

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

NATURAL BRIDGE

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: NATURAL BRIDGE
081-0415
Other Name/Site Number: 081-0414 (Virginia Department of Historic Resources)

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: Intersection of Rt. 11 and Rt. 130 Not for publication:
City/Town: Natural Bridge Vicinity: X
State: VA County: Rockbridge Code: VA163 Zip Code: 24578

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: X
Public-Local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:
Category of Property
Building(s):
District:
Site: X
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing Noncontributing
1 2 buildings
1 3 structures
1 5 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic:	LANDSCAPE RECREATION/CULTURE	Sub:	Natural Feature Outdoor Recreation
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Current:	LANDSCAPE RECREATION/CULTURE	Sub:	Natural Feature Outdoor Recreation
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**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: N/A

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation:  
Walls:  
Roof:  
Other: Limestone

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

Natural Bridge, located in southern Rockbridge County, is a bridge of limestone carved by natural forces. The nomination covers 5.86 acres containing the bridge itself and viewsheds to the southeast and to the north. The historic condition of the bridge is unchanged, except that a variety of paths, railings, benches, markers, and other site improvements have been placed on the site to serve the needs of visitors. In addition, official markers have been placed at the bottom (geodetic survey) and at the top (U.S. Geological Survey bench mark) of the bridge. Although there are substantial buildings nearby, such as the visitors center, hotel, and museum, the only buildings on the site are two small noncontributing utility buildings out of sight on the top of the bridge.

The features of the bridge will be described in general, then as they appear from below, and finally by noting the site features on the top of the bridge.

The bridge is a block of solid limestone spanning the chasm between two steep slopes. Cedar Creek runs under the bridge; it was the gradual erosion from this creek that formed the structure. The bridge forms a semi-elliptical arch. Because of the irregularity of its shape, many different measurements have been quoted. Dimensions commonly are given as a height of approximately 200 feet high (198.5 feet by a 1927 measurement<sup>1</sup>; 205 to 270 feet according to Thomas Jefferson<sup>2</sup>; and 215 feet according to measurements made by French engineers during the American Revolution<sup>3</sup>), a width varying from 150 feet at one end to 50 feet at the other, and a thickness (height) of the rock of approximately 50 feet. The unbroken span has dimensions of approximately 90 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 50 feet deep.<sup>4</sup>

The eastern boundary of the site lies approximately where the path from the visitors' center opens to a stunning first view of the bridge. This point is reached by a concrete pedestrian walkway that follows the curve of the east wall of the canyon. The pathway continues under the bridge, where it crosses Cedar Creek, and on the north side of the bridge runs along the west canyon wall. A low two-foot-high mortared stone wall flanks the creek side of the path, while a taller wall of similar construction forms a boundary along some portions of the slope side. Green aluminum and wood benches face the bridge in a single row on the southeastern approach and in two parallel rows on the north side. Where the path crosses Cedar Creek under the bridge itself, low guardrails have been placed on both sides, consisting of stone pillars approximately two feet tall joined by two treated wood railings approximately four inches square and eight feet long. There are two markers on the path. Almost directly under the bridge a sign marks a rock in which a National Geodetic Survey vertical control mark has been embedded (Monument #2 on the 1996 survey). The inscription reads "G.W. 1750 / 1984." This apparently is the same stone

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<sup>1</sup>Chester A. Reeds, *Natural Bridge and Its Environs* (Lynchburg, Virginia: Brown-Morrison Co., Inc., 1927), 22.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 24.

<sup>3</sup>(no author), *The Story of Natural Bridge* (Natural Bridge, Virginia: Natural Bridge of Virginia, Inc., 1947), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Reeds, 22.

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uncovered in 1927 bearing the initials "G.W." and a surveyor's cross, a photograph of which appears in the Reeds book.<sup>5</sup> The sign also brings to the visitor's notice a carving in the far bridge face which is advertised as the handiwork of George Washington. Outlined in a white box are the initials "G.W." carved in a spot 23 feet high. The other sign, on the north side of the bridge, describes attractions farther down the path (and outside of the project area). Benches, guardrails and interpretive signs that are located within the boundary have not been individually enumerated in the resource count as they are not substantial features.

The boundaries of the bridge are closed to maintain security. A fence varying in materials and ranging from eight to ten feet in height runs along the sides and top of the bridge. This fence is considered a non-contributing structure. Several locked gates provide access to either side of the top of the bridge and to two small noncontributing utility buildings.

The top of the bridge serves U.S. Route 11. This two-lane highway sits within a right of way that normally is 80 feet wide; however, the bridge is narrower than this in places and as noted on the survey, the State retains only the surface reservation (not fee simple ownership) necessary to use the bridge, which in some cases is little more than the width of pavement for the two lanes. At the top of the bridge, the shoulder is approximately four feet between the road way and the fence. Marked on the survey as Monument #1 is a U.S. Geological Survey bench mark that was set on the top of the bridge in 1905 and bears the inscription "1,150 feet above sea level" (although it apparently is approximately 10 feet from the very highest level).<sup>6</sup> A billboard advertising the site sits atop the fence beside the road as it crosses the southeast corner of the bridge. The billboard and roadbed are considered noncontributing structures.

The top and sides of the bridge are covered with scrub forest, mostly maples and other deciduous species as well as a few cedars and pines. None of the trees are very tall and the area is rocky, with numerous outcrops.

Conduit pipes for electrical wires run along the top of the bridge on both sides, serving speakers and lights. The two utility buildings (each less than 10 feet square) in unobtrusive locations on each side of the top of the bridge also serve these electrical needs.

Attached are a 1996 survey of the site, a 1927 sketch map, and the U.S.G.S. map.

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<sup>5</sup>Reeds, 59 (Figure 80).

<sup>6</sup>Reeds, 22.



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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.****Summary**

In the Colonial and Early National periods, the Natural Bridge of Virginia ranked with Niagara Falls on the top tier of the most notable natural wonders of the New World. The Bridge drew a steady stream of artists and well-connected travelers and its image was popularized by widely read travel accounts published in America and abroad. To Americans and Europeans of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the Bridge epitomized the search for the sublime. Its stunning setting and purity of form made it one of the most recognizable and celebrated icons of the wonders of nature. In this preeminent role, Natural Bridge contributed to the way that citizens of the new nation developed a national self-identity tied to the seemingly boundless landscape of the New World. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Bridge continued to be not only a popular tourist destination, but also a source of inspiration for writers and painters. In these artists' varied interpretations from the late 1700s to 1900, Natural Bridge, itself unchanging, reflected the progression of Americans' ideas about nature and man's place in the world.

**Historical Background**

Natural Bridge meets National Historic Landmark Criterion 1 for its contribution to the broad national patterns of United States history and can be understood in terms of Theme III -- Expressing Cultural Values. Specifically, the Bridge, as a symbol of the wonders of nature and as a tourist destination, contributed to the way in which Americans created a national self-identity based on the New World's impressive natural landscape. The period of significance for Natural Bridge begins in the Colonial era with its discovery by Euro-Americans in the mid-1700s (first written mention was in 1742) and extends through the Early National period until approximately 1860, reflecting that travel accounts, art, and literature into the 1850s used Natural Bridge as a symbol of nature on a national scale. It was in this time period that the nation was establishing itself and its own unique culture and looked to such marvels of the American landscape as Natural Bridge for inspiration.

Natural Bridge, along with Niagara Falls, was "on the itinerary of every European who explored the newly settled regions of America in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries."<sup>7</sup> Both were quintessential wonders of nature that came to symbolize the new nation. As tourist attractions and through published images, they were widely known to the general public. Their geographic spread at the edges of the frontier helped demonstrate the breadth of the New World's natural features. For these reasons, Natural Bridge and Niagara Falls had similar meanings at the crucial time of the formation of the national identity. Yet the two sites differed in other ways and the reasons for their importance diverged in later years. Niagara Falls was remarkable for its scale and for the opportunity it offered for man to combine technology and nature. As a tourist site, Niagara Falls lent itself to commercialization and industrialization, and it eventually became

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<sup>7</sup>Pamela H. Simpson, *So Beautiful an Arch: Images of the Natural Bridge 1787-1890* (Lexington, Virginia: Washington and Lee University, 1982), 3.

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the centerpiece of the American Grand Tour, which concentrated on the northeastern states. By contrast, Natural Bridge was simple and pure. Its integrity was in its form, which has not changed. Its magic was, and is, in the mystery of the formation and the serenity of its setting. This made the *image* of Natural Bridge more important than how many tourists actually visited the site. Particularly in the early years, Natural Bridge was a fully American icon, situated in Virginia in the center of the new republic and with ties to two of the nation's most famous founding fathers. Its later history as a tourist destination reflects its southern agrarian location, so that while it remained a critical draw throughout the nineteenth century, particularly for artists, it never became a large-scale resort.

### **Natural Bridge's Role in Forming a National Self-Identity**

In the Early National period, Natural Bridge was one of the nation's most recognizable icons of the wonders of nature. Such quintessential examples assumed nationalistic meaning, as the quest for cultural and national symbols settled on nature for America's identity.<sup>8</sup> These prodigies of nature "seemed to prove that in America Nature expressed itself on a grander scale than elsewhere."<sup>9</sup> In response, Americans "sought their identity in their relationship to the land they had settled."<sup>10</sup> They could take pride in "[h]ow much more sublime the newly discovered wonders of America must have seemed to the European travelers."<sup>11</sup> Tourist sites were especially important to this self-definition as Americans created attractions to rival or exceed those offered in the Old World. American painters and writers, trained on the European model, participated in this "self-conscious creation of America's own tourist attractions."<sup>12</sup> It was through the human activity of illustrating and describing these natural phenomena that they took on cultural significance.<sup>13</sup>

Natural Bridge, paired as it was with Niagara Falls as the predominant natural phenomena of the New World, was influential in this process. The location of Niagara at the northern border and Natural Bridge in the midsection extended the geographic boundaries of the wonders of nature and gave all America full claim to a sublime natural setting.

Natural Bridge also was associated with two of the premier figures of the forming of the new nation, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Washington is claimed to have surveyed

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<sup>8</sup>William Irwin, *The New Niagara: Tourism, Technology, and the Landscape of Niagara Falls 1776-1917* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), xiv.

<sup>9</sup>John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>10</sup>Sears, 4.

<sup>11</sup>Simpson, 3.

<sup>12</sup>Sears, 5.

<sup>13</sup>Sears, 72.

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Natural Bridge about 1750 but this almost certainly is not true because the site lies well south of the Fairfax line which it was his job to survey.<sup>14</sup> Two legends link George Washington to the Bridge. Widely accepted, though unsubstantiated, were claims that he carved his initials on a spot 23 feet up on the side of the Bridge and that he tossed a stone to the top. These legends are interesting for their use of the Bridge, a distinctive natural wonder that would have been familiar throughout the nation, as a prop for demonstrating the legendary physical strength of America's first president.

The link to Thomas Jefferson is more direct. He was the first owner of the Bridge and his enthusiasm for the site increased its fame at home and abroad. Jefferson probably viewed the bridge for the first time in August 1767, when he made notes in his Memorandum Book that became the basis for his description in *Notes on Virginia*.<sup>15</sup> He obtained 157 acres containing Natural Bridge in a grant from King George III dated July 5, 1774, and signed by Virginia Governor Dunmore.<sup>16</sup> In 1778, Rockbridge County was formed, so named because of the Natural Bridge within its boundaries.

Jefferson made at least three more recorded visits to the site.<sup>17</sup> According to Reeds, Jefferson not only surveyed the site himself in 1802 and made a map but the next year had a two-room log cabin built, one room of which was to be kept open for visitors.<sup>18</sup> A book left there "for sentiments" recorded such names as Marshall, Monroe, Clay, Benton, Jackson, Van Buren, and Sam Houston.<sup>19</sup> After financial difficulties in 1809, Jefferson tried to sell the land and for a time leased it for saltpeter mining and use as a shot tower.<sup>20</sup> In 1817, he agreed for a local freeman named Patrick Henry to live at Natural Bridge as a custodian of the property.<sup>21</sup>

Natural Bridge passed out of Jefferson family possession in 1835. Thereafter, tourism facilities were expanded and over the years Natural Bridge became a popular destination for the general public arriving not just by horseback but later by train and by car. Jefferson's views on the Bridge express one of the first attempts in America to establish a conservation easement. His

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<sup>14</sup>S. Allen Chambers, Jr., notes received April 1997. Furthermore, Natural Bridge is not among the sites listed in *The George Washington Atlas*, (edited by Lawrence Martin, Chief, Division of Maps, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1932 and reproduced by the Virginia Surveyors Foundation in 1995).

<sup>15</sup>Monticello Research Department, notes made April 5, 1995, and delivered to David Coffey.

<sup>16</sup>Reeds, 58.

<sup>17</sup>Monticello Research Department, notes made April 5, 1995, and delivered to David Coffey.

<sup>18</sup>Reeds, 59.

<sup>19</sup>Reeds, 59.

<sup>20</sup>Monticello Research Department, notes made April 5, 1995 and delivered to David Coffey.

<sup>21</sup>Monticello Research Department, notes made July 1995 and delivered to David Coffey.

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1814 lease specified protection for the Bridge<sup>22</sup> and the next year he wrote "I view it in some degree as a public trust, and would on no consideration permit the bridge to be injured, defaced or masked from public view."<sup>23</sup>

The new nation, having no ancient past, turned to the untrod, the virgin. As counterpoint to the fine-grained cultural sites of Europe, America offered the fresh, the bigger and better. Places such as Natural Bridge fed this urge to match European culture with the grandeur of American nature.

### **Natural Bridge as a Symbol of the Wonders of Nature**

From *Moby Dick* to travel publications to paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom, Natural Bridge has been used to portray the ultimate natural wonder. It inspired both reflection on God's supreme power and curiosity about the science of nature. The image of Natural Bridge was made famous by artists and by a stream of illustrious visitors.

Natural Bridge played this role most completely in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when it fit perfectly with the search for the sublime, as popularized by Edmund Burke's philosophical writings and practiced by European society. The impressive natural wonders in the New World were quite important to Europeans as well as Americans, for the vast wilderness of America presented new horizons in man's quest to understand his place in the world. Cultural historian William Irwin writes: "[I]n early-nineteenth-century American culture 'the sublime' implied not only magnificent scale, grandeur, and majesty, but also an aesthetic that relished the awesome, the untrammled, the terrifying, and the infinite force and energy of God. Sublime objects cut to the onlooker's psyche, inspiring sentiments that were both intensely embracing and repelling."<sup>24</sup>

Sublime objects were expected to evoke an intense emotional and religious experience. In fact, almost all early accounts of visitors to Natural Bridge use such words as "fear," "wonder," and "awful." The state of mind of these early viewers, as recounted in various sources, is almost always one of awe, with quite a bit of fear mixed in for those looking down from the top. One of the best examples is from Thomas Jefferson. In his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he gives an entire page to Natural Bridge, calling it "the most sublime of Nature's works....few men have resolution to...look over into the abyss. You involuntarily fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it. Looking down from this height about a minute, gave me a violent head ach (sic)... descending then to the valley below, the sensation becomes delightful in the extreme. It is impossible for the emotions, arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they

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<sup>22</sup>In an 1814 lease to Philip Thornton, Jefferson wrote "The said Philip covenants on his part that he ... will make no erection nor do any other thing which shall disfigure the said bridge as a natural curiosity; that he will commit no waste or destruction on the said bridge or lands...but that he will to the best of his power preserve the said bridge in its perfect natural and uninjured form." (notes from S. Allen Chambers, Jr.).

<sup>23</sup>Thomas Jefferson to William Carruthers, March 15, 1815 (Monticello Research Department, notes made April 5, 1995, and sent to David Coffey).

<sup>24</sup>Irwin, xv.

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are here: so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing, as it were, up to heaven, the rapture of the Spectator is really indiscrivable (sic)!"<sup>25</sup>

The Bridge also represented God's hand on earth. The "new Eden" of America was thought to have more direct and dramatic examples of God's work. The New York Christian Herald in 1826 noted that "[t]his great work of Nature is considered by many as the second great curiosity of our country, Niagara Falls being the first. This natural bridge is entirely the work of God. It is of solid limestone, and connects two mountains together by a most beautiful arch, over which there is a great wagon road...the awful rocks...none but the Almighty God could build a bridge like this. . . The view from below is pleasing, as the top is awful."<sup>26</sup>

The Bridge was doubly mysterious and awesome because early visitors did not have a scientific explanation for its formation. Henry Howe in his 1845 discussion of the Bridge further discusses how the nation's top two natural landmarks differ. He notes that Natural Bridge is higher than Niagara Falls and is "a greater curiosity and more an object of wonder...the Natural Bridge is nature like art." In his view, Niagara Falls has great magnitude, but Natural Bridge is the more compelling because it is not so understandable.<sup>27</sup>

Natural Bridge functioned as a gauge of man's place in the universe. Because it was so notable a natural wonder, changing views of it reflected changing views of nature and advances in science. At first some (including Jefferson) thought the Bridge had to be the result of a cataclysmic event. Later geologists put the cause as the gradual forces of erosion. One of the first of these was Francis William Gilmer, a geologist who visited the Bridge with Jefferson in 1815 and then delivered a brief treatise "On the Natural Bridge of Virginia" to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Gilmer discounted the theory of the Bridge being formed by a "sudden convulsion, or an extraordinary deviation from the ordinary laws of nature," suggesting instead that it had been "produced by the very slow operation of causes which have always and must ever continue to act in the same manner."<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Jefferson himself epitomized the dual fascination engendered by Natural Bridge as both a scientific phenomenon and an awe-inspiring icon. His description in *Notes on Virginia* veers

from detailed measurements and a literal description of the site to an ecstatic and enthusiastic detailing of the almost religious experience its viewing inspired.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 24-5.

<sup>26</sup>E.P. Tompkins and J. Lee Davis, *The Natural Bridge and Its Historical Surroundings* (Natural Bridge, Virginia: Natural Bridge of Virginia, Inc., 1939), 33-34.

<sup>27</sup>Tompkins, 11 (quoting from p. 457 of Howe's "Historical Collections of Virginia").

<sup>28</sup>Chester A. Reeds, *Natural Bridge and Its Environs* (Lynchburg, Virginia: Brown-Morrison Co., Inc., 1927), 60-61.

<sup>29</sup>Jefferson, *Notes*, ed. by Peden, 25 and 263-4.

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Art was the primary way in which Natural Bridge became known to a larger audience. The Bridge was one of the most drawn and photographed spots in America judging by the wide range of publications in which its image appeared. The catalog for a 1982 exhibit at Washington and Lee University entitled "*So Beautiful an Arch: Images of the Natural Bridge 1787-1890*" documents the many views, both literal and figurative, of the Bridge.

These varied interpretations of the Bridge by artists over three centuries not only represent distinct schools of art, but also reflect a progression of ideas about nature and provide revealing glimpses of society and technology. Renderings were made of the Bridge by a stream of artists from not only the United States but also western Europe and even Russia. Some of the more famous or distinctive of these images are described below, with notes from the exhibit book written by Washington and Lee University art history professor Pamela Simpson.

The first prominent advertisement of Natural Bridge was in *The Travels of Marquis de Chastellux in North America in 1780-82*. Chastellux had been in the party of forty members of the French Academy serving under the Count de Rochambeau. During the American Revolution, the French made two expeditions to the Bridge and their measurements and diagrams were widely circulated in Europe and America for many years.<sup>30</sup> The earliest published images of the Bridge apparently were three drawings done for Chastellux by the Baron de Turpin of the (French) Royal Corps of Engineers in 1786 (English edition published in 1787.)<sup>31</sup> (Figure 1)

Isaac Weld, an English topographical artist and writer, traveled in the United States from 1795 to 1797. His published account of his journeys, including an engraving labeled "View of the Rock Bridge," was a popular book and went through three editions in London between 1798 and 1800<sup>32</sup> (Figure 2). Other renderings from the early 1800s by British, Russian, Italian, and French artists are included in the exhibit. Quite clearly, Natural Bridge was one of the premier sites in the new nation to visit, and to make images of for popular distribution.

Two other early renderings (Figures 3 & 4), both done in 1820, show unique details. Drayton's aquatint shows a covered wagon crossing the Bridge, which would have been a familiar sight at

that time. Not so the "Alps" which embellish the background of the work by the Italian Ferrario, who added mountains unmistakably more like those of his home country than those in Virginia.<sup>33</sup>

Edward Hicks, one of America's foremost folk artists, used the Natural Bridge in his oil painting of about 1825-30, one of at least six Peaceable Kingdoms that used Natural Bridge (Figure 5).

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<sup>30</sup>Reeds, 59.

<sup>31</sup>Simpson, 4 and 6.

<sup>32</sup>Simpson, 8.

<sup>33</sup>Simpson, 14-15.

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Simpson notes that Hicks "used the Bridge as a symbol of unity between God's work and man's, suggesting that heaven's peace could exist on earth."<sup>34</sup> The text around the painting refers to "grim carnivorous nature" and "savage beasts," suggesting that it is the fearful nature embodied by the bridge that is overcome by God's grace.

Other images, such as those by Milbert circa 1828-29 (Figure 6) and Goodacre in 1832 (Figure 7), show Indians at the Bridge, reinforcing its early image as a wild, natural, frontier site.

Natural Bridge played the same role in literature of this period. Noted in *Rockbridge County Artists and Artisans* is the revealing esoterica that Herman Melville used the image of Natural Bridge in his 1851 book *Moby Dick*, confident that the reference would be understood: "[and] Moby Dick moved on, still withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wretched hideousness of his jaw. But soon the fore part of him slowly rose from the water; for an instant his whole marbleized 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."<sup>35</sup> It was the terror aspect and the dark forces of Nature from which this depiction of the Bridge clearly draws.

Famous artists came to paint the Bridge, including Frederick Edwin Church of the Hudson River School in 1852 and David Johnson, a second-generation Hudson River School artist, in 1860 (Figure 8). These paintings emphasize the beauty of the landscape and texture of the rocks.

As the 1800s wore on, the Bridge continued to be popular as an artistic subject, but without the horror. Paintings became more realistic and then more picturesque.<sup>36</sup> To illustrate this point, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Bridge is more often rendered as a backdrop to human activity than as an awe-inspiring feature that represented God's affinity for America. A Currier and Ives print (Figure 9), circa 1860, helped the common man to "celebrate the scenic splendors of America," in this case by showing a man fishing in the idyllic setting of the Bridge.<sup>37</sup> Currier and Ives prints were widely available among the general population in the last half of the nineteenth century and this print would have been instrumental in popularizing the Bridge and increasing tourist visitation.

Other publications also printed pictures that helped increase public awareness of Natural Bridge. By 1872, the Bridge was presented in an even more picturesque way. Featured in the *Picturesque America* serial are drawings by Harry Fenn that seem almost storybook and leisurely. One shows a man sketching above the Bridge, with servants waiting in the wings

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<sup>34</sup>Simpson, 17.

<sup>35</sup>Barbara Crawford and Royster Lyle, Jr., *Rockbridge County Artists & Artisans* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 34 (quoting from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, p. 448 of the 1967 edition published by W.W. Norton, New York).

<sup>36</sup>Simpson, 3-5.

<sup>37</sup>Simpson, 37.

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(Figure 10). Even stronger in this theme is the 1888 print by W.P. Snyder published in *Harper's Weekly*, which shows a well-dressed party of men and women picnicking at the Bridge (Figure 11).

The last item in the exhibit, a watercolor circa 1880-90 (Figure 12), shows an entirely different scale and atmosphere. This view of the Bridge looks and feels like the American west, down to the horses in foreground. It shows clearly that by this time, the symbolism of Natural Bridge had come full circle. No longer a singularly important icon of the natural wonders that the early Americans envisioned to be their birthright, it is portrayed as almost indistinguishable from the large-scale landscapes that did in fact come to be discovered half-way across the continent.

### **Natural Bridge as a Tourist Destination**

Natural Bridge has attracted visitors from its "discovery" through modern times, and its long history as a tourist site provides a record of the tastes and trends and technology of the day. In the early years, this was the search for the sublime. In the late-eighteenth century, Europeans spurred by a "mania for traveling in search of picturesque and sublime scenery," were the first tourists to truly appreciate America's natural offerings on a wide scale.<sup>38</sup> America itself did not yet have the prerequisites of a leisure class, transportation and tourism facilities, and more importantly, "a body of images and descriptions of those places--a mythology of unusual things to see--to excite people's imaginations and induce them to travel." Until these conditions were achieved in the 1820s, "very few [Americans] visited natural wonders like Virginia's Natural Bridge or Niagara Falls."<sup>39</sup>

Thomas Jefferson wrote often of Natural Bridge and encouraged many to visit the site, including his extensive contacts in Europe. Local historian Royster Lyle notes that there was a steady procession of these visitors from Monticello to Natural Bridge. This might in part explain the widespread knowledge of the Bridge and its high estimation in European as well as American consciousness. Jefferson resolved that the Bridge should never be closed from public view, and while it has always remained in private hands, it has always been open for tourists.

Natural Bridge has had many famous visitors, some of whom, as quoted earlier, gave their own descriptions of the Bridge. Numerous presidents have visited the site.

In early times, expeditions to see the Bridge would by necessity have been extended affairs to a fairly remote site. For example, one early note has visitors retiring to Rockbridge Alum Springs after viewing the Bridge.<sup>40</sup> Joel Lackland, who acquired the property from the Jefferson estate in the 1830s, was the first to operate a commercial tavern/inn there.<sup>41</sup> By 1849, there was a "fine

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<sup>38</sup> Sears, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Sears, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Tompkins, 41.

<sup>41</sup> David W. Coffey, local historian, interview.

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Hotel and outhouses" where there had not been in 1831.<sup>42</sup> As the century wore on, tourism facilities were expanded and the Bridge became much more accessible to the general public and not just to the expeditioners. When Colonel Henry Chester Parsons purchased the property in 1881, there was a very small hotel and admission was 50 cents. Parsons enlarged the hotel, built another sizable one (named the Appledore), moved and enlarged the stables, and located a country store on the site. He initially did not charge admission, but after a few years reinstated fees because of maintenance costs.<sup>43</sup>

The completion of a major Steel Rail Era line provided rail access to the area in the 1880s, with great impact on Natural Bridge. In the heyday of this era of tourism, railroads ran excursion trains to bring people by the hundreds to see the Bridge.<sup>44</sup> Railroad development brought northern capital (as shown in the deed research) as well as more tourists, and it was in this period that the Bridge property became much more valuable and was transferred to corporate ownership.

The third decade of the new century brought paved roads and automobile travel. On May 21, 1927, the formal inauguration of the electrical illumination of the Bridge at night was held, with Governor Byrd of Virginia in attendance.<sup>45</sup> These light shows are still held regularly. A 1947 promotional booklet demonstrates Natural Bridge's evolution into a full-service resort to serve the modern traveler. It has a chapter on what famous people have said about Natural Bridge, including cowboy-humorist Will Rogers who visited the Bridge in 1927 and then wrote a column about it and radio commentator Lowell Thomas who spent five nights at the Bridge in 1934 and made his nationwide broadcasts from there. These and other visitors mention George Washington's initials and the Bridge's billing as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the Modern World and one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the New World. The visitor of this era was offered music and light shows to enhance the viewing of the Bridge, accommodations ranging from the hotel to cottages, and amenities such as swimming pool, golf course, and tennis courts. Today, a nearby resort and convention center and museum complex offer visitors accommodations and historical interpretation of the bridge as well as other local attractions.

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<sup>42</sup>Simpson, 29 (quoting Lewis Miller's journal of the time).

<sup>43</sup>Tompkins, 47.

<sup>44</sup>Tompkins, 48.

<sup>45</sup>Reeds, 54.

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**Interviews and Other Sources:**

S. Allen Chambers, Jr., notes received April 1997, by way of Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Copy in Frazier Associates files.

David Coffey, history instructor, Virginia Military Institute; phone interview with Sara Hollberg of Frazier Associates, December 3, 1996 and correspondence December 12, 1996. Notes in Frazier Associates files.

Royster Lyle, Jr., local historian; interview with Sara Hollberg of Frazier Associates, October 14, 1996 and November 7, 1996, and correspondence October 19, 1996. Notes in Frazier Associates files.

Monticello Research Department; various notes made in 1995 and sent to David Coffey. Copies in Frazier Associates files.

Wes Perkins, surveyor; phone interview with Sara Hollberg of Frazier Associates, December 16, 1996. Notes in Frazier Associates files.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 5.86 acres

UTM References:           Zone   Easting   Northing  
                                  17    928380   4165280

Verbal Boundary Description:

Rockbridge County, Virginia Tax Parcel #105-11-0

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the formation itself and most important viewsheds.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**Name/Title:           Sara S. Hollberg, Project Manager  
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