

H-Net Reviews

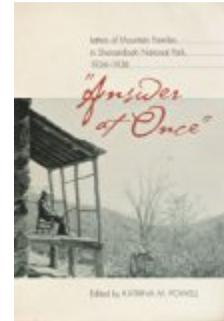
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Katrina M. Powell, ed. *"Answer at Once": Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park, 1934-1938*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. xx + 174 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2853-1.

Reviewed by Drew A. Swanson (University of Georgia)

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Voices of the Dispossessed

Beginning in the early 1930s, the Commonwealth of Virginia acquired land along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains for what would become Shenandoah National Park (SNP). Among the tracts that the state claimed under its powers of eminent domain were the farms and homesteads of five hundred families, and state officials—later with the assistance of the federal government, who assumed control of the park land—began the process of dispossessing these former landowners. *"Answer at Once"* is a collection of letters written by these park residents to various officials during the five-year removal period. These letters are the raw material from which Katrina M. Powell, the editor, drew her previous book, *The Anguish of Displacement* (2007). Powell has arranged these letters chronologically, she provides an introduction that summarizes the background and mechanics of the SNP formation, and she prefaces each year's collection of letters with a few summarizing paragraphs. Of particular usefulness are Powell's editorial comments, in which she links letter writers to other correspondents, explains obscure references, and often provides brief summaries of the writer's history with the state and the park service.

As a scholar of literature, Powell is particularly interested in literacy as a weapon of protest, and, following her work in *The Anguish of Displacement*, she makes much of the collected letters "as acts of resistance" against political and economic domination (p. 20). She asks the reader to look beyond the phonetic spelling and unusual sentence structures and gaze at

the rhetorical devices and logic of the writers. She concludes—convincingly—that these letters were quite effective mediums of communication, conveying park residents' beliefs and arguments to officials, even if in the end they could do little to prevent removal.

The quotidian nature of many of the letters become poignant through repetition. Unsure of their legal rights while they remained on their farms, many of the park's residents wrote for permission to carry on the business of their lives. They asked park officials about the legitimacy of cutting dead wood for fuel, picking apples and peaches from abandoned orchards, removing wire or building materials that park workers planned to destroy anyway, and moving into abandoned homes that remained sturdier or more weatherproof than their current abodes. The combined effect of these letters is an—often unspoken—assertion of the morality of the dispossessed and the inhumanity of the bureaucratic system that governed removal. Residents asserted their rights through appeals to historic use, common sense, and mercy, and their requests were frequently denied. Although Powell in her introduction and commentary is careful to emphasize the difficulties that park officials faced, the letters themselves suggest that dispossession was even more difficult for Shenandoah residents than it had to be. Collectively, these letters "serve as cautionary tales about the enormous psychological, economic, political, and social impacts of displacing families" (p. 162). This conclusion supports the argument of a number of historians—

including Durwood Dunn, Michael McDonald, John Muldowney, Margaret Brown, and Anne Mitchell Whisnant—that the Appalachian dispossessions of the 1920s and 1930s for the sake of large federal projects, whether for the greater economic good or not, were often carried out in an insensitive, unfeeling, and heavy-handed manner.

The selected letters also do much to dispel the notion that the dispossessed were a homogenous population. SNP boosters had argued that only small, economically marginal farms would be affected by the park, and that these farm owners would be better off on new sites beyond the park's boundaries. The letters to park officials, however, came from school teachers, orchard owners, tenants, and a few business proprietors in addition to the prototypical Appalachian subsistence farmer. Some residents were in favor of removal and eagerly took the state's compensatory payout, while others bitterly opposed leaving their historic homes; some inhabitants meekly followed official rules and regulations, while others flouted outside authority. In short, there was no such thing as a typical park resident subjected to removal, nor was there a single response to removal. This conclusion will be nothing new to Appalachian scholars, who for decades have argued against any sort of universal stereotype of mountain people, but it further displays the diversity of even the most remote and agricultural stretches of

the southern mountains during the early twentieth century, and does so through mountain folks' own vernacular eloquence.

In many cases, the reader may wish for a little more information about officials' responses to the letter writers. How successful were these various petitions, and how did those in power interpret their requests? Powell provides some commentary in her editorial notes, and occasionally cites brief passages from responses, but the reader—who in this case is a sucker for narrative—is often left wanting to follow the thread of the story. What happened to these families after dispossession? Powell also does not explain her methodology in selecting certain letters while omitting others. Even if the omitted letters proved boringly repetitious, that very repetition would speak volumes about what residents wanted, and why. *Answer at Once* already includes more than half (186, by the reviewer's count) of the 300 extant letters in a slim volume—165 pages of text and commentary—so a book including all the letters should not have proven an unwieldy tome. But this is nitpicking. Powell has assembled, edited, and interpreted a wonderful collection of primary sources from Depression-era Appalachia, and the resulting book should prove a valuable resource for scholars of a variety of topics, from forcible removal to the eastern national parks.

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