Ohio’s Green Shrouded Miracle
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Assignment Description: Write a historical geography of a place or monument/building in North America and explain why it holds meaning to people. The assignment was completed for Dr. Chris Post’s The Geography of Ohio.

Introduction

Public Law 93-555, December 27, 1974 states that Congress created the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreational Area (cum National Park, c. 2000) for two purposes: 1) “for the purpose of preserving and protecting for public use the enjoyment, the historic, scenic, natural and recreational values of the Cuyahoga River and adjacent lands of the Cuyahoga Valley,”; and 2) for the “purpose of providing for the maintenance of needed recreational open space necessary to the urban environment.”

This process of park creation in the valley is a small part of the environmentalist movement of the twentieth century, but represents in a larger way a shift in the ideology behind the creation of national parks; a shift from protecting sacred space to making sacred space. For the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, national parks were designed to preserve sacred space, a term which is both frustratingly elusive yet also incredibly powerful as a definitional construct. Traditionally, the National Park Service (NPS) sought to find spaces in nature that were sacred, sublime, or that in some way could be perceived as being magnificent; God’s artwork, if you will. These spaces include Sequoia, Yellowstone, or the Grand Canyon, where the majesty (even the divinity) of the space is immediately recognizable to the human senses. These spaces didn’t have to be made sacred, they already existed and simply needed to be delineated and preserved. However, as urbanization and suburban sprawl became encroaching dangers to open green space and the recreational and therapeutic value it holds, a shift in thinking occurred that caused park creators to consider making sacred space. The Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) represents a manifestation of this shift in thought and purpose. It wasn’t so much that the valley was sacred in the traditional sense, but with urban sprawl it began to become sacred in a different way; it was sacred only in relation to the spread of suburbia and other human development.

The valley at first glance may not seem sublime or majestic, though it certainly has its scenic wonders. However, the granite ledges, thick forests, meandering rivers, and occasional waterfalls pale in comparison to the majesty of Sequoia’s ancient redwoods or the breathtaking views of the Grand Canyon. How, then, did it gain the same classification, purpose, and value as these western parks? The answer lies in the desire of Ohioans to prevent the sprawl of two major urban centers—Cleveland and Akron—from developing away all of the open space in the valley. It also has to do, in

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a lesser sense, with the energy crisis of the 1970's and the widespread realization that parks located so far away from major population centers weren't of much use if people couldn't afford to drive to them. It stands to reason then, that it's the people of Ohio and the legislators of Ohio who embody and reify why the valley is important to Ohio and Ohioans.

There are three major points which indicate the importance of preserving, through the federal government, the natural and historical elements of the valley, and also the sense of place-attachment it holds to Ohioans: first, a large, growing number of people supporting the idea of and campaigning for the park (this was especially crucial during years of opposition—during the administrations of Ford and Reagan); second, bipartisanship in Ohio and in Congress during the push to create legislation for the park; and, third, the widespread realization of the importance of such a park to both the economy and the quality of life in northeast Ohio. By exhibiting that these three assumptions are true, the importance of the CVNP to Ohio will be illustrated. But first, a brief history of the Cuyahoga Valley will be presented for the purposes of historical context and in an attempt to illustrate the "heritage"—which for the purposes of this essay will be defined as the reified story that emerges from a complex historical mixture of private motives and public movements and which belongs to everyone in a particular group—that the NPS, and, therefore, the citizens of Ohio (indeed, the nation), have become wardens of.

The Physical and Pre-European History of the Valley

The valley and its natural landscape were formed from the interaction of bedrock, water, and ice over the course of millions of years. The park's oldest exposed rock—blue-gray Chagrin shale—is about 400-million-years-old, while its youngest—the pebbly Sharon Conglomerate—is about 300-million-years-old. As the glaciers retreated over the Allegheny Plateau, they left end moraines (depositional features signifying the furthest point of a glacier's advancement) that are more squeezed and contorted in shape than those in the flat lands further west in Ohio. The Cuyahoga River as it exists today was a result of the last glacial retreat and either flowed with the moraines when weak or eroded them and rerouted itself where its flow was strong, which is part of the reason for the river's oddly abrupt changes in direction.3

There is some evidence of Paleo-Indian peoples living in the valley, and some from the Archaic Period too, but most archeological sites in the valley have unearthed Woodland culture peoples, namely the Whittlesey who were the first true maize farmers and permanent settlers in the valley. The Whittlesey left the area in the 1600's, and eastern tribes moved into the valley after having depleted their eastern hunting grounds and because of conflict with European settlers. The Treaty of Greenville in 1795 stripped all tribes of their Ohio lands, however, and spurred the migration and settlement of Europeans into

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the valley, which was part of the Connecticut Western Reserve at the time.⁴

**European Settlement in the Valley and the Ohio and Erie Canal**

The first wave of settlers in the valley following the Treaty of Greenville hailed mostly from Connecticut. Moses Cleveland was sent to survey the area, and his system of surveyed ranges and sections has left a long-lasting imprint on settlement patterns in northeast Ohio. The eruption of Mt. Tambora, which created a “year without summer,” and the War of 1812 spurred many farmers and their families to migrate into the valley where they were promised fertile land to cultivate. The early economy of the valley revolved around corn, wheat, and rye agriculture in combination with pig farming. In 1810 the first gristmill was constructed at Brandywine Falls and by 1822 a distillery and post office accompanied it. Most early migrants were of Irish or German descent, the majority coming from Connecticut and Pennsylvania.⁵

Life was hard for these early settlers, but generation by generation they cleared the land for agriculture and created what small business endeavors they could. Unlike industrial centers such as Cleveland, Toledo, and Cincinnati, people living in the valley had a major problem: transportation. The Cuyahoga River’s depth fluctuated frequently, and was never deep enough for large cargo ships. Unlike settlers near the Ohio River or Lake Erie, people in the valley had a harder time getting their goods to any outside markets. This all changed when the Ohio and Erie Canal opened in 1832; now people in the valley could get their goods exported and much needed supplies imported with relatively easy access to both the Ohio River (and therefore the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico) and Lake Erie (and therefore the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Atlantic seaboard).

Business boomed almost instantly as many distilleries, sawmills, and gristmills popped up along the canal, and with them, growing centers of population, though no real “urban” space was ever created within the valley, and restrictive terrain and primitive roads created cultural “islands”; separated physically from one and other, the towns within the valley were often secluded from outside contact and social intermingling—which would ultimately lead to a strong though not necessarily unified sense of heritage among residents. The canal also created a boom in boat building and stone quarrying. An economic change occurred, due largely to the canal, in which people shifted from a subsistence style of farming to a combined agricultural-, service-, and manufacturing-based economy.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the valley saw the success of barrel makers, blacksmiths, tailors, tanners, brick makers, shoemakers, and harness makers.⁶ There were also two large papermaking plants located in the valley. The Jaite Company created a company town for its paper bag enterprise, operational for many years. But the valley never fully industrialized like surrounding urban areas (big and small) largely due to

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⁴ Ibid, 18, 19.  
the difficulty of running rails through its terrain. As railways made the canal obsolete, the valley became a bit of a farming backwater again, pinned between the metropolitan sprawl of Cleveland and Akron, and its value as an open green space increased until a strong citizen movement to protect and rehabilitate the valley began to steamroll in the twentieth-century.

Citizens of Ohio also began to recognize that there were many non-natural elements present upon the valley’s landscape which deserved protection because they represented a history and cultural heritage of the region; these included Native American artifacts and villages (many of which are presently operational archeological sites), towns, trails, farms, roads, canals, rail roads, bridges, mills, factories, mines, quarries, and an assortment of various historically significant buildings and structures. There was a heritage present upon the valley’s landscape in danger of being eradicated by modernization, and people decided it was time to protect this heritage along with the scenic beauty and recreational value of the valley which was gaining a new appreciation as a refuge from urban America. As is typical in the historiography of environmentalist thought and public perception of green space and wilderness in America, the valley went from being a perceived frontier, dangerous, God-less, and in need of taming by man, to being viewed as the very space where man could reconnect with the divine and reconnect with his spiritual roots.

Early Calls for Parks in the Valley

When the Ohio General Assembly passed the County Park Commission Act of 1911, something unique was taking place in the history of landscape planning. For the first time ever, a level of parks had been created which existed “between the echelons of city and state...devised principally to serve metropolitan Cleveland” forming the Cuyahoga County Park Commission (CCPC) and giving it the power “to receive in the name of such counties gifts, donations, and devises of land and property...for the establishment of parks...and public grounds outside of cities, for use of said county.”7 There were some initial legal issues concerning funding and land acquisition, but by 1915 the city had invited the famous Frederick Olmstead to help prepare a county-wide plan for a string of green “islands” surrounding the metropolitan area, later dubbed the Emerald Necklace. By 1917, the Cleveland Metropolitan Park District (CMPD) had been formed, and Akron followed suit in 1920 with the Akron Metropolitan Park District (AMPD). The two public entities set to work creating parks and reservations outside of urban centers, which included, among other attractions, bridle paths, footpaths, bicycle paths, girl- and boy-scout camps, picnic grounds, and nature trails.8 In the pre-Depression era the CMPD would concentrate its efforts into creating the Brecksville and Bedford Reservations, and the AMPD protected Sand Run, Furnace Run and Kendall Lake (which is now under the control of the NPS within the CVNP). The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) would continue to improve these public

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7 Ron Cockrell, A Green Shrouded Miracle: The Administrative History of Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Ohio, Department of Interior and NPS, 1992, 12.
spaces as well as restoring historic structures within them during the Depression era under federal funding.

As previously stated, some initial problems the CMPD and AMPD faced were funding and land acquisition. This set the stage for a rocky beginning and a constant uphill climb to achieve the goals of its supporters and those tasked with the orders. They relied heavily on donations. Enter F.A. Seiberling, the founder of the Seiberling Rubber Company and grandfather of John F. Seiberling, the Ohio state representative who introduced the bill in 1973 that created the CVNP. Between his own donations of money and acreage, and the persuasion he had among wealthy friends to do the same, it’s doubtful that any one man can be singled out more than him for contributing to the cause for park creation in northeast Ohio, particularly in the Cuyahoga Valley. The girl- and boy-scouts of America contributed significant funds to land acquisition and landscape planning for recreational purposes, as did the Phyllis Wheatley Association. Historically, then, both the CMPD and the AMPD have depended almost exclusively on donations, from the 1920’s to the 1950’s. But in his historic research study of the valley, Dr. Nick Scrattish asserts that, “no other metropolitan park district in the country can boast of having done so much with so little.” It boiled down to Ohioan’s place-attachment to the valley and both the recreational value and the communal heritage it represented to them.

These precursors to the CVNP—the metropolitan parks—then, are an interesting democratic process which included federal, state, county, municipal, and citizen cooperation on an unprecedented scale in the name of protecting open green space for the recreational use of local urban citizens—the need for which was becoming more and more paramount as suburban sprawl and industrial development exploded in northeast Ohio. This truth, then, exhibits points one and two as laid out in my thesis, as it demonstrates both the growing number of people recognizing the need for parks in northeast Ohio, and bipartisan cooperation amongst several branches of government involved in the legislative process that spawned the metropolitan parks and steered public perception of the Cuyahoga Valley in the direction of an acknowledgment of its sacredness as a space, particularly a public space. The valley’s sacredness was not innate though, it was made sacred by means of contrast with the surrounding urban and suburban spaces.

The Birth of a National Park

In the 1960’s, there was further and much more compelling evidence of a growth in citizen support for the protection of the valley’s natural and man-made landscapes, which culminated in the bipartisan support that created the national park in the early 1970’s. The first two threats to the valley which spurred citizen’s associations in its defense were the proposal from Ohio Edison to run power lines through the valley and the construction of the sports coliseum, which local residents feared would create environmental risks such as run-off issues, as well as parking lot eyesores, wildlife habitat destruction and the sort. In 1964,

10 Nick Scrattish, Historic Research Study: Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Ohio, Department of the Interior and NPS, Sept. 1985, 231.
there was an attempt to move the historic, yet decaying Bronson Memorial Church (est. 1835) from Peninsula to Hale Farm, which galvanized community opposition.

Local citizens had recently created the Peninsula Valley Heritage Association (PVHA) to combat the Ohio Edison plans. After successfully preventing both the construction of the power lines and the removal of the church (along with the help of the Summit County Historical Society and the Western Reserve Historical Society) the PVHA changed its name to the Cuyahoga Valley Association (CVA), broadening its focus to the entire valley, not just the town of Peninsula. In 2000, they were renamed the Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association (CVNPA) and since the parks can’t lobby for themselves, the CVNPA and its more action based group, the Cuyahoga Valley Park Federation (CVPF), have been credited by the NPS as being the “citizens’ arm” of the valley because of their ability to gather citizen volunteers for lobbying, laboring, and raising funds for the park.\(^\text{11}\)

This, however, is jumping ahead a little. It simply helps to illustrate that for nearly one hundred years the citizens of Ohio have gathered together in defense of the Cuyahoga Valley’s natural and man-made landscapes, and the heritage they represent, which therefore demonstrates place-attachment, illustrating the importance of the valley and the park to Ohioans. But just how exactly was the national park born?

By the 1960’s, the cities of Cleveland, Akron, and Canton were on the verge of creating one massive metropolitan region, threatening the unique rural individualism of the valley. This threat can be considered a cultural threat, or a threat to the heritage of the valley. In addition to the developmental threats already mentioned, which were prevented due to citizen opposition, there was the pre-existing condition of the Cuyahoga River as a polluted space. For decades the city of Cleveland, determined to support industrial growth, had encouraged local industry to use the river and the lake as a source of free water and to discharge wastes into the river, the lake, and the air. And although the river had caught fire numerous times (as had many other rivers near industrial centers in America) the fires of 1964 and 1969 took place in an evolving intellectual climate concerning environmental protection. Many former industrial sites near the river had been declared “brown zones” by the EPA. This further motivated citizens and politicians alike to recognize the fragile balance between human development and the ecosystem within which it took place.

The first call for the creation of a valley-wide park district (state or federal) came from the chairman of Ohio’s Tri-County Regional Planning Association, John F. Seiberling in 1965 when he encouraged Governor Rhodes to establish a park. A lifelong resident of the valley and grandson of one the valley’s earliest proponents, Seiberling felt a particularly personal attachment to the valley and would go on to spend an entire career working to protect it in one way or another.

Seiberling, along with Rep. Charles Vanik of Cleveland, introduced a bill in Congress calling for a national park in the valley. His first attempt failed, but when he tried again in his second term he was successful. There are two reasons for the success of his second try. The first was a change in the way the park idea was pitched. Seiberling was essentially re-declaring the sacredness of the valley. "For Seiberling, sacredness was something that could be imposed from the outside; it was not confined to an innate quality that a place possessed."12 Instead of pitching the park idea in terms of its sublime value, he framed its promotion in the context of its importance as a public space which could fulfill the "recreational needs of the urban population of the Midwest."13 The second reason was citizen and bipartisan support. Hundreds of volunteers headed to Washington to sit in on hearings and to show that public support was present. Seiberling and Vanik, both Democrats, were joined by Republican Rep. Ralph Regula, who gave full support to the park idea. Even after the bill passed and fears of a veto were rumored, dozens of Republicans pressured the administration in favor of the park.14 President Ford did not veto, despite being urged to do so by the NPS and the Department of the Interior who feared eastern parks near urban spaces would deflect funding from the NPS’s western "crown jewels" (Yosemite, Sequoia, etc.) because he was quite literally warned by public supporters and politicians alike that he would lose Ohio in the next election if he vetoed the bill.15

This was quite the accomplishment considering an NPS administrator had been quoted as saying the "Cuyahoga Valley will become a national park over my dead body," and that just five years before, in valley town hall meetings where the park concept was initially being pitched to local residents, shouts of "they're trying to steal our land!" were met with concerned and supportive cheers.16 The passage of the bill, then, and how it came to be, represent the truth in the first two assumptions laid out in my thesis; it was growing public support and bipartisan cooperation which created the park, and which therefore illustrates the importance of the park to Ohioans.

From Conceptualization to Undertaking and Use-Value

The third assumption laid out in my thesis asserts that since the creation of the national park there has been a widespread realization of the importance of such a park to both the economy and the quality of life in northeast Ohio. This can be illustrated in several ways. First, the complex and difficult undertaking of the environmental cleanup, land acquisition, and recreational potential of the valley which has been realized, and the constant support for funding which was especially crucial during the proposed cuts to NPS funding by the Reagan administration when it was even

13 Ibid, 73.
suggested that the park be completely decommissioned.\(^{17}\) Second, the rehabilitation of not just the natural landscape but also the cultural landscape that has evolved in the valley. And, third, the use-value that the valley offers visitors.

Initial environmental cleanup involved the reclaiming of the Krejci dumpsite, in operation since the 1940’s, which was a significant source of pollution for the river and surrounding habitats. Other reclaimed areas include two wetlands which are full of life today, but in the 1970’s were an auto salvage yard and a topsoil mining operation. There was also the damming of the river to fill in an old sand and gravel quarry which has created what is today the beautiful and serene Indigo Lake.\(^{18}\) The cultural landscape has also been rehabilitated in many ways. Hundreds of historic buildings have been rehabilitated and/or repurposed as park headquarters, museums, historic farms and the like. Reclaiming the abandoned canal was a massive undertaking, but when the Towpath Trail opened for public use in 1993 it essentially formed the backbone of the park and is a popular public space today.\(^{19}\)

There is also something somewhat unique to the CVNPA which Dr. Scrattish has dubbed “quasi-public ownership” of the land.\(^{20}\) This balance of public and private land-use accounts for 2,404 of the park’s 33,000 acres and includes boy-scout and girl-scout camps, Blossom Music Center (home of the Cleveland Symphony), ski resorts, golf clubs, Kent State University’s Performing Arts Center and their outdoor lab at Stumpy Basin, and Hale Farm, operated under the stewardship of the Western Reserve Historical Society. In addition to these quasi-public use-values, the park offers visitors a wide variety of recreational opportunities including hiking, bicycling, nature observation paths, scenic rail trips, and an array of educational opportunities in both the natural and cultural sciences. With a rough average of 3,000,000 visitors per year, the park undoubtedly represents a deeply entrenched sense of importance to Ohioans (and out-of-state visitors).\(^{21}\) Its use-value has increased steadily since the 1970’s, as have the number of visitors to the park each year.

**Conclusions**

Efforts to increase the park’s use-value continue to grow today with the promotion of the Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center to inner-city youths, increased historical interpretation and educational role-playing at places like Hale Farm and Wheaton Village, and, most recently, the park has created the Countryside Initiative, which aims to lease historic farmhouses and fields to farmers.

\(^{17}\) Ron Cockrell, *A Green Shrouded Miracle: The Administrative History of Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Ohio*, Department of Interior and NPS, 1992, 137.


who agree to farm sustainably and sell their produce to park visitors.  

The park and its supporters are constantly working to balance the environmental needs of the valley with the cultural and recreational needs of the citizenry. Staffs from multiple disciplines work together to balance managing resources, to study the effects of urbanization on natural systems, and to balance the trade-off between historic and natural preservation. There is a delicate balance unique to a national park so close to urban spaces between the preservation of sacred space, the promotion of public space, and the negotiation of private space. Geographically, this is a fascinating paradigm, one in which multiple layers of social and natural complexities intermingle. But if one thing is made clear by linking together historical, economic, environmental, political, and cultural themes within this essay, it’s this: the CVNP is an important place to Ohioans, and is and always has been representative of a shift in landscape planning within the NPS and popular public opinion concerning the use-value of open green spaces.

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Bibliography


The term “Green Shrouded Miracle” was first used to describe the Cuyahoga Valley by Theodore R. McCann of the Office of Urban Affairs while visiting the Cuyahoga Valley in 1969: “Today, the valley containing this river [the Cuyahoga] exists as a green shrouded miracle caught between the spreading suburbs of Akron and Cleveland.” Quoted in: Ron Cockrell, A Green Shrouded Miracle: The Administrative History of Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Ohio, Department of Interior and NPS, 1992, 80.