Mountains: Land Use Planning, the New Deal, and the Creation of a Federal Landscape in Appalachia*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Hampton, Joan
Henry, Thomas

Horning, Audrey J.


2002  Myth, Migration and Material Culture: Archaeology and Ulster Influence on Appalachia. *Historical Archaeology* 36(4), 129-149.


Inscoe, John C. ed.
2001  *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*. University Press of Kentucky, Knoxville, KY.

Lambert, Darwin
1989  *The Undying Past of Shenandoah National Park*. Shenandoah Natural History Association, Luray, VA.

Lewis, Ronald L.

Lohman, Bill

Lombardo, Paul
2008  *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck vs. Bell*. Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, MD.

Mahoney, Shannon

McDavid, Carol

Perdue, Charles and Nancy Martin-Perdue

Powell, Katrina


Sherman, Mandel and Thomas Henry
1933  *Hollow Folk* New York, Thomas Crowell and Son
Sherman, Mandel and Cora Key


Silber, Nina

Singleton, Theresa

Sizer, Miriam

Sizer, Miriam
1933 Recent Study of Mountain Folk. Potomac Appalachian Trail Club *Bulletin* 2(2) April: 36.

Veney, Bethany
1889 *Aunt Betty’s Story: the Narrative of Bethany Veney, a Slave Woman*. Worcester, Massachusetts

2011 *Madison County Marriages 1792-1850*. Iberian Publishing, Athens, GA.

Yowell, Claude Lindsay
1926 *A History of Madison County Virginia*. Shenandoah Publishing House, Strasburg VA.

Wayland, John W.
1989 *Twenty-Five Chapters on the Shenandoah Valley*. C.J. Carrier Company, Harrisonburg VA.

Zaborney, John Joseph
1997 *Slaves for Rent: Slave Hiring in Virginia*. PhD dissertation, University of Maine, New Brunswick, ME.