

Project Category

NSBF Byway Community Award: Visitor Experience

Project Name

Restoring and Reopening the Historic Bluffs Restaurant

Byway Name

Blue Ridge Parkway

Designation: 1996

Distance: 496 mi

Overview

The Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation has partnered with the National Park Service, hundreds of donors, and other key stakeholders to restore the historic Bluffs Restaurant building at Milepost 241 on the Blue Ridge Parkway and successfully reopen to thousands of happy Parkway visitors.

In 1949, The Bluffs became the first dining establishment to open on the Blue Ridge Parkway, near Sparta, NC and just 21 miles from the Virginia line. The popular restaurant was famous for its fried chicken, ham biscuits, and more. The Bluffs Restaurant became a treasured destination for generations of hungry diners for over six decades.

Unfortunately, in 2010, when no concessionaire bid to operate the aging structure, The Bluffs Restaurant closed, along with the nearby Bluffs Lodge. The boarded-up restaurant sat empty, hosting only a leaky roof, mold, and decay for the next decade. Parkway visitors, the local community, Foundation donors, and the National Park Service all wondered if the building would ever reopen.

In 2016, the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation took on the challenge. The Foundation secured a historic lease agreement with the National Park Service, raised \$1 million from hundreds of donors, hired an experienced contractor to renovate the building, and teamed up with experienced restaurateurs to operate the facility.

In 2021, the historic building reopened to welcome guests and provide a historic Parkway dining experience. Longtime diners came back after the lengthy hiatus, often entering the facility in tears due to the emotions it stirred in them. The 2021 season was a resounding success, serving more than 27,000 customers in its first year of operation in over a decade.

Thanks to the creative historic lease agreement, ongoing donor support, and revenue from restaurant operations, The Bluffs Restaurant is poised for additional success and continued operations for many years to come.

Intrinsic Qualities

The official purpose of the Blue Ridge Parkway is to connect Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks via a scenic parkway through the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia and North Carolina, and to preserve natural and cultural resources while providing opportunities for public enjoyment. According to one of the Parkway's guiding documents, "the parkway offers escape from everyday life, challenge for the mind and body, and rejuvenation, relaxation, and renewal fostered by immersion in the natural and cultural landscape."

As the largest recreational area on the Parkway, the Bluffs at Doughton Park is a mountainous 6300-acre region featuring bluegrass downs terminating in precipitous bluffs. Parkway visitors are drawn to the area's 30 miles of hiking trails as well as its overlooks, campground, and picnic areas.

Stepping into the newly restored Bluffs Restaurant is like stepping back in time to the early years of the Parkway—a warm and inviting escape from the distractions of everyday life. The National Park Service, Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, and the Atriax Group collaborated to restore the restaurant as faithfully as possible to its original historic design, while also incorporating modern equipment, current safety protocols, and ADA considerations. They painstakingly cleaned and polished period light fixtures, removing decades of grime until they shined like new again. They restored the checkerboard floor, rebuilt the lunch counter to its original form, and searched to find stools and chairs that faithfully represented the originals. While the main dining room maintains as much of its original look and charm as possible, the building has some welcome changes, too, from the newly accessible restrooms and doors to new kitchen equipment that meets today’s health and safety standards.

All of these details combine to provide patrons with an authentic and immersive Parkway dining experience that truly delivers escape, relaxation, and renewal.

Byway Best Practice

Partnership and Leveraging Resources - Numerous partners and donors made this effort a success. The Blue Ridge Parkway and National Park Service made the building available; provided ample guidance on maintaining the historic fabric of the building; and advanced the creative option of a historic lease agreement. Donations from hundreds of individuals and several private foundations helped the Foundation secure and leverage large financial commitments from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the State of North Carolina. Private businesses - from the building contractor to the restaurant operators to various service providers, have gone far beyond dollars and cents to make sure this work has been done right and done well. It was truly a team effort that has enhanced both the Blue Ridge Parkway and the visitor experience.

Historic Lease Agreement - The Foundation secured a historic lease with the National Park Service before undertaking these renovations; the lease in turn enabled an innovative approach to restoring restaurant operations. Engaging a mission-driven non-profit organization like the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation in the building’s lease and operation, rather than a profit-driven concessioner, helps bring historic preservation, education and outreach, and the overall visitor experience all into sharper focus.

For-profit restaurant operation; long-term revenue source - By contracting out the actual restaurant operation to a for-profit business, the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation is able to serve the basic dining needs of Parkway visitors; re-create an authentic Parkway dining experience that dates back to 1949; support local jobs and economic development; and create a revenue stream to support the long-term maintenance of the building and equipment. Whenever we can find ways to create a revenue source to maintain or improve the byway’s resources, we stand a much better chance of sustaining that effort well into the future.

Keys to Success

The overall key to success required weaving together wonderful memories of past experiences at the Bluffs with a viable plan for future sustainability. In collaboration with the local community, the foundation successfully gathered financial support while honoring the site’s long history. This approach required past patrons to put money down for the restoration, long before they ever might eat a meal there again. It required the National Park Service to consider new approaches to the failed concessionaire option of the recent past. It required designers and contractors to balance historic designs and modern standards, while completing the renovations during a worldwide pandemic(!). It required not just restoring the building to its historic look, but also restoring restaurant service, in order to provide long-term revenue to help sustain the building and the memory-making well into the future. The result is a memorable dining experience in a historic building for 27,000+ Parkway visitors in 2021, with tens of thousands more to follow in 2022 and beyond.

Additional Information

Contact Information

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1/1/2016 - 5/21/2021

Website

<https://www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm>

Photographs

