

PRESERVATION

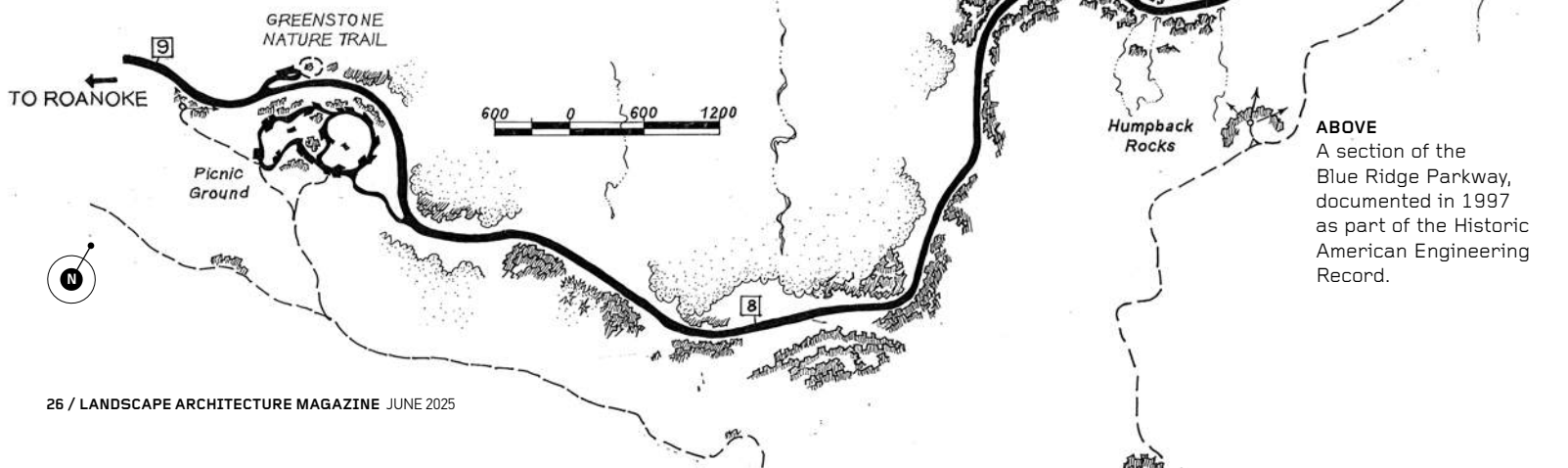
The Blue Ridge Parkway Has Something to Teach Us

Skimming the ridges of the Blue Ridge Mountains for 469 uninterrupted miles, the Blue Ridge Parkway is one of “the finest examples of the collaborative work of the National Park Service and Bureau of Public Roads,” according to the U.S. Department of the Interior, which recently designated the roadway a National Historic Landmark.

Constructed between 1935 and 1987 under the design direction of then 25-year-old landscape architect Stanley Abbott, the parkway reflects early 20th-century efforts to conserve the nation’s natural and cultural resources through driving. It is “one of the most important contributions that landscape architecture made to cultural modernism,” says Elizabeth K. Meyer, FASLA, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Virginia. “It was a radically new type of landscape designed for an automobile.”

At Cornell University, Abbott studied under Gilmore Clarke, a consultant on urban parkways, including Virginia’s George Washington Memorial Parkway. In her own first year at Cornell, Meyer studied a 10-foot-long elevation drawing of Abbott’s detailing the entire mountain range, including the Blue Ridge Parkway. “He was imagining this as a line in the landscape on the scale of a mountain range,” she says. Abbott’s topographic literacy is “remarkable,” Meyer says, noting that he designed the parkway’s curvature to maintain vehicles at a speed of no more than 45 miles per hour. “That geometry sustained over that distance is the brilliance of the project,” Meyer says the designation of the Blue Ridge Parkway reminds people that modernism wasn’t just about architecture but also “about the new tools and technologies of modernization.”

—DEBORAH HUSO



ABOVE
A section of the Blue Ridge Parkway, documented in 1997 as part of the Historic American Engineering Record.