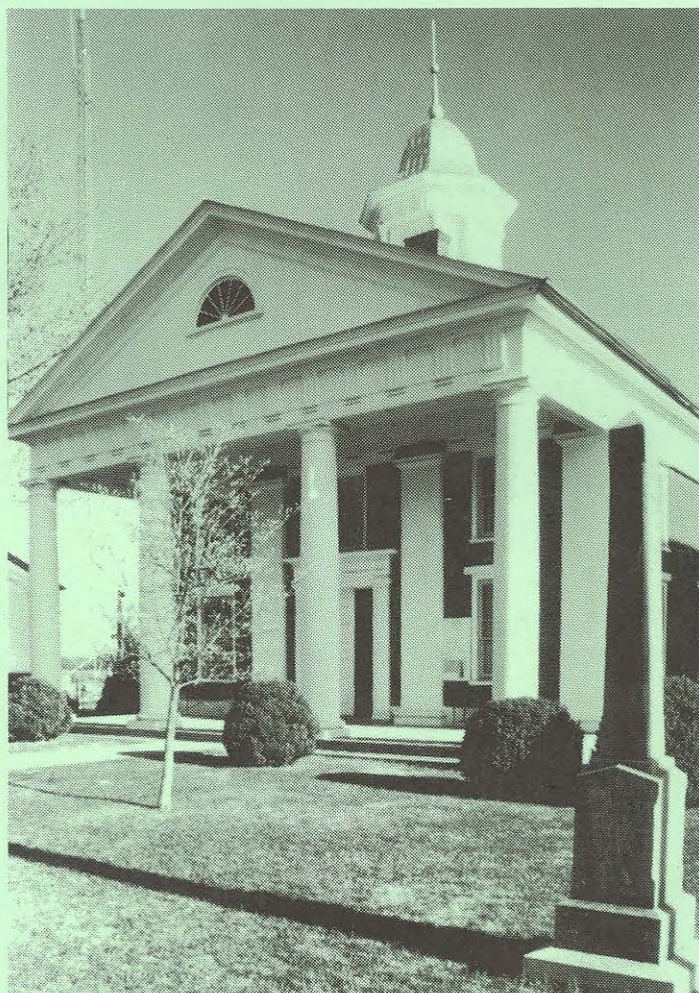


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# Greene County Magazine

Shenandoah National Park and Greene County

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## SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK AND GREENE COUNTY

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Research by Barbara Zorn

This article is meant to whet the appetite of those individuals who have an interest in the early history of Shenandoah National Park. For those who would like to know more about its formation, I urge them to read Dennis Simmons' dissertation on the subject.

In early 1924 Stephen Mather, Director of the National Park Service, proposed to Secretary of the Interior, Hubert Work, that the Southern Appalachians be studied as a possible site for a major national park located here in the east. Such a site would be close to large population centers on the East Coast. Responding to Mather's request, Secretary Work obtained permission from Congress to appoint an unpaid committee, the Southern Appalachian National Park Committee (SANPC), to consider proposals for a park.<sup>1</sup>

Word spread and friends contacted George Pollock, who owned a summer resort at Skyland on land he inherited in 1894 near Stony Man Mountain in the Blue Ridge Mountains. At Stony Man he was host to a number of folks from the Washington, D. C. area. Pollock, Harold Allen and George Judd completed a Committee questionnaire and delivered it to a member of the Park Committee in Washington. L. Ferdinand Zerkel, a Luray, Virginia businessman, was also interested in the project.<sup>2</sup>

In late 1924 other citizens of the Shenandoah Valley noted the publicity about a proposed park and, subsequently, a group of businessmen interested in tourism formed Shenandoah Valley, Inc. They were from communities ranging from Winchester to Staunton. This region, rich in natural history and history, included Massanutten Mountain, one of the three ridges of the Appalachian Mountains in this area.<sup>3</sup>

Both groups continued to move forward in publicizing their ideas through personal contacts and correspondence. Finally, they arranged for the two sides to meet in Luray and to join forces by creating a new organization, the Northern Virginia National Park Association with Pollock as President.<sup>4</sup>

Several members of the SANPC had already visited Skyland. In October 1924, William Gregg, another member of the Park Committee, visited Luray. Zerkel happened to meet him and suggested that he and his wife stay at Skyland. He finally agreed and they spent five nights with Pollock. Needless to say, after the Pollock treatment, Gregg was impressed. Apparently while there, Gregg commented there should be a road along the crest of the Blue Ridge, thus was born the "Skyline Drive" idea.<sup>5</sup>

Republican Representative Henry Temple of Pennsylvania read the committee report into the Congressional Record in late 1924. He then introduced a bill to change the Park Committee to a Park Commission with a modest budget to make recommendations for a park in the Northern Blue Ridge. Senator Claude Swanson of Virginia introduced a similar bill in the Senate.<sup>6</sup>

It was during this period that Charlottesville's Daily Progress published editorials supporting a new park in the area and articles about George Pollock's interest in the proposed park were published in the Greene County Record.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time Ferdinand Zerkel made contacts with Virginia's Governor Lee Trinkle, U. S. Senator Carter Glass and State Senator Harry Flood Byrd. Trinkle and Byrd assured Zerkel of their support for the park.<sup>8</sup>

In early 1925 a large number of Virginians met in Washington and they appointed a committee to help provide information as the park bills worked their way through Congress. Harry Byrd as Chairman was joined by Governor Trinkle, Dan Wine, and Colonel H. J. Benchoff and apparently for the first time, someone from the eastern side of the Blue Ridge, Judge Archibald Dabney of Charlottesville.<sup>9</sup>

Eventually, the bills were passed into law and the Southern Appalachian National Park Committee became the Southern National Park Commission with a modest budget of \$20,000. The law had been expanded to study three potential park areas, one in North Carolina – Tennessee, one in Kentucky and one in Virginia. The law also stated that park lands must be acquired by the states or by individual donations. No federal funds were to be used for land acquisition.<sup>10</sup>

Following some discussion between several local groups, a new organization was formed to support creation of a local national park. The new Shenandoah National Park Association collected funds for land acquisition. Again, Benchoff, Wise and Zerkel were involved along with Hollis Rinehart of Charlottesville as treasurer. The NVNPA ceased to function.<sup>11</sup>

In early 1926 retiring Governor Lee Trinkle stated that the collection of private money would not provide enough funds for the park project. He urged the state to assist and the volunteers were filled with some degree of hope, as the new Governor of Virginia would be Harry Flood Byrd, who had assisted their project in the past.<sup>12</sup>

Following an open letter from Governor Byrd to the citizens of the State of Virginia for donations, only a little over \$1,200,000 was collected or pledged by the first of April 1926, to purchase land for the park.<sup>13</sup>

On May 22, 1926 President Calvin Coolidge signed a bill authorizing the creation of Shenandoah National Park with a potential size of 521,000 acres. Title of the lands was to be accepted by the Secretary of the Interior when 250,000 acres had been acquired. It was up to the Commonwealth of Virginia to raise the funds and acquire the land.<sup>14</sup>

By July 1926 Governor Byrd formed the Virginia Commission on Conservation and Development with William E. Carson as Chairman. It would fall upon this organization to collect pledges obtained by some of the committees and place the money in a central account.

As Carson evaluated his assignment, he soon found out that the task would not be easy. Not only would he be responsible for setting a procedure for acquiring the land, he was also assigned the task of completing the collection of pledged donations from the public. In November 1927, George Pollock came to the forefront again when Governor Byrd, Carson and other officials visited Skyland. They left with the desire to continue work on the park project.<sup>15</sup>

On February 10, 1928 Representative Temple informed Byrd that a bill had been passed with a minimum (?) acreage for the park of 321,000 acres. A few days later Governor Byrd informed officials at the Department of the Interior that Virginia's General Assembly, upon his request, had appropriated \$1,000,000 for the park. It now appeared that the fate of the park was in the hands of Harry Byrd and William Carson.<sup>16</sup>

William Carson obtained the assistance of his brother, Judge A. C. Carson, in developing a relatively simple method of obtaining park land. Judge Carson suggested blanket condemnation where land could be purchased with a minimum of time. The General Assembly passed legislation in 1928 where courts of the eight counties involved would have the tracts appraised, surveyed and the land owners would be paid the appraised value from the donated funds and the \$1,000,000 provided by the General Assembly.<sup>17</sup>

Carson again undertook another project in late 1928 and early 1929. He heard that newly elected President Herbert Hoover was looking for a fishing camp near the White House. Carson obtained the fishing rights on the upper Rapidan River in Madison County and the end result was that Hoover selected a site there that eventually became "Hoover Camp". President Hoover visited Madison, Virginia on August 17, 1929 and Governor Byrd arrived early in an army dirigible. During the process Carson developed good relations with the new Secretary of the Interior, Dr. Ray Wilbur.<sup>18</sup>

It was toward the end of Harry Byrd's term as governor that the Judge of Warren County Circuit Court ruled that Virginia's Public Park Condemnation Act was permitted by the state constitution.<sup>19</sup> This opened the door for condemnation proceedings to begin or continue in the other seven Virginia Counties that contained land that would eventually become Shenandoah National Park. It was one of the many challenges that Chairman Carson would face during the land acquisition process.

With the crash of the stock market in 1929 and poor crops due to a severe drought in the area in 1930, Carson started pushing for development of dams and roads in the area. One of the things mentioned was the construction of a "Skyline Drive". During late summer of 1930 on a horseback ride from Hoover's Camp to Big Meadows, President Hoover ordered NPS Director Horace Albright to begin the planning process and to begin construction of the Drive to create jobs.<sup>20</sup>

It was not until mid-summer 1931 that construction began on the Skyline Drive. Congress failed to pass the appropriation in late 1930 and government red tape further delayed the availability of funds. The beginning of the work provided needed jobs in the area hard hit by drought and lean economic times. This first project of building a road from Hoover Camp to Big Meadows and north to Panorama provided a boost to those who wanted to create the Park also.<sup>21</sup>

The depression also brought about another problem and that was a drastic reduction of donations to purchase land. State and Federal officials decided that the size of the proposed park must be reduced. Respective Congressional sponsors of the park introduced bills to reduce the minimum acreage of the park from 327,000 to 160,000 acres. The last of the two bills was passed on February 4, 1932.<sup>22</sup>

On October 22, 1932 a twelve-mile portion of the Drive was opened temporarily to the public between Panorama and Hawksbill Gap just south of Skyland. By the time the road was closed to the public on November 30, 1932 for continuation of construction, 30,000 visitors in over 7,000 vehicles had an opportunity to visit this section of the Blue Ridge. In December 1932 Secretary of the Interior Wilbur approved the extension of the Drive from Thornton Gap to Front Royal.<sup>23</sup>

In the spring of 1933 Harry Byrd was appointed U. S. Senator from Virginia to replace Claude Swanson. Also, federal presence was increased in the area when President Franklin Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In late April Albright ordered J. R. Lassiter of the Park Service to select several sites for camps. It was necessary to obtain permission for the sites since the state had not acquired most of the land yet. During this period Ferdinand Zerkel was hired to recruit young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. He was also to enroll sixty "Woodsmen" above the age of twenty-five. These older men were to receive one dollar per day and food and shelter.<sup>24</sup>

By the middle of May 1933 young men began to arrive and camps were established at Skyland, Big Meadows, Baldface and Front Royal. Camps were later established near Grottoes and Elkton. Conservation work continued in the park until the advent of World War II.<sup>25</sup>

On August 12, 1933 President Roosevelt visited the five camps in the park area starting at the Brown's Gap Camp before proceeding to Big Meadows for lunch. It was during this trip to the five camps that he proposed a scenic road to connect Shenandoah and the Great Smoky Mountains; thus the seed was planted for the Blue Ridge Parkway.<sup>26</sup>

Mrs. Mildred McDaniel, a neighbor in Madison County, relates that there was a small work force in the Wolfstown area for about six months. The young CCC men were from the White Hall area and worked on the fire road on Allen Mountain and Kirtley Mountain. They also did some work on Garth Run. In approximately 1933-34 there was a camp on Quaker Run near Criglersville. These young men worked on the road to Hoover's Camp and the fire road on Blakey Ridge.

By mid-1933, as the land acquisition process continued, problems began to crop up with some of the landowners. One hundred and thirty owners of nineteen thousand acres did not agree to the appraised value of their property and decided to go to court to get fair compensation. Governor Pollard decided to appoint five county judges and their decisions would be binding if the owners agreed to arbitration. Some owners agreed and Senator Byrd became very active again in trying to get all landowner attorneys to agree to the proposal. While this was taking place, Byrd was also enthusiastically trying to get a portion of the Skyline Drive open for the remainder of the year. In spite of much activity by Senator Byrd and various groups in the valley and Charlottesville, a portion of the Drive did not open in 1933.<sup>27</sup>

Virginia's new governor, George Peery, took office in January 1934. He tried to remain neutral in the conflict between Senator Byrd and members of Shenandoah Valley, Inc., of the first group, and William Carson, NPS Director Arno B. Cammerer, J. R. Lassiter and Ferdinand Zerkel. The first group wanted to open the Drive and the second group was opposed to the proposal for a number of reasons, i.e. legal, environmental and construction issues.<sup>28</sup>

On February 1, 1934 NPS Director Cammerer announced that all people living within the park boundary must be removed before the Federal Government would accept title of park land from Virginia. About 600 families and 4000 people were involved. There would be a few exceptions based on certain criteria. This shocked state officials and local leaders for it was another stumbling block in creating the national park. Cammerer's decision was reinforced by the relatively new Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes. This policy was not only to be enforced here but also in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This decision created adverse opinions about the park project that continue today with family members of folks moved from the park.<sup>29</sup>

Removal of the folks from the park should not have come as a complete surprise to state officials and some individuals in the private sector. Removal had been discussed back and forth for some years. Changes in administrations did not help the situation. It still came as a shock when the time came to make the hard decision.

Back in 1929 Carson asked then Secretary Wilbur that if most residents left, what would happen to the family cemeteries and church and school lands? Wilbur's reply was that the government would maintain the cemeteries and that the state could lease the church and school properties as long as there were residents to use them.<sup>30</sup>

In mid-February 1934 the Interior Department announced plans to assist families who would need aid in finding a different home location. A committee selected Ferdinand Zerkel as director to head up this project. Not only would he provide real estate advice to those that could rent or purchase property outside the park, but he also proposed three homestead communities on each side of the Blue Ridge. These homesteads would provide homes for those families who needed this type of assistance.<sup>31</sup>

On Friday, September 14, 1934 the gates were opened at Panorama and Swift Run Gap for the public to use that section of the Skyline Drive although part of the road still had not been paved. This was after much maneuvering by Senator Byrd, members of the Shenandoah Valley, Inc., State officials and Federal officials. Construction work continued on that section of the Drive between Panorama and Front Royal.<sup>32</sup>

One of the things still troubling state officials was completion of the land acquisition process. Back in late summer of 1933 there were 130 land owners who would not accept appraisers findings for arbitration. The landowners wrote numerous letters to State and Federal officials complaining about the treatment they were receiving. One case even went as far as the Supreme Court, which turned down the case. Construction continued at the Resettlement sites and most of the 300 families remaining in the park agreed to leave by April 1, 1936 or whenever the homesteads were ready for them.<sup>33</sup>

With plans to take care of the remaining families completed by December 26, 1935, Secretary of the Interior Ickes declared the establishment of Shenandoah National Park with 176,430 acres.<sup>34</sup>

On July 3, 1936 President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the Park with ceremonies at Big Meadows. As a ten-year-old youngster, I attended the affair with my parents. The speaker stand was located in a lower part of the meadows with chestnut log seating arranged in an amphitheater fashion some distance up the slope. Needless to say, a large crowd attended.

One should not tell the story of the creation of Shenandoah National Park without covering in some detail the hardships created and at the same time discuss some of the benefits that a National Park in the Blue Ridge provides the citizens of Virginia and the nation. The listing below identifies some of the hardships:

- A. Removal from their homes and property where family members were buried and in some case where several generations of their forebears had worked the land. This created ill will back then that has been passed along to the generations of today.
- B. Removal from an area where most of them appreciated their surroundings and where they could hunt and gather what the forest, their gardens, orchards and fields had to offer.
- C. Removal from the mountains where those that wanted to could enjoy their isolation.
- D. Due to that isolation some of them had developed a culture of their own. It is true that an outsider would notice differences in their way of life from folks who lived elsewhere; however, many of them had skills that an outsider would not know about nor could an outsider perform.

Now, to describe some of the benefits of the Park. A relatively large natural area has been preserved in close proximity to large metropolitan cities along the East Coast. These include Washington D. C., Baltimore, Pittsburgh and heavily populated areas of tidewater Virginia. While using the trails in the park, visitors can enjoy some degree of isolation that was dear to some of the folks who lived in the Blue Ridge. The lodges, campgrounds and picnic areas give all of us the opportunity to relax for a day or two or several weeks if we so desire. The picnic areas also provide sites for family reunions.

The protective aspects of the park have brought back good populations of deer, bear and wild turkey that had been decimated or eradicated by our forefathers. Another important benefit that is not often mentioned is the large watershed areas along the east and west faces of the Blue Ridge. Greene County itself draws water from the Rapidan, which has its origin east of Big Meadows and flows past my farm to Route 29.

Now let us go back and review the resettlement program with headquarters in Luray, Virginia. Established in 1934, this office was under the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the Department of the Interior. There were seven projects, two in the Shenandoah Valley, Elkton and Ida Valley, and five on the east side of the Blue Ridge, Flint Hill, "Little" Washington, Madison, Wolfstown and Geer. I have copies of the Subdivision Maps or Plats drawn in 1937 and dated February 23, 1939 for four of the projects, Elkton, Flint Hill, Madison and Wolfstown. These plats show lots of varying sizes, most of them ranging from 30 to 50 acres with a few of them 5 to 10 acres in size. This followed the concept of having some distance between the homes as they occurred along the ridges and in the hollows of the Blue Ridge.<sup>35</sup>

The project was eventually transferred to the Resettlement Administration as Shenandoah Homesteads, Farm Security Administration, United States Department of Agriculture, with a headquarters office in Elkton, Virginia. In 1940, Chester Housh was Project Manager, Mozelle R. Cowden was Home Management Supervisor and Mrs. Frances Perry was Homestead Nurse.<sup>36</sup>

In April 1936 the United States of America purchased from the Church of the Brethren 400 acres. The property was located about halfway between Geer and March in Greene County, Virginia on both sides of what is today Route 810. In March 1937 the Federal Government purchased another adjoining 158 acres from the Williams Estate for a total of approximately 558 acres.

There is an interesting history story about the church property. In March 1922, the General Mission Board of the Church of the Brethren purchased this land in Greene County, Virginia where an industrial school (C. B. I. S.) would be built. Soon after purchase of land, construction began on Sanger Hall, which was to be used as the school. While approximately sixty individuals worked on Sanger Hall, Sister Martha Sanger, Brother C. J. Yagel and Sister Nelie Wampler and a few school children started a garden and canned vegetables for later use.<sup>37</sup>

By December 12 of that year they moved into the building with the plasterers, plumbers, carpenters and painters. The building was dedicated on December 10 and the school opened on January 2, 1923. Work continued on the other large building and the barn. The teachers were Mrs. Ellen Wampler and Miss Nelie Wampler and Mr. A. F. Bolinger was Principal. There were 98 students enrolled. The second school year opened on September 10 with an enrollment of 140 students; 40 of them were boarding pupils.<sup>38</sup>

By 1926 or 1927 the school had eight workers with apparently 43 children staying at C. B. I. S. with 101 children enrolled in the school. The following list is quoted from a description of their farm: (1) 300 Acres; (2) 125 mature apple trees; (3) 798 young fruit trees; (4) 300 bushels of apples raised last year; (5) 900 quarts of cherries gathered in all; (6) 25 cattle, 6 horses and 9 hogs. (7) Eight acres truck garden. (8) 660 purebred Rhode Island Red chickens. There were church services in a number of locations in the area also. The above is listed to illustrate the type of labor needed to operate this type of school in the early 1920s.<sup>39</sup>

Galen Morris informed us he attended the school in the early 1930s before attending Monroe High School in Stanardsville. The advent of school bus transportation in the county could have affected attendance at C. B. I. S. It is possible that the school continued until the federal government purchased the property; however, this has not been documented to date.

Now back to the Geer Resettlement Project. Rexford G. Tugwell, administrator of the Resettlement Administration at one time, decreed that a French-village type unit would be built here. The homes would be placed in a community type setting as in a small town.<sup>40</sup>



A road was constructed from the Old Stanardsville & Nortonsville Road along the south side of the dormitory on a hillcrest to connect with Haneytown Road where it intersects with Route 810 today. There were four resettlement homes on the south side of this road just east of the Nortonsville Road and opposite the dormitory. Next came the standpipe and the C. B. I. S. barn. East of the barn, the rest of the resettlement homes were on either side of the road to the end of the hill. There were 14 or 15 resettlement homes and the old William's farmhouse on the south side of Haneytown Creek.

There were 10 families from Greene County moved from the Park to the Geer Resettlement and also one family from Page County moved from the Park to Geer. Mrs. Lettie Morris, a seamstress, moved there from above Dyke, and helped the families make mattresses. I also understand they made mattresses for other families who lived in the foothills. We do not know where one family was from. Earl Estes, Sr. moved there from Stanardsville, Virginia. He had been a truck driver for the Resettlement Administration while the homes were being built. It might be that he moved to Geer as a foreman of a fence construction crew.



National Youth Administration on a Field Trip



Officials of the Elkton Resettlement Administration and the local National Youth Administration unit.  
From left to right: Chester Housh, "Polly" Estes, Irene Smith, Unknown Man, and Mozelle Cowden.

The land area was eventually divided into three farms and Earl Estes, Sr. became one of the farmers. Simmons mentioned that the drought of 1930 adversely affected crops in the Blue Ridge area and deprived the folks of picking apples in nearby orchards. Men from the Geer Resettlement area in the early 1940's rode in a stake-body truck to Crozet to pick peaches and, later in the fall, to pick apples.

President Roosevelt on June 26, 1935 created the National Youth Administration as a part of the Works Progress Administration. This organization reached the Geer Resettlement Project around 1941, for "Polly" Estes led a NYA project with at least 20 young ladies involved. Apparently they sewed quilts and probably worked on other handicrafts too. She was also involved in getting surplus commodities for lunch programs for the NYA girls and children at the elementary school there. It is interesting to note that the young ladies paid \$0.50 for lunches in May 1941 and approximately 21 school children paid \$0.08 for lunches in April 1941. In several cases there was \$0.02 left over for May. The NYA Office in Harrisonburg, the Greene County School Board and the Ruckersville School provided jars for canning purposes. Several of the parents canned vegetables and fruit for the school children. In the fall a lot of fruits and vegetables were canned including 144 quarts of apple butter. Perhaps it is wise to say, "Once around the side and twice through the middle, careful now, don't scorch the kettle."

My father, Earl Estes, Sr. farmed and raised chickens there for several years. The family grew sorghum one year and made molasses. There are records where one of the men living on the resettlement area was hired to assist on the farm and was paid \$1.50 per day. Estes moved from the Geer area to a farm in Madison County in 1944. The Geer Resettlement Project land was declared surplus and sold in January and February 1946.<sup>41</sup>

This year in the March 2, 2000 issue of the Greene County Record that the present owners have requested a special permit to open a bed and breakfast business using the C. B. I. S. buildings. Is it possible that people will be staying there and having meals there as the children did in the 1920's and 1930's? Sometimes, what goes around, comes around.

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<sup>1</sup> - Simmons, Dennis Elwood, *The Creation of Shenandoah National Park and The Skyland Drive, 1924 – 1936*. A Dissertation to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia. May 1978. p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> - Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> - Ibid. p. 10 - 11.

<sup>4</sup> - Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> - Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> - Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> - Ibid. p. 25 & the December 11, 1924 and January 29, 1925 issues of the Greene County Record.

<sup>8</sup> - Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> - Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> - Ibid. p. 27 - 28.

<sup>11</sup> - Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> - Ibid. p. 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> - Ibid. p. 34 - 36.

<sup>14</sup> - Ibid. p. 41 - 42.

<sup>15</sup> - Ibid. p. 45 - 46 & 53.

<sup>16</sup> - Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> - Ibid. p. 59 & 60.

<sup>18</sup> - Ibid. p. 64 - 68.

<sup>19</sup> - Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> - Ibid. p. 75 & 77.

<sup>21</sup> - Ibid. p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> - Ibid. p. 84 - 85.

<sup>23</sup> - Ibid. p. 87 - 88.

<sup>24</sup> - Ibid. p. 90 - 91.

<sup>25</sup> - Ibid. p. 92.

- <sup>26</sup> - Ibid. p. 94 – 95.
- <sup>27</sup> - Ibid. p. 105 – 115.
- <sup>28</sup> - Ibid. p. 115 – 118.
- <sup>29</sup> - Ibid. p. 122 – 125.
- <sup>30</sup> - Ibid. p. 126.
- <sup>31</sup> - Ibid. p. 145 – 146.
- <sup>32</sup> - Ibid. p. 151.
- <sup>33</sup> - Ibid. p. 133 & 134 & 159.
- <sup>34</sup> - Ibid. p. 159.
- <sup>35</sup> - Kenefick, F. Eugene, "Shenandoah Homesteads", A Rural Resettlement Project of the Farm Security Administration. A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Social Work of the Catholic University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Social Work. June 1940. Washington, D. C. p. 18.
- <sup>36</sup> - Ibid. p. i – Preface and 1.
- <sup>37</sup> - Pamphlet on C. B. I. S. written circa 1926. p. 3
- <sup>38</sup> - Ibid. p. 3 & 4.
- <sup>39</sup> - Ibid. p. 13.
- <sup>40</sup> - Lambert, Darwin, "The Undying Past of Shenandoah National Park". Roberts Rinehart, Inc. Publishers. 1989. P. 253.
- <sup>41</sup> - Greene County Clerk's Office, DB 28 p. 17 & DB 28 p. 40