

FDR On Skyline Drive

On April 8, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, his wife Eleanor, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, NPS Director Horace M Albright, and other officials took a road trip that brought them to Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park. Invited to ride with President Roosevelt in his seven-passenger open touring car for this leg of the trip, Albright joined Henry Morgenthau, Jr., then head of the Farm Credit Bureau but soon to be Treasury Secretary. Albright recalled the trip:

. . . . we drove up an old wagon road . . . to the unfinished Skyline Drive. It was a beautiful road, which swung under the peaks but was generally right on the summit backbone of the Blue Ridge with spectacular views both into the Shenandoah Valley and the Piedmont Country. No one, including the president, seemed to mind that we soon looked rather ghostly with our covering of good old Appalachian dust

Roosevelt seemed surprised to learn that the Skyline Drive was being built by impoverished local farmers who were paid with relief funds [former President Herbert] Hoover had secured from Congress. He commented favorably on the alignment of the highway, the beauty of the route, and the hand-built embankments at the panoramic overlooks. He sized up the standards of the road very quickly. Turning to me he said, "Albright, the super-elevation on that curve ahead must permit a speed of 45 miles an hour." (He was exactly right!) However, there was a constant dissenting voice from the back seat. At every stone barrier protecting an overlook, Morgenthau criticized the work and blamed Hoover for spending too much money on it, never stopping to think that they were built by competent stonemasons out of work until employed on the project.

Finally, the president obviously had listened to one too many of these harangues, for when Morgenthau started another, Roosevelt turned and said sharply, "Oh, shut up, Henry! If it were not for these protective walls you would get out and walk. You are the scariest one in the crowd." That was the last we heard from Morgenthau for the rest of the day.

President Roosevelt returned for opening ceremonies for Shenandoah National Park on July 3, 1936. He spoke of the tragic waste caused by unemployment and how so many men had been put to work in the park. He recalled seeing the workers on his visit 2 years earlier, and now he envisioned many other parks providing similar employment. "Is it a dream?" he asked. "Shall I perhaps be accused of an exaggerated passion for planning if I paint for you a picture? You who are here know of the great usefulness to humanity which this Skyline Drive achieves from now on, of the greater usefulness which its extension, south through Virginia and North Carolina and Tennessee to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, will achieve. In almost every other part of the country there is a similar need for recreational areas, for parkways which will give to men and women of moderate means the opportunity, the invigoration and the luxury of touring and camping amid scenes of great natural beauty like this."



On July 3, 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed the crowd during the opening ceremonies for Shenandoah National Park, site of Skyline Drive. (Courtesy, NPS History Collection)



On July 3, 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd as he arrived for the dedication of Shenandoah National Park. With him is Governor George Campbell Peery of Virginia. (Courtesy, NPS History Collection)