

# Shenandoah National Park

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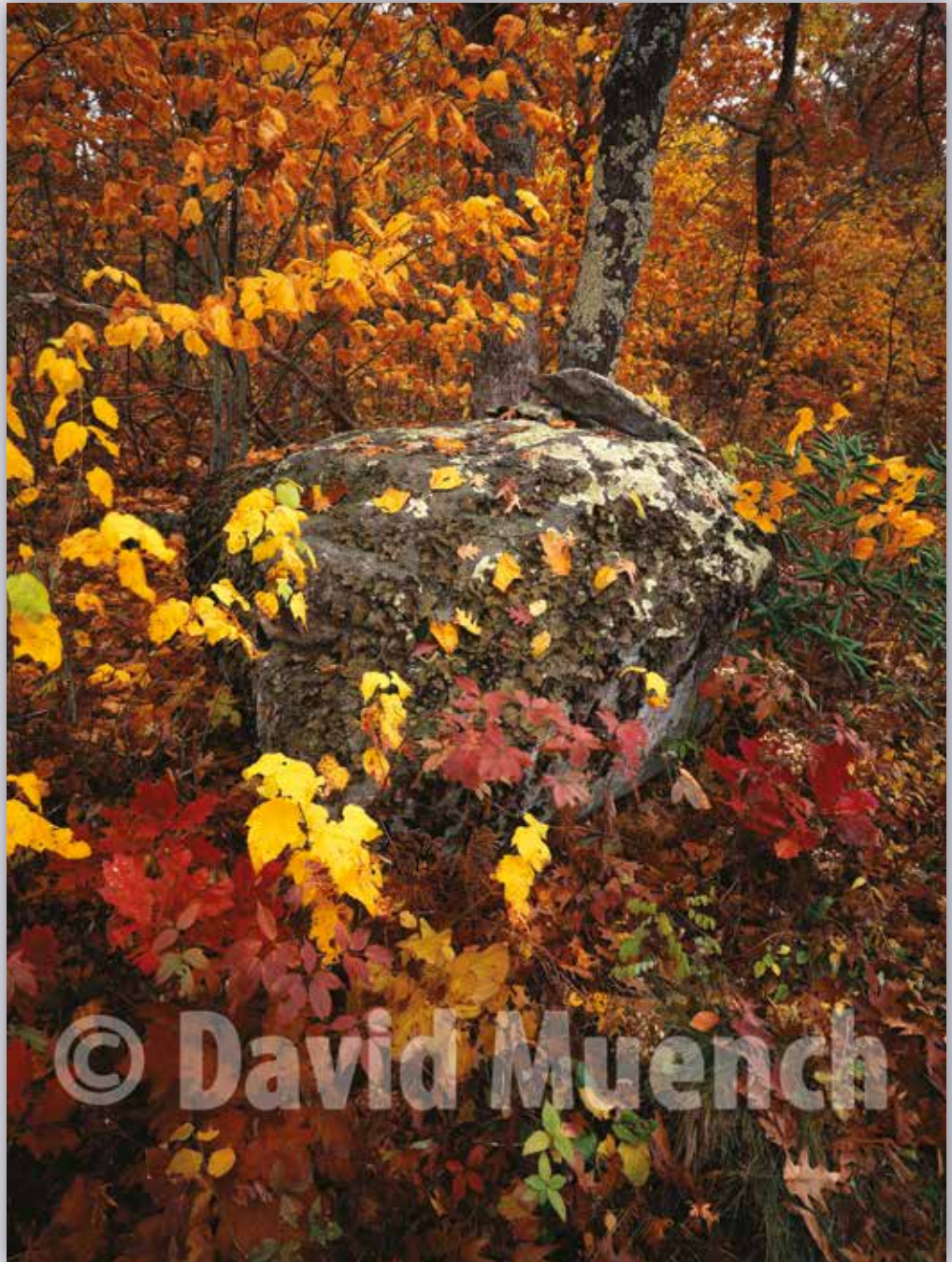
## Seeing the wood for the trees

It seemed ironic that the ranger-led walk from Big Meadows in Shenandoah National Park showed us the remains of where the original inhabitants of these ancient Blue Ridge Mountains once lived. When the park was designated in 1935, about 400 'hillbilly' families, described as being 'almost completely cut off from the current of American life' were evicted to make room for the park, in the mistaken belief that all national parks had to be uninhabited wildernesses like Yosemite and Yellowstone in the West.

That was many years ago, and thankfully the park's original authoritarian attitude is long gone. The important cultural history of the area is now recognized and explained in visitor centers. The action of the Government in evicting these hard-working families really hit the headlines. They had lived there in harmony with the landscape for several generations, and many refused to leave quietly.

Apart from the significance of its cultural heritage, Shenandoah National Park is important in many other ways. An estimated 50 million people live within a day's drive and it receives over two million visits a year. It was the first national park to be situated close to the large population centers of the east coast and of Washington DC, which is just 75 miles away.

It was President Franklin D Roosevelt's 'New Deal' Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) public work relief program that



*Fall leaves*

created the national park that we see today. Between 1933 and 1942, ten CCC camps including Big Meadow were established within Shenandoah, and at any one time more than 1000 boys and young men were working here.

Their tasks included the building of trails, fire roads and towers, comfort stations, picnic grounds and construction projects associated with the 105-mile Skyline Drive, which runs along the granite crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Its name changes to Blue Ridge Parkway as



*Richland Balsam Overlook, Blue Ridge Parkway*

it leaves the park at Rockfish Gap. Most visitors follow this road especially during the fall or 'foliage' season. The various pull-outs constructed by the CCC also afford spectacular views and easy trails take you to the bald granite tops of peaks such as Stony Man, Bearfence and Old Rag Mountains.

Over nine years, three million young men participated in the CCC, which provided them with shelter, clothing, and food, together with a modest wage of \$30 a month – \$25 of which had to be sent home to their families. A life-size bronze statue of a typical ax-wielding CCC workman stands in front of the Harry F Byrd Visitor Center at Big Meadows, commemorating the men and boys of the Corps.

I left the ranger walk to take the short descent to the pretty 70-foot cascade of the Dark Hollow Falls, hidden among the greenstone rocks of Dark Hollow. It is thought that President Thomas Jefferson was fond of this place and spent time here quietly contemplating the wonders of Nature. Maybe this was where he first considered that protecting the American environment should be a national goal – a thought he expressed in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785).

It was an atmospheric, misty day on my visit, and I felt at one with the third president and Founding Father as I explored the falls from top to bottom, and heard the melodious 'look-up, look-up' call of a fellow summer visitor, the blue-headed vireo. Just over 100 miles of the 2200-mile Appalachian Trail runs parallel to the



*Dark Hollow Falls*