

## **"AT THE VERY MOMENT THE ACCIDENT HAPPENED: " Coping With Changes in Physical and Imagined Landscapes Along Railways of the American Appalachians**

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In the mid- to late nineteenth century, the building of trans-Appalachian railroads through rugged terrain required engineering feats that, to many observers in the United States, were as impressive as the powerful locomotives those roads were designed to carry. Grading and laying of track in mountain areas required contractors to go to unusual lengths to not only build iron bridges and trestles across gaping divides but also cut timber, dig ditches, and blast cuts and tunnels in order to create usable roadbeds on steep terrain.

The changes that the landscape underwent in rural upcountry areas and small towns required of residents and railroad workers a variety of mental, physical and legal adjustments. Fences and overpasses, for example, led to visual obstructions that could be hazardous at intersections, particularly in areas where railways curved. Likewise, a cut or removal of a natural barrier could flood nearby farmland during heavy rains. When they went to town, farmers had to learn to judge the speed of oncoming trains.

Leisure class Americans from larger, urban areas often held a perspective that differed from that of their upcountry counterparts. Consumers of travel brochures and "local color" fiction often saw the interaction between the manmade and natural landscape in romantic terms as new infrastructures and their perceived dominance over time and physical space became the stuff of wonders for tourists to observe on vacations.

This paper marks an attempt to contrast the literary and promotional depictions of the new physical and cultural landscapes with written records of the challenges that people in rural areas encountered toward the turn of the twentieth century, from loss of control of their physical spaces to fatal accidents during routine errands. In addition to pertinent secondary literature, I plan to examine primary sources including novels, travel narratives, short stories and state government reports from upcountry areas of North Carolina and New Hampshire, the states in which Appalachian peaks reach the highest elevation in the United States east of the Mississippi River.