

# CONTEXT CLUES

**LIZ SARGENT APPLIES  
HER RESEARCH SKILLS  
TO UNCOVER HIDDEN AND  
COMPLEX LANDSCAPE  
NARRATIVES.**

BY KEVAN WILLIAMS

**T**he heavily wooded picnic area at Humpback Rocks is a sometimes lonely space, and rarely used compared to the visitor center just a couple of miles north on the Blue Ridge Parkway. As a problem, an underused picnic glade can be approached many ways, but Liz Sargent, FASLA, who prepared a cultural landscape report for the Humpback Rocks area, based her recommendations on the history of the place. “The campgrounds and the picnic areas were designed at a time when people had different-sized cars, had different lifestyles, and wanted to use the landscape in different ways,” Sargent explains. She relied on historic plans for the parkway’s construction and landscape management and a knowledge of shifting alignments of the nearby Appalachian Trail to understand how this humble parking area had changed over time. She recommended selective clearing, not so much a change but a respectful

LIZ SARGENT, FASLA

## EARTHWORKS AND TOPOGRAPHY



**ABOVE**  
The relationship between the landform and topography and Yorktown Battlefield earthworks.

**OPPOSITE**  
Soils associated with the Yorktown Battlefield landscape.

rediscovery of the space's earlier, more open character, built on an appreciation of the details, large and small, that shape our landscapes.

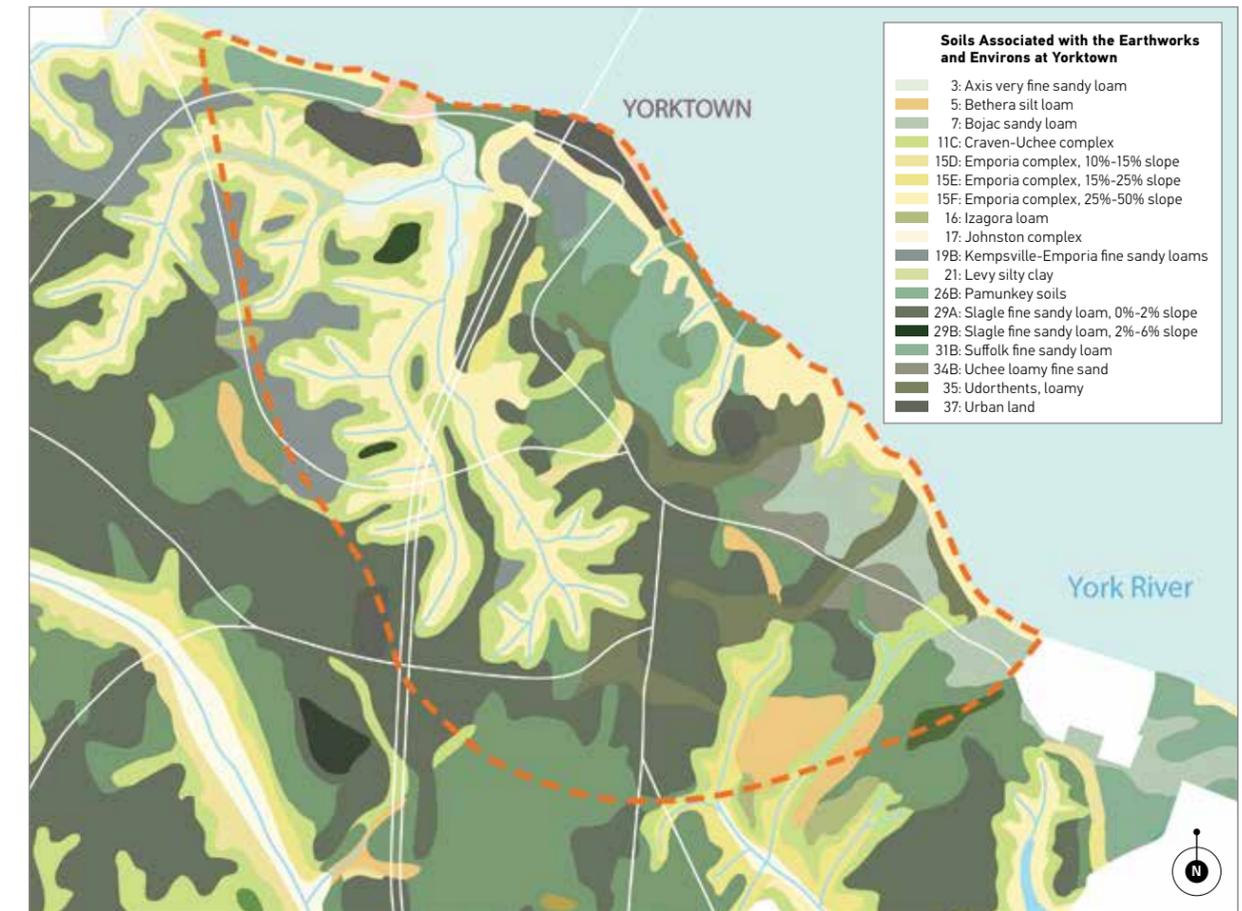
The principal and sole employee of Liz Sargent HLA works from home in a cozy, light-filled studio fashioned from a single-car garage on a residential street in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her firm has no website or social media presence. Instead, Sargent relies on word of mouth among the network of collaborators she has built over 25 years in practice. Her overhead and affect are modest, but Sargent is a prolific figure in the realm of cultural landscapes.

She has worked on cultural and historic landscape projects all over the country, including more than 50 National Park Service sites and battlefields, campuses, cemeteries, and other historic sites—as well as dozens of National Historic Landmarks, the highest order of recognition a historic resource can receive in the United States. And there are other high-profile projects that bear her mark. Sargent also served as the lead landscape architect on the team that developed a conservation management plan for Louis Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. She led an inventory of cultural landscapes at Yellowstone National Park

and developed a preservation master plan for the campus of Clemson University in South Carolina. Along the way, she has quietly reshaped the way historic and cultural landscapes are recognized.

Rob McGinnis, FASLA, principal of Robert McGinnis Landscape Architects, has collaborated with Sargent since the early 1990s. In describing her work, he emphasizes the breadth of Sargent's portfolio and the strength of her research, which, he says, give her practice unusual authority on quite singular types of projects. "The ability to work with such wide and diverse landscapes—

## SOIL PROFILE



JESUS NAJAR

JESUS NAJAR

geographically, time period, stylistic, vernacular, high design—it's not just that she's a generalist," McGinnis says. "Part of it is—what gets you up in the morning—is the challenge of addressing these landscapes with a process and a perspective that is informed by working so broadly."

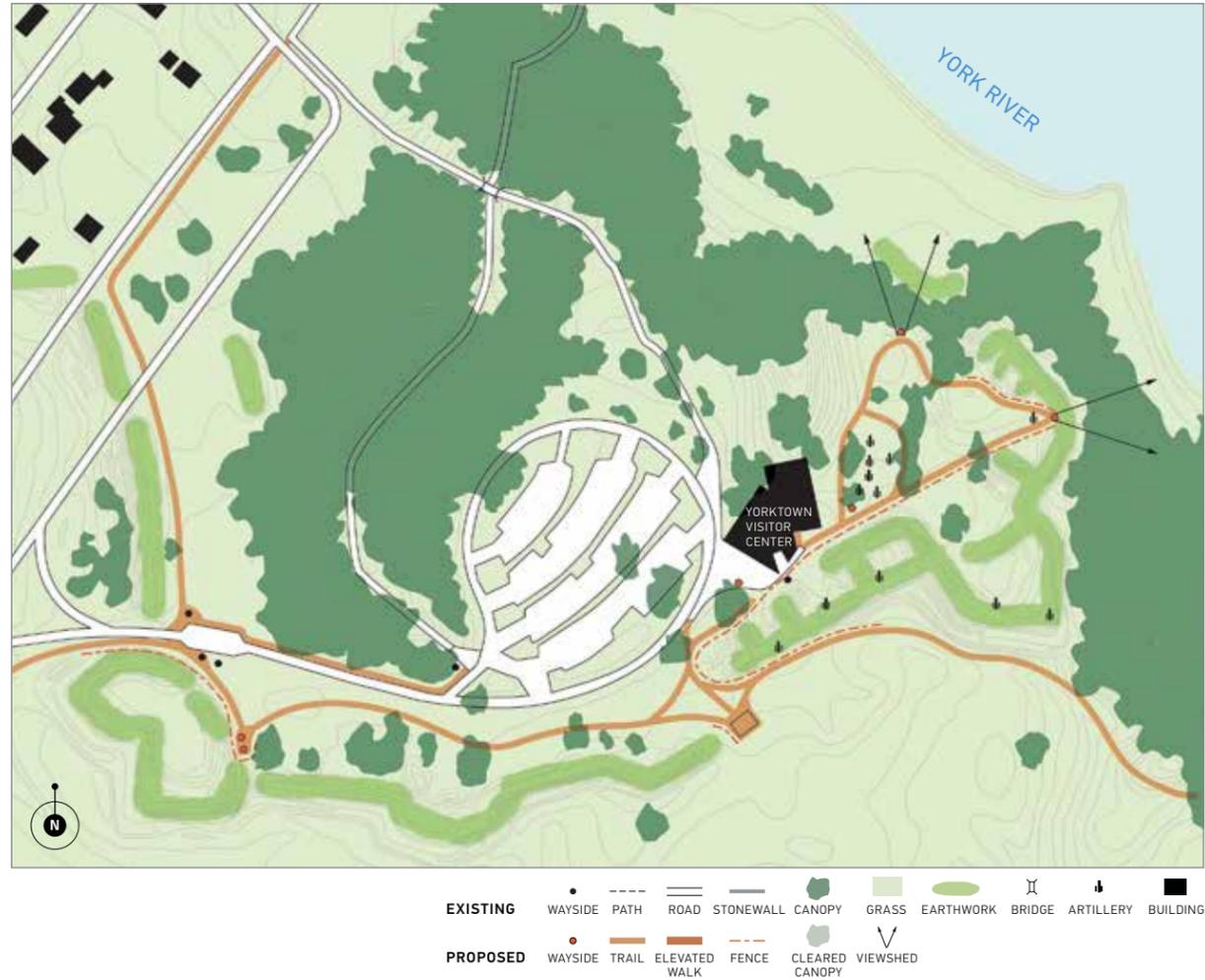
After receiving her master's degree in landscape architecture from the University of Virginia in 1991, Sargent worked for Land and Community Associates, a firm that became an early leader in the cultural landscape field. McGinnis also worked at LCA, and attributes the focus on process to the influence of Robert

Melnick, FASLA; Tim Keller, FASLA; and Genevieve Keller, Honorary ASLA, principals at the firm who shaped his generation of cultural landscape practitioners. The principals, he says, had a "less predetermined analytical approach" to cultural landscapes and were "more open-minded in allowing a fresh perspective on a resource."

Before pursuing her MLA, Sargent studied at Connecticut College, receiving a bachelor's degree in both botany and American history, an education that she has folded into her practice of interpreting the relationships among physical, ecological,

and social dynamics that have shaped cultural landscapes. For example, Sargent explains that Civil War battlefields "were places where something happened, and there doesn't necessarily need to be anything there except the environmental conditions, the combination of natural and cultural conditions, that led armies to end up meeting in certain places, and there are certain landforms and landscape types that were used in battles in certain ways." At Yorktown Battlefield, Sargent created an earthworks management plan that interpreted the successive layers of military activity and commemoration and interpretation at the site.

## MANAGEMENT PLAN



**ABOVE**  
The plan for managing the earthworks proposes an elevated walkway for viewing.

She recommended the use of viewing platforms and careful clearing to reveal the spatial relationships that shaped the site's settlement and fortification. Sargent also proposed illustrating the spatial effects of artillery by using vegetation of contrasting texture or color to mark the distances they could fire. These interpretive strategies were overlaid by recommendations for management and planting that preserved the earthworks through the use of low-maintenance native grasses that required less mowing.

Sargent's work illustrates an expanded conception of the possibilities for

cultural landscape interpretation. Standards for documenting and nominating places to the National Register of Historic Places are generally biased toward structures and designed landscapes (or collections thereof), emphasizing qualities like style when describing their historic integrity. Those who document landscapes that don't fit neatly into that mold, like Sargent, have had to work creatively to adapt to changing conceptions of sites. "Those [standards] are our framework. We might start with [them]...but we have the skill level and the credibility to manipulate that process," McGinnis says. McGinnis sees growth ahead

for the cultural landscape field, as it extends beyond the criteria established by the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior that have defined much of the field's output to date. He cites the applications of cultural landscape research methods to assessments that increasingly look more like master plans than reports, or in his own work, that are incorporated into urban design.

Over the course of her career, Sargent has applied her knowledge as a researcher to increasingly large and complex sites. One of the most significant projects she's completed



"WE NEED TO PRESERVE THE MOST IMPORTANT OF OUR HISTORIC RESOURCES."

—STEVEN KIDD, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



was the recent study of the Blue Ridge Parkway's historic resources. Although Sargent had worked previously preparing cultural landscape reports on some of the parkway's individual sites, such as Humpback Rocks and Peaks of Otter, both in Virginia, the new study, the Blue Ridge Parkway Survey and Assessment, completed in 2016, encompassed the entire 469-mile-long scenic corridor that runs from Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. It took four years and cataloged approximately 1,000 historic resources and grappled with the ephemeral

views and verges that define the parkway's driving experience. It also accounted for the variety of strategies that have shaped its half century of development. One significant challenge was coordinating with federal and both Virginia and North Carolina state preservation agencies when developing the inventory of parkway features, which added complexity.

The report's immediate benefit is that it aids in making decisions about park maintenance. Steven Kidd, who is a cultural resource specialist and archaeologist for the National Park Service, served as an

archaeologist for the Blue Ridge Parkway during the period of Sargent's work. "We have a limited budget, and we need to preserve the most important of our historic resources," Kidd explains. Even in draft form, the report was being used to prioritize work on structures that were defined as contributing to the parkway. But defining what constituted an essential structure was complicated by the park's long development history, not least in its later phases, Sargent says. "Some people would say, 'What's that modernist aspect doing here?' We were able to say it really was an essential part of the parkway," she says.

**TOP, LEFT AND RIGHT**  
Proposed overlooks move foot traffic off fragile earthworks and provide an overview of the battlefield's spatial relationships.

**BOTTOM, LEFT AND RIGHT**  
A model of the site's terrain is proposed that provides visitors with an overview of the battlefield around them.

SONIA BRENNER

LIZ SARGENT, FASLA, PHOTOGRAPHS; SONIA BRENNER, ILLUSTRATIONS

# BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

PARKWAY LAND USE MAP, 1943–1974



**ABOVE**  
Twenty-six tunnels were constructed as part of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

**RIGHT**  
The parkway's numerous overlooks are an important type of historical resource.

"My personal philosophy is we don't often look at these sites as museum pieces," Sargent says. "But we like to look at them as living landscapes, and there is a need to accommodate contemporary needs, but as well, to make sure that we preserve inherent values." In the case of the parkway, Sargent addressed its history of development, from its rustic conceptions and the landscape architect Stanley W. Abbott's original alignments and "plumbs," illustrating the landscape character of the vegetation and openings along the parkway. She also examined more contemporary elements such as midcentury modern visitor centers and lodging,

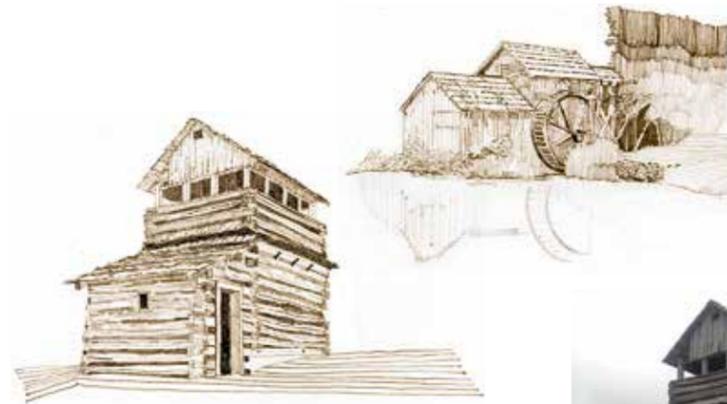


and the dramatic Linn Cove Viaduct, a quarter-mile-long segment of roadway built in 1987 that floats above the slopes of Grandfather Mountain on only seven piers.

Describing this corridor as a cohesive landscape is also bringing new conceptual challenges in formally

recognizing that identity within the conventions of historic structure and landscape documentation. "We have a blueprint in that Skyline [Drive] was listed as a National Historic Landmark," Kidd explains. But Skyline, in Shenandoah National Park, is only 105 miles long—less than a quarter the length of the parkway—and was

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT; COMMONWEALTH HERITAGE GROUP, BOTTOM RIGHT



begun and completed in the 1930s, unlike the successive eras of the parkway's development, which don't appear at first to be harmonious.

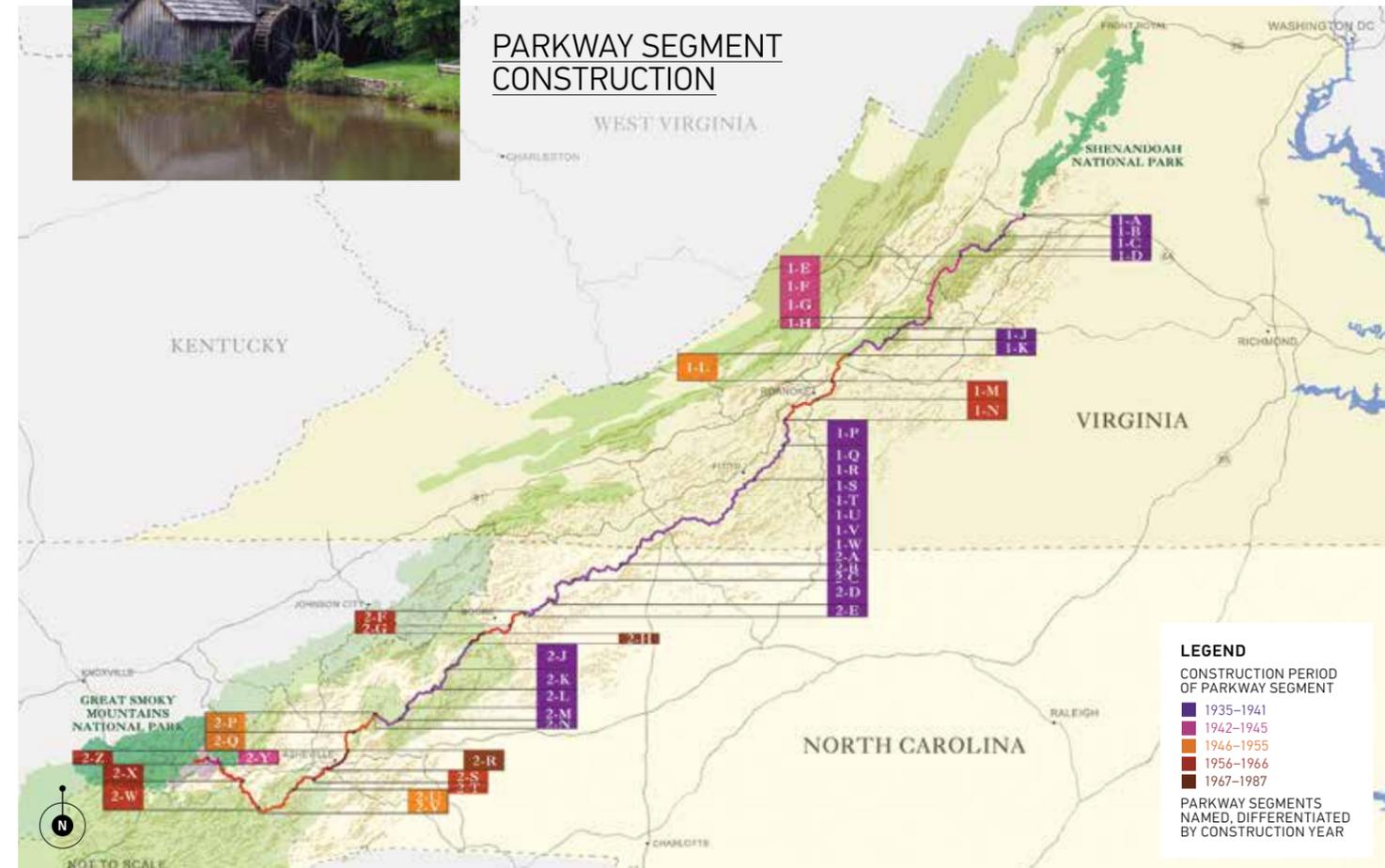
"In addition to the complexity of the resource, one place people keep getting bogged down is in the layered aspect of the parkway's history, since it was built in several stages over a 52-year period," Sargent says. She refers to the work of the landscape historian Ethan Carr, FASLA, in documenting the importance of Mission 66, a federal initiative to

**LEFT**  
Kirsten Sparenberg Brinton's drawings of contributing structures, such as Groundhog Mountain Lookout Tower (left) and Mabry Mill (right) help document the character of the parkway.

**BELOW**  
The parkway was built in many phases over time, resulting in a multilayered landscape.



PARKWAY SEGMENT CONSTRUCTION



WISS, JANNEY, ELSTNER ASSOCIATES, INC., PHOTOGRAPHS; KIRSTEN SPARENBERG BRINTON, ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAP



**ABOVE**  
Careful management of vegetation to frame distant views is an essential part of the Blue Ridge Parkway's design.

modernize the National Park System for its 50th anniversary that focused especially on visitor centers and other amenities supporting automobile tourism. "Trying to get management sold on some of the Mission 66 structures as historic and as character-defining for the parkway was a bit of a challenge, but I think we did it," Kidd says. In this broader light, the parkway as it exists today isn't simply an unfaithful realization of Abbott's initial vision, but an evolving dialogue about recreation in America. The Blue Ridge Parkway's Mission 66-era elements, Sargent says, "helped to take the idea of this recreational motorway to that

next level, the supersonic motorway that brought people through the landscape and helped improve efficiency" in response to larger crowds and changing patterns of use. "[The parkway report] was just trying to unify everyone's understanding of this place, because people hit these things from different angles, and something about the cultural landscape process synthesizes things in a way that no other study really does," Sargent says.

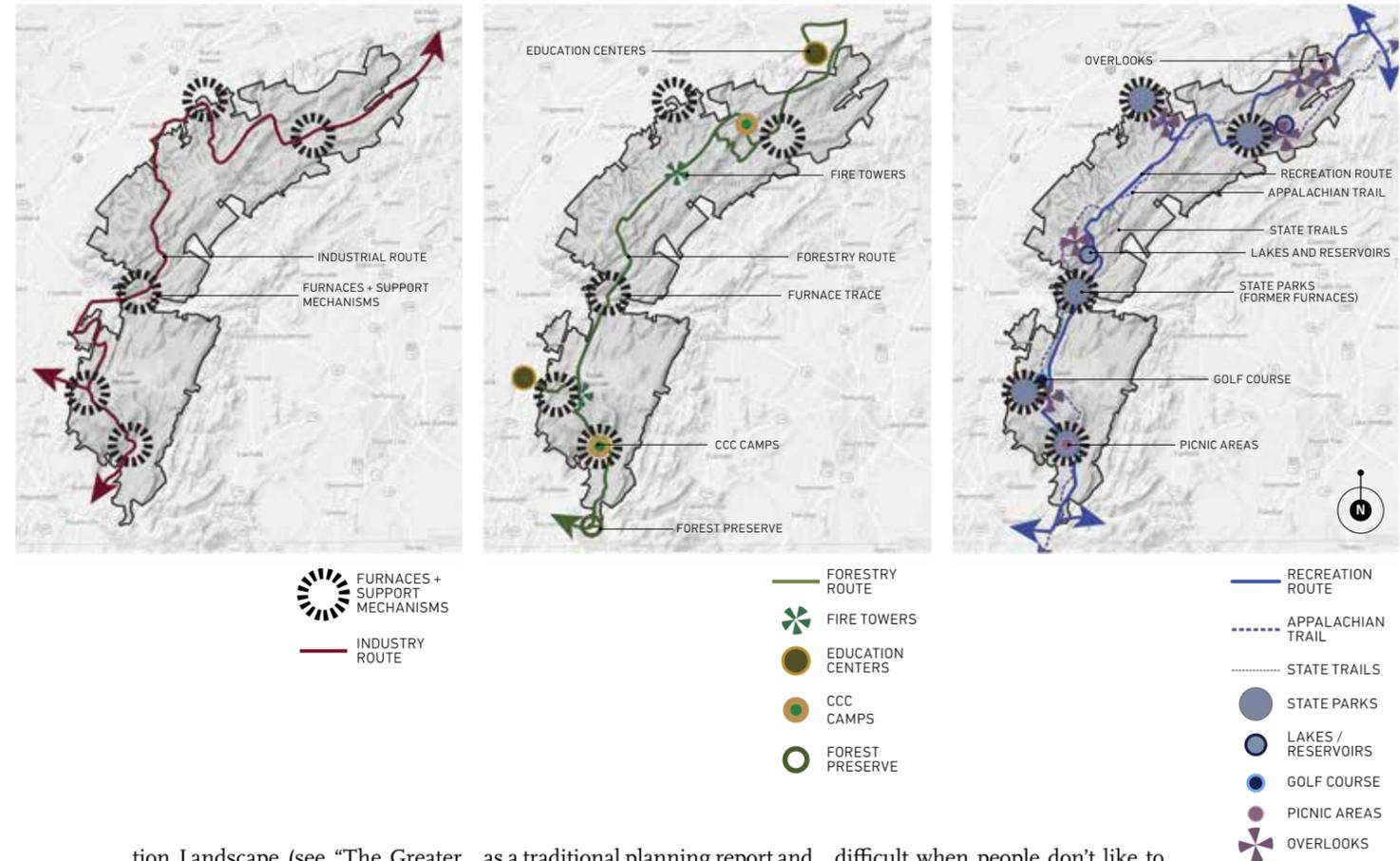
Sargent's report on the Blue Ridge Parkway describes the site as an evolving spatial dialogue that reveals changing attitudes toward

travel and recreation. "Because of my work with cultural landscapes, which are often palimpsests of layers of cultural use over time, I embrace the idea of articulating, interpreting, and revealing layers of history in the landscape," she says.

In 2012, Sargent partnered with Heritage Strategies, LLC to develop a cultural landscape assessment for the 85,000-acre Michaux State Forest in Pennsylvania. The team had two broad goals: to support a future management plan for the state forest, and to document major historic and cultural themes in the 400,000-acre South Mountain Conserva-

# MICHAUX STATE FOREST

## HISTORICAL THEMES AND FEATURES



tion Landscape (see "The Greater Margins," *LAM*, May 2016), which includes public and private lands. South Mountain is one of seven regional conservation planning areas in Pennsylvania focused on natural resource stewardship, and Sargent and other team members analyzed historical patterns of development as well as ecological and geologic activities in the South Mountain region, the northernmost stretch of the Blue Ridge.

Rather than making specific recommendations or an inventory of specific features or properties, the assessment balances functioning

as a traditional planning report and telling the broader and more accessible environmental history. The assessment will aid the South Mountain Partnership, a public-private partnership between the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and numerous regional organizations with planning by developing a cohesive sense of place that derived directly from the region's unique resources. Katie Hess, the director of the South Mountain Partnership, says one of the goals of the project is to "develop a societal culture of conservation" in the area. "That's very

difficult when people don't like to be told what to do—not that anyone does," Hess says. "This is simply another tool to reveal information to individuals and encourage them to be responsible stewards and empower them."

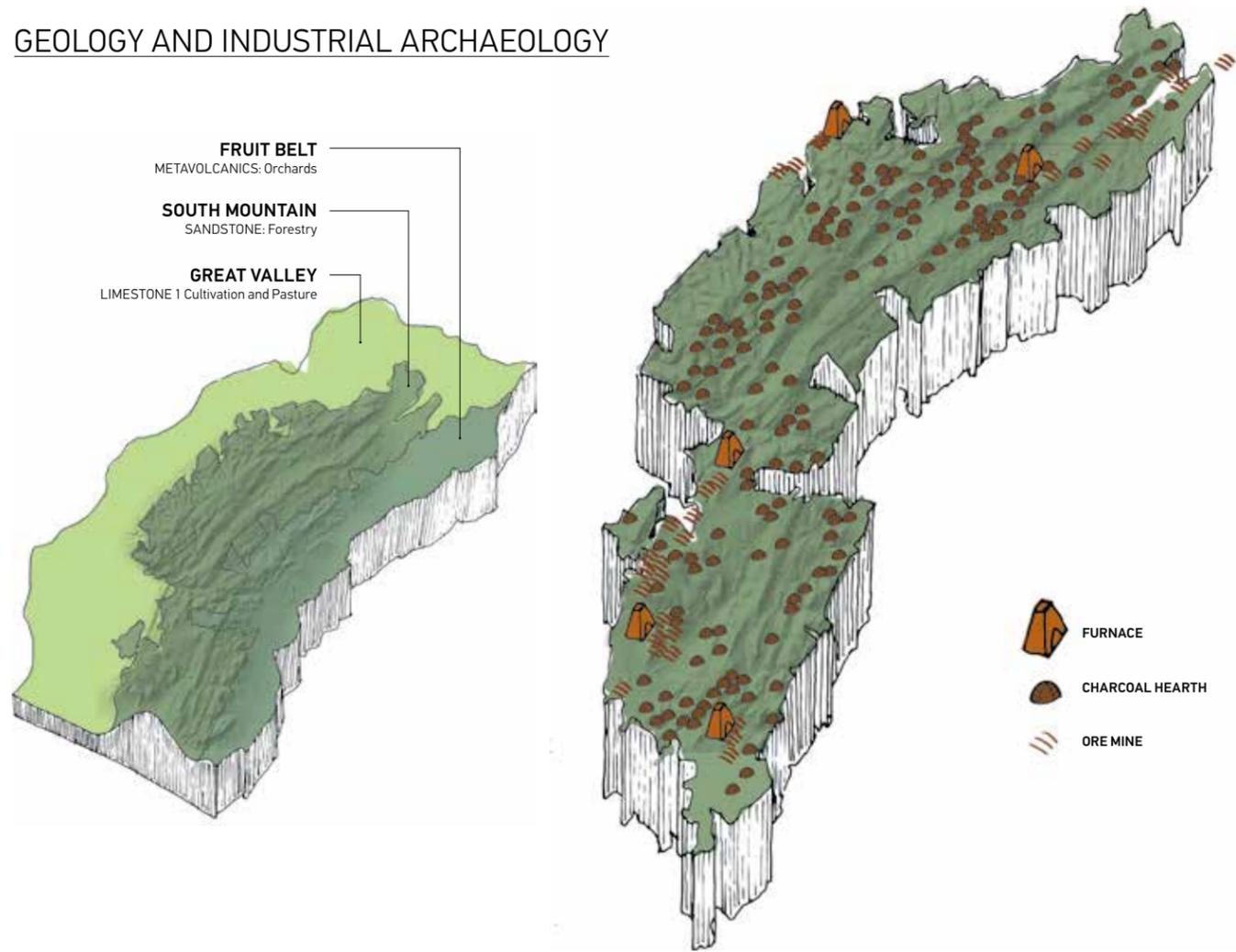
Peter Benton, an architect with Heritage Strategies, led the Michaux State Forest team. "A lot of what we were trying to do was tease out the history of this place, and how it relates to the state and national context," he says. The mountain was an early location for iron mining and processing, and is covered by thousands of charcoal hearths, in addition to the railroads,

**ABOVE**  
Driving trails that interpret the region's major historic themes are being developed as part of the recommendations.

COMMONWEALTH HERITAGE GROUP

JENNIFER TROMPETER

## GEOLOGY AND INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY



**LEFT**  
The South Mountain region's underlying geology is a major factor in shaping the region's agriculture and land use.

**RIGHT**  
Remnants of iron mining and processing are found through Michaux State Forest.

work camps, and logging roads that supported them. After it was cut over during the mining era, the area became an important site for the development of forestry practices in Pennsylvania, and ultimately a recreational destination. With Sargent, the team identified four major themes that describe the patterns of landscape history in the region—mineral extraction, forestry and conservation, recreation and health, and the impact of government—and the structures and landscape features that represent each theme. These themes point back to the resources of the mountain itself, illustrating deep connections between the an-

cient geology of the place and its cultural evolution. "How the mountain has been used over time is inseparable from economies, landscape patterns, and the social issues related to the surrounding, larger landscape," Benton says.

Telling the history of South Mountain in this way illustrated that the mountain is visually and ecologically prominent for the surrounding region, but also essential to the region's cultural character, an important way of connecting to the private landowners who own much of the region and will play critical roles in developing a culture of conserva-

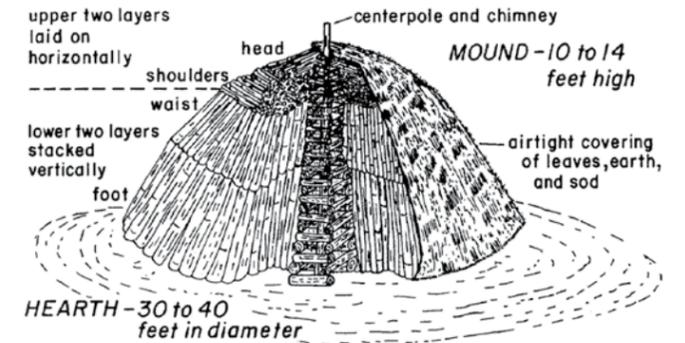
tion. "I think that cultural resources are a way to reach really rural, older populations here, because it represents what they feel they're losing," Hess says. "It represents a time that they feel disconnected from, and that perhaps no one younger than a certain age gets, and so I find that being about railroad systems and the iron ore industry really helps to open some doors."

Interpretation was a major focus of their work with Michaux State Forest itself, which is a recreation destination and thus an economic resource vital to the region. With the forming of a cohesive narrative,



**LEFT**  
At Caledonia State Park, an iron furnace has been preserved and used to interpret the region's industrial history.

**BELOW**  
Thousands of charcoal hearths are scattered throughout the South Mountain landscape.



LIZ SARGENT, FASLA, LEFT; PENNSYLVANIA GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RIGHT

STUDIOTENIS

the team hopes to make the region a more comprehensible destination, Sargent says. "We're unifying the understanding of the place, and the interconnectedness of the stories, and then making recommendations about how to tell the stories, where to tell the stories, and how to connect things that comprise the stories."

The project, which was funded by South Mountain Partnership, also helped to build dialogue with natural resource managers about how to account for historic resources. "We talked with one of the state foresters, and he's looking for guidance on tak-

ing the way that they've always managed state forests, and looking at a more sustainable future that looks at the cultural landscape," Sargent says. She identifies issues such as controlled burns and invasive species removal that could affect cultural landscapes if those landscapes aren't documented, as well as opportunities for alternative landscape strategies in light of new challenges such as climate change.

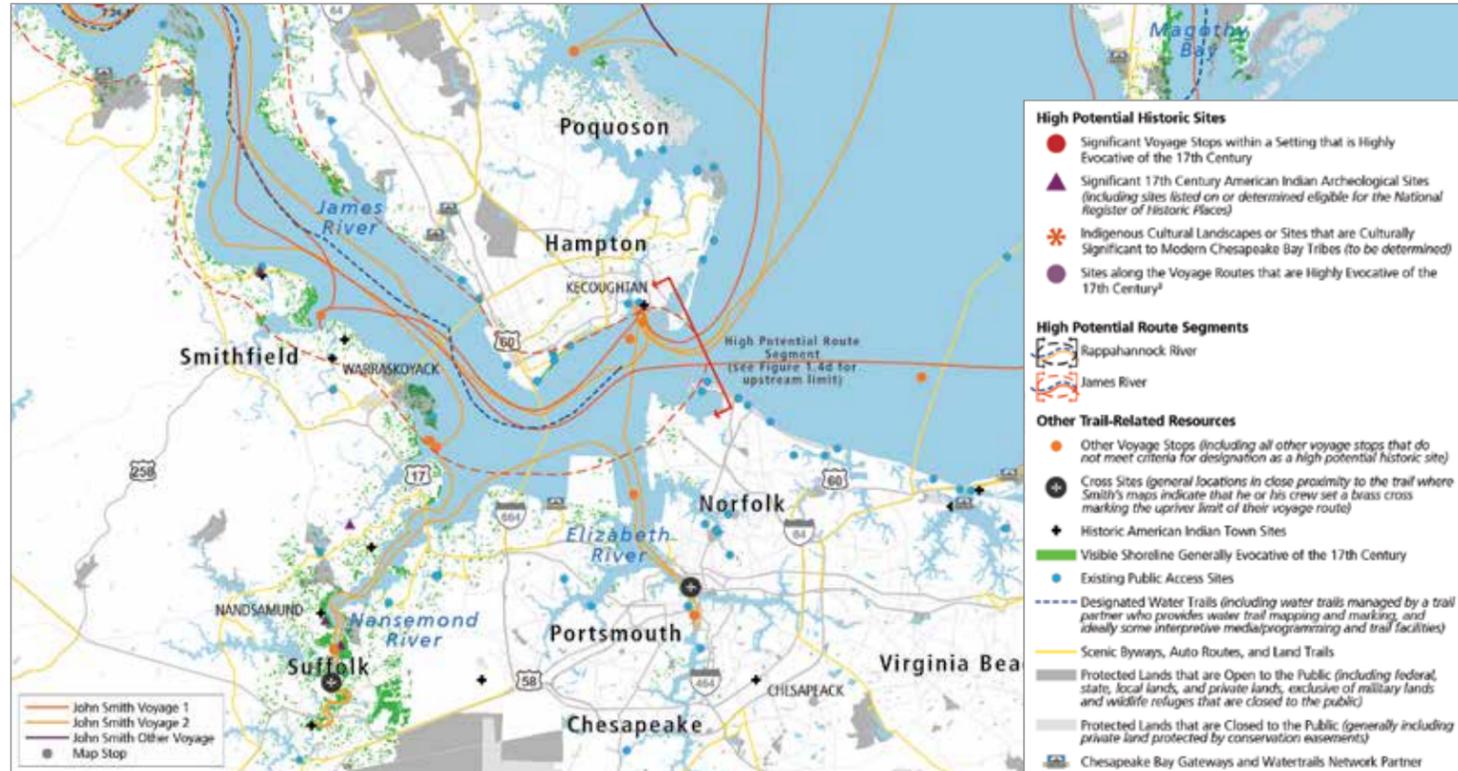
In 2017, Sargent started working on a new project that offers a window into the emerging directions for interpreting and protecting cultural landscapes as historic resources:

the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. Sargent is working as a subconsultant to the multidisciplinary firm Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, helping to identify resources along this 3,000-mile network of waterways across five states plus the District of Columbia that might be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The trail will focus on interpreting the landscapes of Chesapeake Bay and numerous tributaries as Smith encountered them in the early 1600s. "One of the historic contexts that we are considering is about the interactions between John Smith and his

# CAPTAIN SMITH TRAIL



TRAILS AND HISTORIC SITES (DETAIL)



**LEFT**  
Sargent consults with a park ranger while doing field work at Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

**OPPOSITE**  
A view from Marshy Point, along the northern section of the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.

party and the American Indians, and what effect that had on the landscape,” says Bethany Serafine, a National Register historian for the National Park Service.

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake trail is composed entirely of a network of water trails, presenting new challenges in determining important features and protecting them. “Bodies of water aren’t technically supposed to be something you nominate to the National Register,” Serafine says. The team’s task is to develop an approach to these sites that builds on the National Register’s framework, account-

ing for places that are historically significant, especially indigenous cultural landscapes, that may not contain the types of structures and features the program traditionally documents. “I think there are many people who are trying to figure out how to broaden our understanding of the value of landscape in cultural lifeways and how to establish metrics for evaluating significance,” Sargent says. One possible strategy Sargent is considering is comparing contemporary landscapes to understandings of local ecology and plant communities to determine how well these landscapes reflect 17th-century conditions.

“Working with indigenous cultural landscapes really forces you to question assumptions, change your mind-set, and consider other ways of looking at the interplay between people and the environment,” Sargent says. “This approach should extend to every cultural landscape project, such that we continue to ask questions, and try to get to the ‘why’ of things.” ●

KEVAN WILLIAMS IS PURSUING HIS PHD IN THE CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA.

SARAH ROGERS, TOP; NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BOTTOM

MELISSA DIRR GENGLER