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Lost in Transition: Removing, Resettling, and Renewing Appalachia

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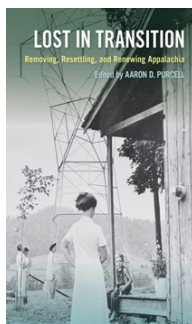
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REVIEWS

Lost in Transition: Removing, Resettling, and Renewing Appalachia



Aaron D. Purcell, ed.
Knoxville : University of
Tennessee Press, 2021
ISBN: 9781621905899
283 p. \$48.00 (Hbk)

Lost in Transition chronicles the removal of people in the Appalachian region to make way for hydroelectric dams, lakes, and national parks. The book explores the role of government land acquisition for New Deal-era projects in the uprooting of local communities, and the subsequent loss the residents felt from being removed from their land, livelihoods, and communities.

The authors of each chapter do an excellent job of contextualizing the removal of people from the land that was used to make way for national parks or hydro-electric dams and lakes in the name of “progress” while still focusing on the core of what the book is about – the loss displaced citizens felt. Most chapters contain oral traditions either directly from the residents affected, or relatives of those directly concerned and blends those stories with the historical events and processes of organizations like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the National Park Service. *Lost in Transition* chronologically follows case studies of public land removal actions in the 1930s-1960s. The authors supplement interviews and first-hand accounts with research from the TVA, the National Archives, or the Department of Works. Key projects include the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Mammoth Cave (KY), the Keowee-Toxaway Project (SC), Shenandoah National Park (VA), Norris Basin (TN), and the New River project (NC).

The history of the national park system and hydroelectric dams that dot the American country is a fascinating one. While most of the broader historical contexts of these programs are

mentioned in passing or briefly described, *Lost in Transition* zooms down to a micro-level of these events and describes some of the local management and politics around the creation of these public works. The community-level focus describes the affected areas and populations before and after removal and leans into the dramatic change in lives by highlighting the loss of place, loss of home, and loss of community. Typically, this era of New Deal programs is thought of as an era of progress; however, *Lost in Transition* adds another side to the story and sheds new light to the tensions between cultural displacement and progress.

The contributors pull on the heartstrings of loss in these Appalachian communities, a thread that might be more poignantly felt by readers after having gone through the recent pandemic and the loss of “normal” life. This loss of place in the zeitgeist of Appalachia culture shows a complex relationship between the spaces once called home and the recreational spaces they are now. Other conflicts brought to light are the tensions between citizens and governmental agencies, the discord between what life was really like before removal and the imagined idyllic life citizens used to live, and how these strains have continued to the present day in the wide diaspora of displaced communities trying to reclaim a connection to a past, real or imagined.

While this book may appeal to academics and history buffs alike, the best audience may be for readers who are deeply interested in Appalachia, its people, and things that shaped its identity. Also interesting is how projects carried out by the TVA or National Park Service in the Appalachian region centered on Tennessee and neighboring states. However, the title is misleading, as the book only focuses on a narrow swath of Appalachia. Other regions including Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi also had a rich history of Works Projects that are neglected in the book, to the extent that Georgia is even mislabeled on the map in the introduction. The Appalachian Trail is mentioned in the conclusion as a public works project that did not displace, disenfranchise, or relocate residents in its creation.

In short, *Lost in Transition* recounts tales of home irretrievably lost and a people whose cul-

ture has weathered the march of “progress.” Many people think of Appalachia as homogeneous, but this text gives greater nuance to the area of Appalachia, its citizens, and culture. Some stories recount economic deprivation, others political power lost, yet most focus on the personal sense of dispossession that residents and even generations removed feel. Families were cut off from their land, missed economic potential, forfeited a connection to their past, and sometimes just lost the place they called home. Throughout these stories, one can read about the plight of the residents who were removed, the nuances of the local communities that the National Park Services and TVA did not understand, and the shared values of an idyllic past that may have not existed for the people living it, but nevertheless remembered down through the generations that has become synonymous with the Appalachian identity.

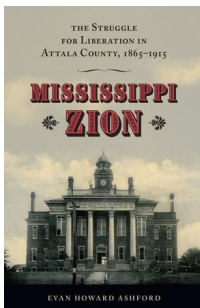
Other books of interest

Disappearing Appalachia in Tennessee: A Picture of a Vanished Land and Its People by Harry Moore and Fred Brown – a journalistic look at the Appalachian of yesteryear that includes stories of the creation of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park.

An Appalachian New Deal: West Virginia in the Great Depression by Jerry Bruce Thomas – a snapshot of Appalachia in the Great Depression with stories of families affected by poverty through a period of economic crisis for the country.

William F. Brogdon, II, University of North Georgia

Mississippi Zion: The Struggle for Liberation in Attala County, 1865-1915



Evan Howard Ashford
Jackson: University Press of
Mississippi, 2022
ISBN: 9781496839725
248 p. \$99.00 (Hbk)

Of necessity, much of the scholarship on African American his-

tory has focused on slavery, segregation, and oppression. At the same time, going back at least as far as W.E.B. Du Bois in the late 1890's, there has been scholarship that has emphasized the perseverance and success of African Americans as active agents in resisting and overcoming their difficult historical circumstances in the United States. Ashford's *Mississippi Zion* clearly falls into this category.

Using Attala County, Mississippi for an in-depth analysis, Ashford explores the theme of African American liberation during the first half-century following the end of the Civil War. Ashford, who is African American, says he essentially began this project at age 11 by writing to family members in Attala County inquiring about family history and requesting photographs (p. x). This early curiosity informs his intention to write a different sort of history with the focus more on African American agency and less on white power (p. 7). Instead of viewing the period 1865-1915 as simply a slide into the Jim Crow era in Mississippi, Ashford makes a point of emphasizing this as an era in which formerly enslaved African Americans and their descendants engaged in a constant and rather successful campaign of liberation.

The book is organized both chronologically and thematically with specific examples of Attala County residents engaged in the liberation struggle via education, economic development, political participation, and use of the legal system to achieve some level of justice. While emphasizing African American successes, Ashford is realistic and does cover the ongoing efforts of white “redeemers” to roll back the gains of the formerly enslaved since for most whites in the area, the concept of equality between the races, was intolerable. Interestingly enough, Ashford cites several examples where African American women successfully sued to ensure that their children borne of white men received legal recognition as citizens and heirs. He even states, “Black women saw they could use their sexuality to their advantage” noting that under such circumstances, African American women and mixed-race children “represented a threat to the redemption agenda” and helped undermine white power (p. 74).

Another unconventional observation concerns Ashford's assertion in regard to differing attitudes toward education. For African Ameri-