



Natural Bridge in Virginia was created by nature.
Credits: Jackie Sheckler Finch

Natural Bridge Created By Nature

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SHENANDOAH VALLEY, Virginia – With enemies hot on their heels, the Monacan Indians ran into a dead end. All seemed lost when they saw a huge canyon draped in fog blocking their escape. Falling to their knees, the Monacans called upon the Great Spirit to save his children.

When they looked up, the fog had lifted and a gigantic stone bridge now spanned the impassable chasm. Crossing safely to the other side, the Monacans watched as their pursuers turned back, afraid that the wondrous arch might not support their weight as it had the Monacans. Thereafter, the Monacans called this revered gift "The Bridge of God."

"That's the legend," said Don Henk, assistant general manager at the Natural Bridge. "There are so many stories and so much history about the bridge. It is really one of our natural wonders."

The statistics are staggering – Natural Bridge is 215 feet high (55 feet higher than Niagara Falls), 40 feet thick, 100 feet wide and spans 90 feet between its massive walls. Composed of solid grey limestone, the arch weighs about 36,000 tons.

Through millions of years, nature has crafted the awesome bridge using a simple mountain stream as a tool. Cedar Creek slowly wore away the stone on its way towards the sea.

No one knows who and when European colonists discovered the Natural Bridge. The landmark was probably "officially" discovered around the 16th century, Henk said. After all, the first permanent English settlement in the New World was in 1607 at Jamestown, Virginia, by the James River 340 miles from the bridge.

GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS HERE

The earliest documentation of Natural Bridge was in the 1742 diary of settler John Peter Sallings. A youthful George Washington, engaged by Lord Fairfax to survey his property, is said to have been an early visitor to Natural Bridge.

"George Washington is supposed to have been the first to survey it in 1750. It is said that Washington left his initials 'G.W.' cut into the wall of the bridge," Henk said, gesturing to initials outlined in a white rectangle. The initials are carved about 23 feet above Cedar Creek on the southeast side of the bridge.

Shortly thereafter, Thomas Jefferson saw and fell in love with the great stone monument, calling it "the most sublime of Nature's works." In 1774, Jefferson purchased the bridge from King George III for 20 shillings.

"Thomas Jefferson didn't believe the government should own such a treasure," Henk said. "He felt that it should be in private ownership so that someone would be accountable for it and would preserve it for all to see."

In 1803, Jefferson had a one-room log cabin built near the site of the current hotel, keeping one room available for visitors. He kept a logbook in the cabin to record visitors and their comments. Among signers in the book were Henry Clay, Daniel Boone, Sam Houston, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Hart Benton, John Marshall, James Monroe and Martin Van Buren.

"The early Europeans who would come to America would go see Niagara Falls and Natural Bridge," Henk said. "Those were the two natural wonders that visitors wanted to see."

When Jefferson died in 1826, ownership of the bridge passed down to his heirs. It remained in the family until 1835 when Jefferson's heirs sold the bridge to Joel Lackland for \$1,500. Natural Bridge has remained in private ownership ever since.

Over the years, Natural Bridge has been commemorated in numerous photographs, paintings and writings. Noted American folk artist Edward Hicks used the bridge as the background for his popular 1830s painting, "Peaceable Kingdom."

In his 1851 classic novel, "Moby Dick," Herman Melville described the great white whale as rising from the deep, "for an instant his whole marbled body formed a high arch, like Virginia's Natural Bridge, and warningly waving his bannered flukes in the air, the grand god revealed himself, sounded and went out of sight."

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Today the Shenandoah Valley wonder continues to draw people from around the world and has developed into a popular complex with a conference center, 180-room inn, restaurant, gift shop, snack bar, cabins, Natural Bridge Caverns, Cedar Creek Nature Trail and Native American Monacan Village.

"Our goal in the village is to educate people as to what life was like for the Monacans in 1725," said Christopher Taylor, demonstrating how the Native Americans would have prepared their food and what they would have eaten. "The No. 1 food was deer, second was turkey, third was turtle, fourth was elk and fifth was bear."

About 90 to 110 people would live in an average village, Taylor said. A typical lodge would be covered with cattail plants to keep the structure warm and dry. "We built this one 10 years ago and have done very little maintenance to it," Taylor said. "It was covered with 37,000 cattails and we added 75 cattails last year."

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Carved into the limestone hill, Natural Bridge Caverns is noted for being the deepest commercial caves on the east coast. The caverns drop 347 feet – 34 stories - below the surface where the temperature remains a cool 54 degrees.

"People have been coming here for so long that we don't know who discovered the caverns or when," said guide Tom Price. "It's an important place for bats. About 3,500 bats winter here every year."

The 45-minute cavern tour includes such structures as the Colossal Dome room, Mirror Lake, Well Room and stalactites and stalagmites growing in the Canyon Room.

As darkness falls, Natural Bridge becomes the star of an awesome light, narration and music show. A longtime tradition, "The Drama of Creation" has been enjoyed since President Calvin Coolidge first pressed the button in 1927 to start the 45-minute show on the theme of the biblical creation.

In today's high-tech world, the simple illumination can still bring chills as lights play across the towering rocks and night birds add to the symphony.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Natural Bridge, (800) 533-1410, www.naturalbridge.va.com or the Roanoke Valley CVB, (800) 635-5535, www.visitroanokeva.com

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