

Section 4

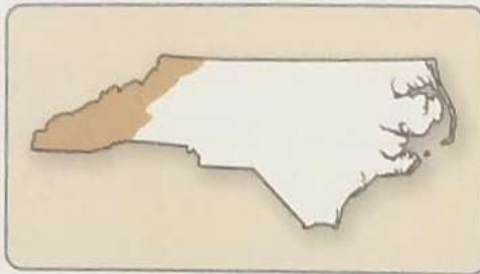
The Mountains Region

Opposite page, above: The Blue Ridge Parkway, begun during the New Deal era of the 1930s, takes tourists to most of the famous sites in the Mountains region. It has a 45 mile-per-hour speed limit.

Below: The views of the nearby mountains from parkway overlooks can be spectacular.

As you read, look for:

- the features of the Mountains region
- vocabulary terms **elevation, bald, cove**



Travelers from the east see North Carolina's mountains long before they cross into them. The mountains begin at the Blue Ridge, which sometimes towers from than 1,000 feet over the nearby Piedmont hills.

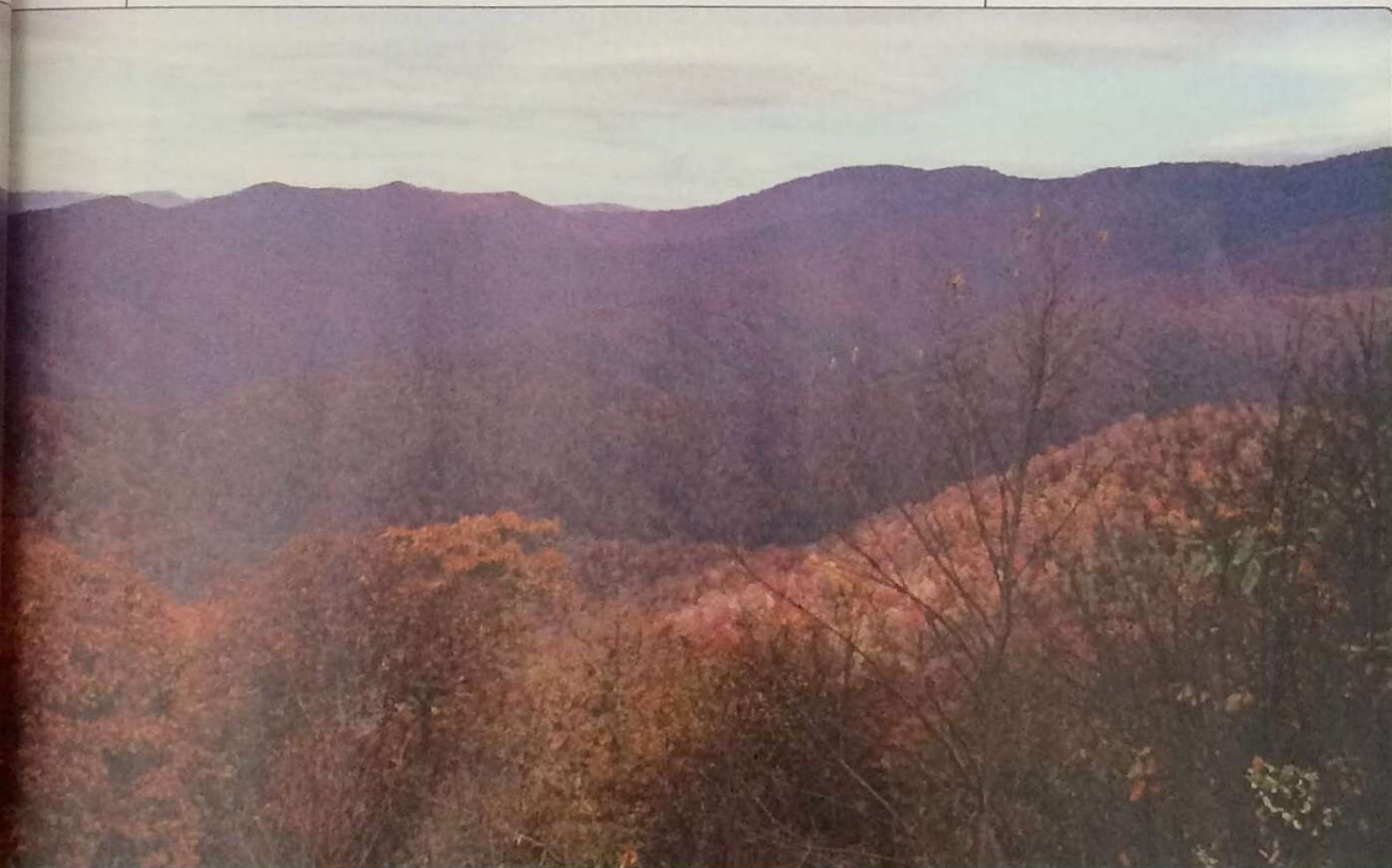
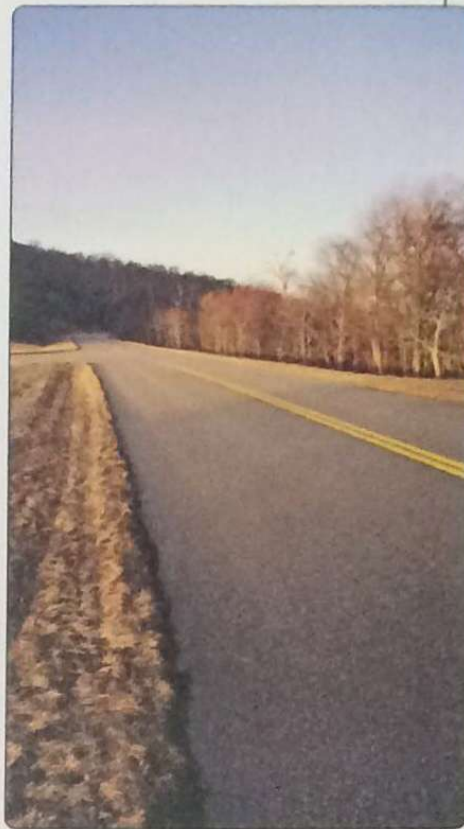


The Blue Ridge forms the eastern boundary of the Appalachian Mountains, some of the oldest in the world. Running along the ridge top is the Blue Ridge Parkway, a national highway that has some of the best views in the United States. The Blue Ridge divides the Piedmont from the Mountains region in the state. To the east are the foothills, a series of progressively higher hills, and to the west are different ranges of mountains that make up the western third of the state. The Continental Divide runs along the Blue Ridge. Streams flowing down its eastern slopes eventually became part of the Atlantic Ocean. Streams on the west side send water into the tributaries of the Mississippi River.

The Blue Ridge

The Blue Ridge gets its name from the fact that, at a distance, the mist evaporating off its slopes shimmers an aqua blue. The Blue Ridge runs from New Jersey into the Deep South. In North Carolina's western area, the Blue Ridge curves westward before nipping the very western edge of South Carolina.

Like the barrier islands, the Blue Ridge is really just one long landform, with peaks of various heights and gaps that, like inlets, both allowed and discouraged travel back and forth. For years, places west of the Blue Ridge were even more isolated than the barrier islands. Early settlers to the state had to cross lower points of elevation like Deep Gap



in Watauga County (to the east of the town of Boone today) to venture into the mountains.

Until the building of railroads in the late 1800s, travel over the Blue Ridge was expensive and laborious. One of the greatest feats in state history was the long effort in the 1870s to grade and tunnel through the Blue Ridge at Swannanoa Gap. More than 100 men died in the effort. The long wind of Interstate 40 up and down the Blue Ridge from Old Fort to Black Mountain parallels that route.

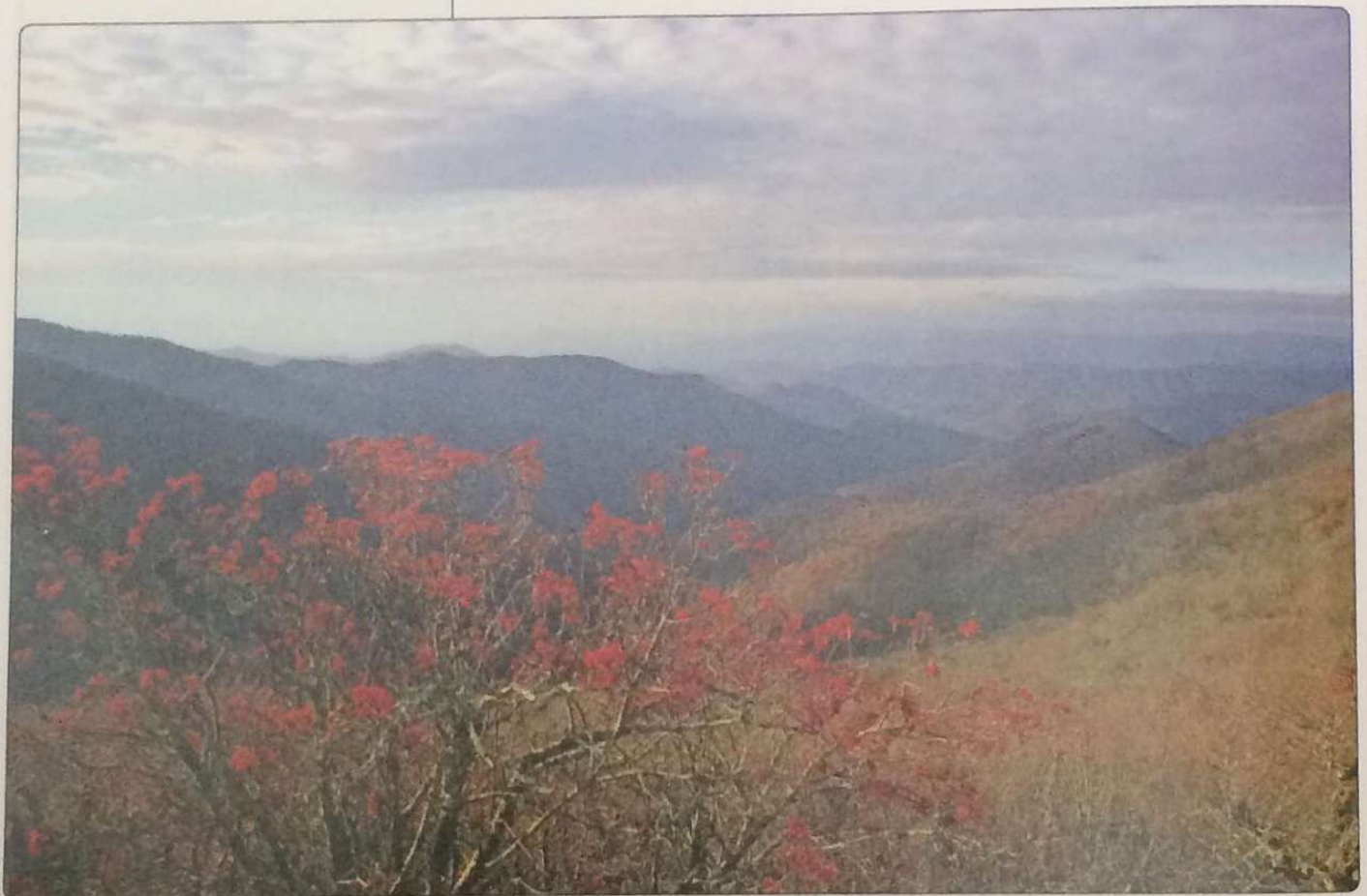
The Appalachians

The Appalachian range runs from New York to Alabama but spreads out the most and has its highest peaks in North Carolina. Forty-three mountaintops in the state are more than 6,000 feet above sea level. The highest **elevation** (height above sea level) east of the Rocky Mountains is Mt. Mitchell at 6,684 feet, although a half dozen other peaks are just about as tall.

There are more than a dozen different mountain ranges within North Carolina. Among the more notable are the Black Mountains, located just to the west of the Blue Ridge. The Black Mountains get their name from the dark shadows the mountains cast when summer thunderstorms threaten. Mt. Mitchell is the highest point of the Black Mountains.

Even more notable are the world-famous Great Smoky Mountains. They get their name from the evaporation of resin-filled dew off the needles of spruce and fir trees. When the mist rises, the resin makes

Below: This view from Craggy Gardens on the Blue Ridge Parkway shows the dark shadows on the mountainsides that gave the Black Mountains their name.





the mist look like smoke. The Smokies have one of the greatest variety of plants found anywhere in the world outside of the rain forest. More than four thousand different species have been identified. Two of the highest mountains in the state, Clingman's Dome and Mt. Guyot, are located in the Smokies.

South of the Smokies are the Balsams, home to a large number of the most mysterious places in the mountains, the balds. **Balds** are places, usually above 6,000 feet in elevation, where few trees ever grow. The ones that do take root never rise far above the ground. The bald habitat includes many of the flowers and shrubs found throughout the mountains, including the rhododendron and the mountain laurel. No one has ever explained why trees fail to grow on the balds. Some scientists believe it has something to do with the rocky soil. Others say the cold winds keep the plants from thriving. North Carolinians once believed that the Cherokee kept livestock on the mountain tops, which in turn kept plants from growing. But the Cherokee are long gone from parts of the mountains, and the balds have stayed the same. One of the best-known balds is Wayah Bald, just off the Blue Ridge Parkway. *Wayah* is a Cherokee word for "wolf."

Mountain Streams and Rocks

The Mountains, like the rest of the state, has interesting waterways. Where rivers on the Coastal Plain run east, and the Piedmont rivers turn south, mountain rivers run north and west. The New River starts just west of the Blue Ridge and flows straight north out of the northwestern corner of the state. Also flowing north is the French Broad River, which starts in the Balsams and meanders its way across a broad valley between

Above: The bluish haze that gives the Great Smoky Mountains their name can be seen from the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Did You Know?

Geologists believe the New River is actually very old; in fact, it may be the oldest river in the United States.

CAROLINA CELEBRITIES

Dr. Elisha Mitchell

Most North Carolinians know that the highest point in the state, and the highest in the eastern half of the United States, is Mt. Mitchell. Some state residents remember that the mountain is 6,684 feet above sea level. Often, North Carolinians do not know just how hard it was to figure out that number, and how Elisha Mitchell, for whom the mountain was named, literally gave his life in the effort.

In 1817, Mitchell came to the University in Chapel Hill to be its mathematics and natural philosophy professor. At that time, “natural philosophy” meant anything connected to science, so Mitchell had to teach a wide range of subjects. He also conducted religious services on Sundays (he was also a Presbyterian minister) and during the week kept the books and groomed the grounds of the University.

Mitchell also worked to connect the two sections of the state—east and west. In 1846, Mitchell surveyed a route that would connect Raleigh to Asheville. Although the road was not immediately built, North Carolinians today enjoy its more modern version: Interstate 40.

While in the west in the 1840s, Mitchell put his math and geology skills to work studying the Black Mountains. He soon concluded that the highest part, then known as “the Black Mountain,” was higher than Mt. Washington in New Hampshire. Three times he made measurements with surveying instruments and calculations by hand. He believed the peak was 6,708 feet above sea level.

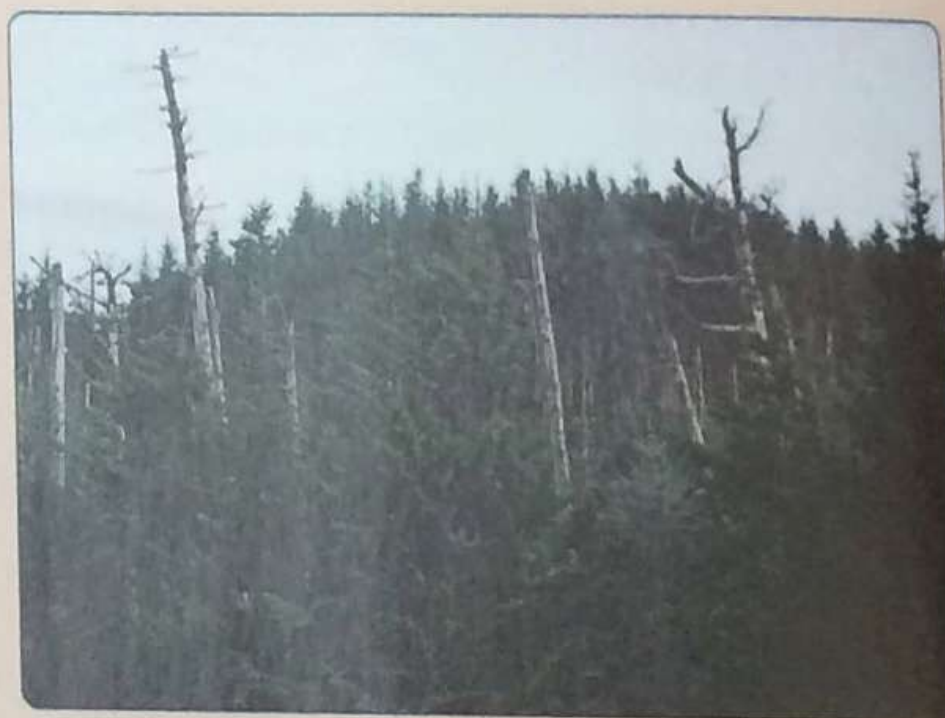
Not every North Carolinian believed Mitchell. Residents around Asheville believed that the Great Smokies might be higher. Like a good scientist, Mitchell went back to the Black Mountain to recheck his results. In June 1857, he was alone on a lower slope of a mountain and was caught in a



thunderstorm. His companions found him drowned in a pool at the bottom of a waterfall. Apparently, he had slipped on wet rocks and fallen to his death.

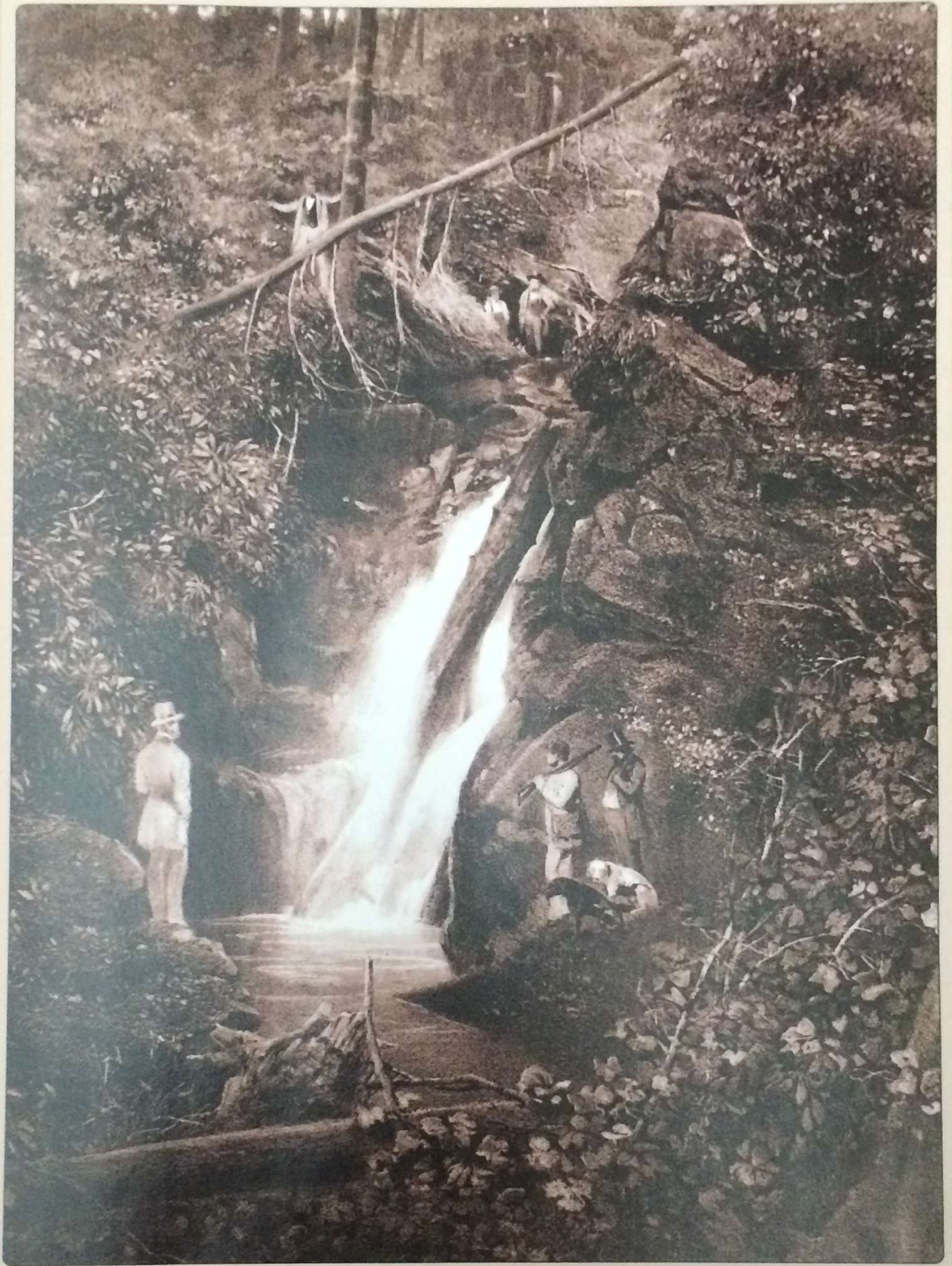
Professor Mitchell was buried at the top of Black Mountain in 1858. Soon after, North Carolinians began to call the peak “Mt. Mitchell.” In 1882, government scientists used better instruments to prove that Mt. Mitchell was the highest peak in the eastern United States. In the early 1900s, North Carolina made the mountain a state park. It also remains a place where education never ends, as Professor Mitchell

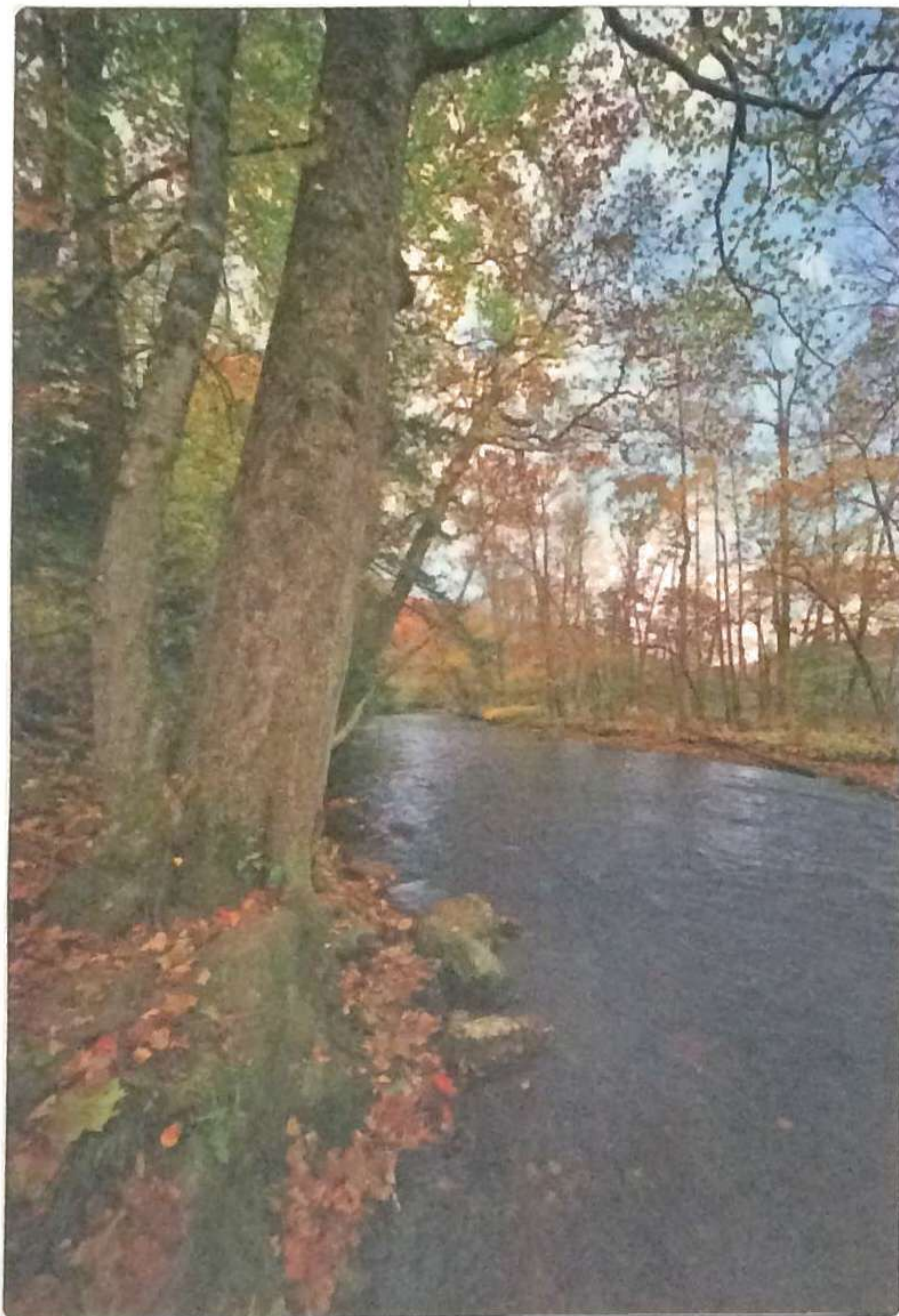
would have liked. Scientists are currently studying its trees to learn the effects of acid rain on the environment.



Top: Dr. Elisha Mitchell. **Above:** These dead trees on the peak of Mt. Mitchell may be due to beetles.

Opposite page: Oscar M. Lewis’s lithograph of the falls where Dr. Mitchell fell to his death shows his ghost standing nearby.





Above: The Oconaluftee River flows through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. **Right:** Beautiful Lake Lure is ringed by mountains, providing a favorite destination for many.

the Black and Balsam Mountains. Asheville, the largest city in the Mountains, is located in this basin. The tributaries of the Tennessee River, in particular the Little Tennessee and the Nantahala, form a river system that flows all the way to the Mississippi River. The long-time inhabitants of the mountains, the Cherokee, built most of their villages along the Tennessee River tributaries.

More than one hundred lakes are to be found in the Mountains, but almost all of them are manmade. Lake Lure, constructed in the 1920s, is considered to be one of the most beautiful lakes in the world. It has been the setting for a number of motion pictures. Fontana Lake is one of the deepest lakes in America, having been built in steep mountain valleys during the 1930s in an effort to produce cheaper electric power. Fontana has the highest dam in the eastern United States.

The Mountains region is also full of scenic wonders, natural formations that are interesting just to see. Blowing Rock is a cliff so high above the nearby hills that updrafts of wind sometimes make rain and



HISTORY BY THE HIGHWAY

Asa Gray and Andre Michaux

N 18

ASA GRAY

American botanist and Harvard professor. In July, 1841, investigated flora of this region. He visited Grandfather Mountain.

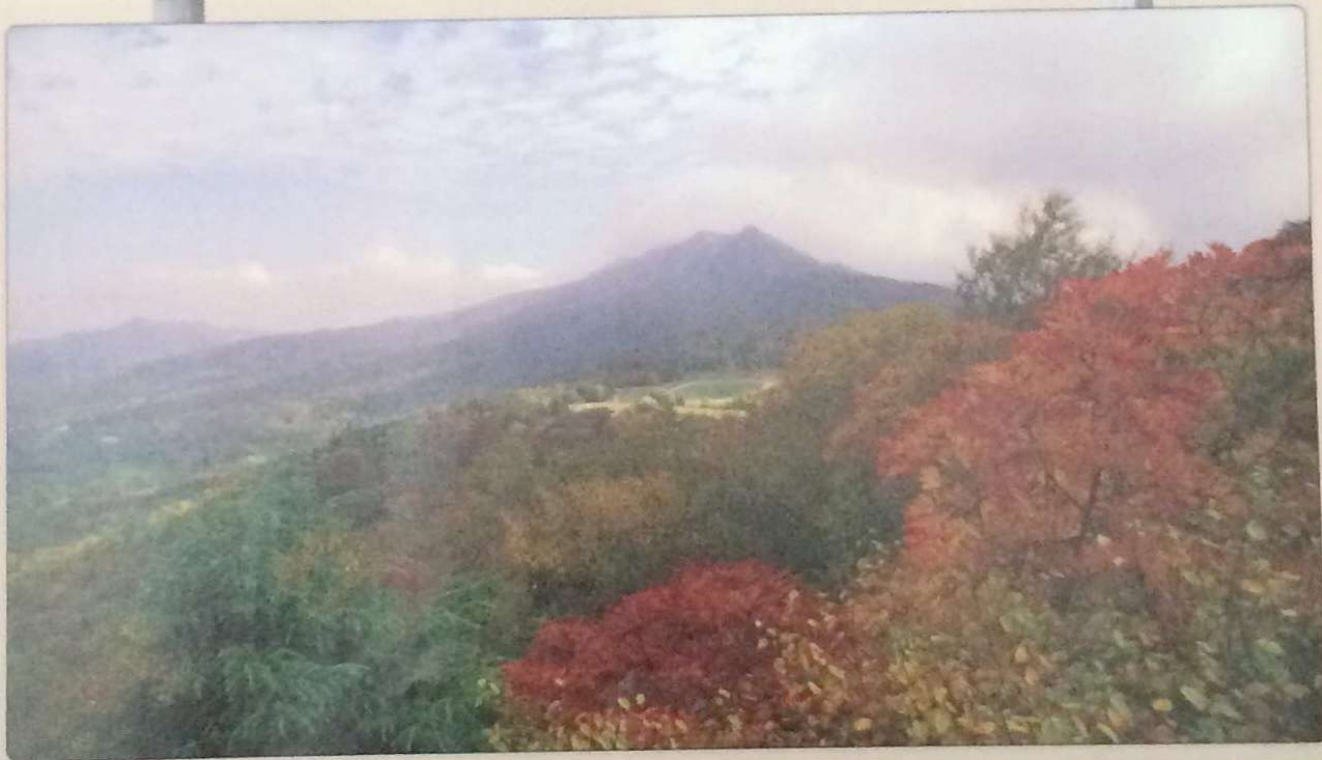
From early days, North Carolina has been renowned for the variety of its plants. Some of the pioneers of botany have visited the state, particularly the mountains in the Grandfather Mountain area. Andre Michaux came to locate plants to take back to his native France as proof of the greatness of the new United States. Asa Gray, the first Harvard College botanist, followed in his footsteps a half century later.

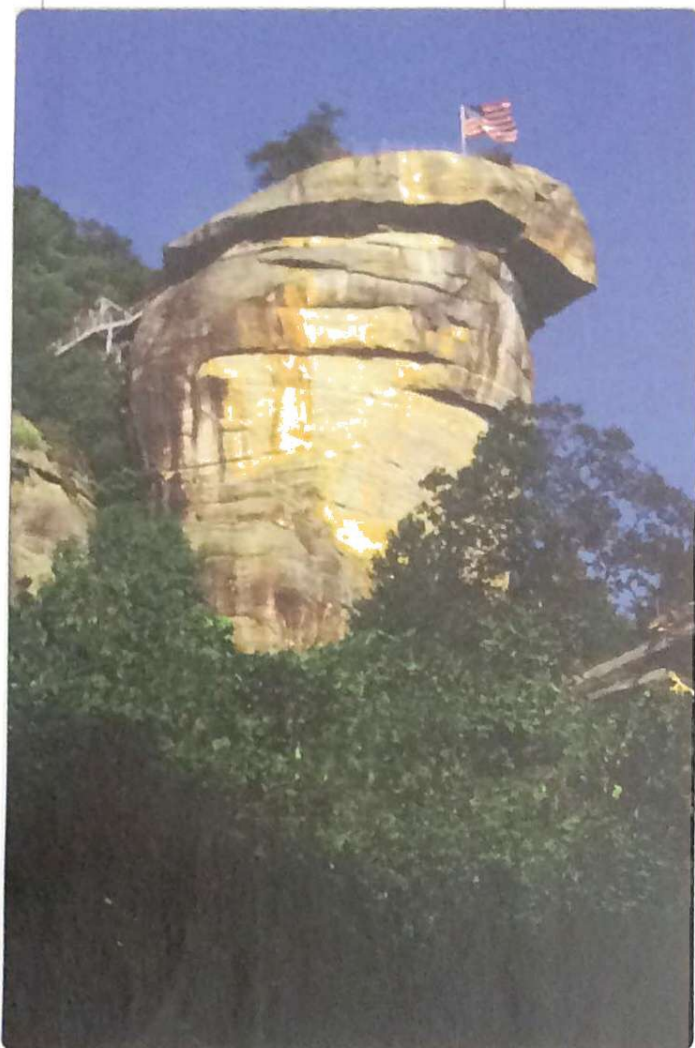
N 20

ANDRÉ MICHAUX

French botanist, pioneer in studying flora of western North Carolina. visited Roan Mountain. 12 miles north. August 16, 1794, & May 6, 1795.

Below: Grandfather Mountain, showing a "face" that gave it its name.





Above: Chimney Rock sticks out over the Hickory Nut Gorge south of Asheville. It has recently become a state-owned tourist site.

snow reverse course. Chimney Rock, a towering granite spire above Hickory Nut Gorge in the southern mountains, has been a great attraction for almost a century. Grandfather Mountain, in the northwestern corner, has habitats that attract thousands of tourists each year. Sometimes the natural wonders are helped by humans. There is an elevator deep inside Chimney Rock to help tourists get to the top, and Grandfather Mountain is noted for its “mile-high swinging bridge” that connects its twin peaks. The Nantahala River Gorge features some of the best rafting anywhere, which is made possible by the daily discharge of water from a power dam upstream.

The Mountains Economy

The Mountains region historically was never as populated or developed as the other regions of the state. The first settlers generally lived in **coves**, valleys where streams cut out swathes wide enough for farming. In coves like Valle Crucis, west of the town of Boone, little communities had schools, churches, stores, and mills. Yet, it was hard to get from one cove to the next, and even harder to get goods in and out of the mountains. Early on, farmers grazed livestock on lush mountain grass and then drove the cattle to coastal markets each fall. Because the mountains had a variety of plants, mountain families made money selling “roots, barks,

berries, and herbs,” plants with medicinal properties. More than two thousand “yarbs,” as they were called, could be found. Ginseng, used as a spring tonic in China, was the best seller.

In more recent times, tourism has become the largest part of the Mountains economy, with an increasing part given to people who actually retire to the region. Both retirement and vacation homes seem to be sprouting up everywhere. The most distinctive recent economic development has been the Christmas tree industry. This has been concentrated in Ashe and adjoining counties in the northwest corner of the state. The leading seller has been Fraser firs. Some tree farms even allow customers to cut their own and take them directly home during the holidays.

It's Your Turn

1. What is the significance of the Continental Divide?
2. What is the highest point in the state?
3. What are balds?