

Linville Caverns: North Carolina's Show Cave Opens July 1, 1939 ^[1]

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By Kelly Agan, N.C. Government & Heritage Library, 2015

North Carolina has some 900 natural caves, and its only show cave, Linville Caverns, opened to the public on July 1, 1939. The commercial operation began in 1937 with purchase of the land by local businessmen, led by J.G. Gilkey of Marion and Wade Phillips of Lexington. The project coincided with construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway in McDowell and Avery Counties in 1938, and the attraction became an overnight success, as newspapers reported thousands of visitors.

Sitting under [Humpback Mountain](#) ^[2], the natural limestone cave features extraordinary and colorful speleothem formed from dissolution and redeposition of the Shady Dolomite as acidic water has dripped through it over millions of years. One of the earliest published accounts in 1859 of exploration of the cave, by young Fayetteville naturalist and school teacher [Henry Colton](#) ^[3], described the “wondrous splendors of that hidden world”, from the arctic cold water, to the extraordinary formations as the “grandest of nature’s stony tapestry.” He noted evidence of the caverns’ inhabitants -- bats, mice, and a “perfect grasshopper, petrified and covered with a crust of lime.” Later Colton would go on to be state geologist of Tennessee.

The entrance to the cave is located off U.S. Route 221 in McDowell County, a few miles south of Linville Falls. Linville Caverns continue to operate into the 21st century as a private enterprise and the cave remains home to a number of critters including the Eastern pipistrelle and little brown bats as well as spiders and trout that swim in its underground stream. In 1987 the North Carolina General Assembly passed the Cave Protection Act, providing for the conservation of the unique geologic formations inside the state’s caves by making damage and removal of features unlawful.

References:

Henry E. Colton. *Mountain Scenery*. Philadelphia: W. L. Pomeroy, 1859.

<https://archive.org/details/mountainscenerys00colt> ^[4]

Holler, Cato; Holler, Susan. *Hollow Hills of Sunnalee: The Linville Caverns Story*. Old Fort, N.C.: Hollow Hills Publishing Company, 1989.

N.C. General Assembly. Cave Protection Act, 1987. [http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Ch...](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter_14/Article_22C.pdf) ^[5]

Gastonia Daily Gazette (Gastonia, N.C.), October 26, 1939.

Raleigh Twig (Raleigh, N.C.), February 12, 1938.

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