FEATURES

# Middle Mountains: Pilot Mountain

**From bird-watchers and hikers to Andy Griffith fans and proud locals, those who know this landscape understand why it rises above the rest.**

*by Jane Borden*

From the Little Pinnacle Overlook at Pilot Mountain State Park, the iconic Big Pinnacle appears to glow in the dawn light.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL STEED

The rocky knob of Pilot Mountain, rising 2,400 feet in the Yadkin Valley, was the "Great Guide" for the Saura tribe. Today, the striking pinnacle continues to draw us toward it.

*The Making of Pilot Mountain*

Technically, it's not even a mountain, or at least not what we typically think of as a mountain. Pilot Mountain — and the entire Sauratown range, including Hanging Rock — didn't burst from the ground due to tectonic shifts or volcanic activity. Rather, these distinctive elevations remained after the land around them eroded over time. In fact, the peaks we see today were once at the bottom of a shallow sea. They're merely sand transformed by heat and pressure into sturdy quartzite. Over time, the quartzite broke off, forming cliffs and creating that exposed knob — known as Big Pinnacle — so iconic that Pilot Life Insurance Company used the image in its logo.

A destination for generations of school field trips, hikes, and family picnics, the mountain gained worldwide fame — and a stream of new visitors — when Andy Griffith made it Mayberry's notable landmark, too. While the land is now a state park, before that and for much longer, it was a local tourist attraction and often the site of a rollicking party scene.

"That peak over there," says Kathy Hunter, pointing toward Big Pinnacle, which is now closed to the public, "they used to have wooden steps that went up the side of it." Hunter grew up on a nearby tobacco farm and now works by the entrance to the park, at Pilot Knob Inn. She remembers exploring the mountain around the time it became a state park in 1968 and just before the steps — which led up the vertical, 200-foot-high knob that caps the 2,200 feet of elevation — were removed. "When you got halfway to the top, you didn't want to look down, and you didn't want to look up," she says, laughing. "You wanted to keep moving."

At Pilot Knob Inn, guests can stay in one of the six cabins, which are renovated century-old tobacco barns, or the inn's five suites.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM MOWERY

The wooden stairs were built by W.L. Spoon, an engineer who purchased the mountain in the 1920s and developed it for tourism. "He approached the mountain as a kind of P.T. Barnum character," explains Mark Farnsworth, a Pilot Mountain historian. "He was a showman and promoter." Spoon built roads up the mountain and developed a picnic area at Little Pinnacle (the lower peak with an overlook). "He made an airstrip at the top and said it was the highest airport in the South," Farnsworth says.

But Spoon wasn't the mountain's first booster. In the middle of the 19th century, members of the Gilliam family owned Pilot Mountain, along with a hotel at its base, which they publicized nationally. "People wanted to see this curiosity of nature, a mountain that stands alone," Farnsworth says. The Gilliams set up rickety-looking ladders for tours of the peak.

During World War II, a local Chevrolet dealer, J.W. Beasley, bought the property and turned it into a local hangout to see and be seen. To draw crowds and charge admission, Beasley built a swimming pool — with two diving boards and a slide — and a dance-hall pavilion, where campgrounds are now. On sunny weekends, some 100 folks paid 50 cents each (25 cents for kids) to take a dip in the pool. For another 50 cents, they could drive up the mountain, recalls Dean Gordon, whose

grandparents were the caretakers of the property for the Beasleys. Bands played at night, usually beach music, and Gordon remembers sneaking out of the second floor of his grandparents' house and wandering over to the Pilot Pavilion to listen.

"Just a concrete slab with a roof over it" is how R.L. Williamson, who grew up in Mount Airy and now lives in Emerald Isle, describes the '60s pavilion setup. But what went on under that roof was epic: a couple hundred people, all shag dancing. A band called the King Bees, from King, played on Thursdays in the summer from dusk to midnight. "Mount Airy guys would meet up with Pilot Mountain girls or girls from Winston-Salem, and there was a lot of mingling," Williamson says. "The view from there wasn't anything outstanding. But then, you were probably viewing the girls more than the scenery, if I remember correctly," he adds with a wink.

Not all of the memories were good ones, though. The Pilot Mountain party scene took a dark turn when two people were arrested for fighting. "They were brought to the old jail in Pilot Mountain," Gordon explains, "and an officer was killed at the jail as a result of that." The tragedy marked the end of an era: Shortly after, the dance hall shut down.

The pool stayed open until Beasley's widow, Pearl, sold the property to the state for a park. While folks would miss the pool parties and bands, locals were grateful that the family didn't sell the mountain for private development. "There was a lot of excitement about the state buying the mountain and preserving it," Gordon says. Today, the wild nights may be over, but the quiet, starry skies over Pilot Mountain are just as magical.

Photographer Michael Steed takes in the view from Grindstone Trail, a three-mile hike to the summit picnic area in Pilot Mountain State Park.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL STEED

Back to Top

*Building Pilot Mountain's New Visitor Center*

When Jim Powell was growing up in Winston-Salem in the '70s, Pilot Mountain State Park was a favorite family destination. "It was an all-day event," Powell says of their picnic lunches, with a cake and presents, too, on special occasions. "Then we'd kid that we had to hike to work it all off." Memories of those day trips came back to Powell, a managing principal at ADW Architects in Charlotte, when he heard about plans for a new visitor center at Pilot Mountain. He admits, "It had been quite a while since I'd been," so he and his team hopped in the car. They wanted to learn more about the project before interviewing for it. When they arrived, Park Superintendent Matt Windsor took them to the site — a wooden knoll down the road from the 1981 park office that would be decommissioned. As soon as they looked up at the rocky knob, inspiration struck. "Spontaneously, we started sketching in the dirt," Powell says. "It just sort of happened; it was beautiful. And Matt was smiling at us."

Windsor has spent 12 years watching visitors discover the wonder of the pinnacles. "People are really moved by being on top of the mountain [at Little Pinnacle Overlook], especially because it has a

limits to visitors since shortly after the state bought the property, and the three mountaintop acres are now designated as a National Natural Landmark. Over the decades, the Yadkin River section of the park was added, and trails were improved. But the parking facilities are not designed to handle the 700 to 1,000 cars that enter the park each day — close to 2,000 on a weekend.

The new center, which Powell's firm designed, will include more parking and shuttle service and will open later this spring. It will address another issue, too: visibility. Previously, Big Pinnacle could only be seen from the hiking trail. Powell's design will bring the showstopping knob into view inside, too. "We wanted you to be able to look out from the visitor center and visually connect yourself to the landscape," he says. The new center's distinctive roof — long and angled — will allow visitors to see the knob from within the exhibit hall. "The slanted roof literally points their eyes toward it," Powell says.

Inside, visitors will find exhibits that explore the natural and cultural history of Pilot Mountain, the Yadkin River, and the Sauratown Mountains. Windsor is thrilled to have space for more education. But even he knows that the attraction everyone wants to see up close awaits just outside.

Pilot Mountain's new visitor center (pictured in a rendering) will open later this spring. Inside, guests will find an interactive hawk display and an exhibit on Native American fishing methods.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADW ARCHITECTS

*View From the Little Pinnacle Overlook*

On little pinnacle, the hard-core hawk-watchers are out, binoculars and weather equipment in hand, dutifully counting birds. Starting in September, between 2,000 and 5,000 broad-winged hawks fly south over Big Pinnacle on their way from Canada and the northeastern United States to Central America. Every year, the Forsyth County Audubon Society sends chapter members to Pilot Mountain to tally the birds on their migratory path, thanks to chapter founder Ramona Snavely, who discovered the connection between wind patterns and the birds' journey through her research that began in 1973.

In the fall, when northwest tailwinds push southeast, the hawks travel in thermals, pockets of warm air that rise, taking the birds with them and providing advantageous conditions for extended gliding. Within the thermal, the hawks circle around one another. "It looks like if you were to put loose tea in a kettle and stir it," says North Carolina State Park Ranger Jesse Anderson.

Hundreds of hawks can circle inside one "kettle," so it's these kettles that bird-watchers count — but not until the grouping starts to break. "The hawks will gain altitude to a certain level in the atmosphere where the warm air cools or gets pushed off by upper-atmospheric winds," Anderson explains. The thermal then dissipates, and the hawks start streaming, which is the easiest time to count them.

From the Little Pinnacle Overlook, Park Ranger Jesse Anderson keeps close watch on the hawk and raven nesting grounds atop Big Pinnacle.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM MOWERY

But if the birds only wanted thermals, they could migrate along any number of paths. They pass over Big Pinnacle on updrafts, air currents that cross flat land until reaching a mountain, which pushes the current up and over, allowing the raptors to gain additional altitude. If you're thinking it would make more sense for the birds to travel over mountains with higher elevations, you're right. "We are not by any means one of the highest hawk-migration-count sites," Anderson says. "Those sites follow the Appalachian Mountains, which serve as a huge flyway for birds."

Nonetheless, 13 species of diurnal raptors migrate over the monadnock — an Algonquian word meaning "lone mountain" — including bald eagles, peregrine falcons, and osprey, although 95 percent of all raptors counted are broad-winged hawks. The public is always invited to join the bird census. A cabinet at the top of Little Pinnacle, where counters gather, holds the current tally for anyone who's curious. The park also offers a program for junior hawk-watchers and schedules events during International Hawk Migration Week.

"Seeing a large kettle of broad-wings move through is spectacular and special," Anderson says. "You're seeing something that's happened for eons." The static and only imperceptibly changing mountain and the dynamic, constantly shifting collection of birds have a unique relationship. "They are in the middle of a 2,000- to 3,000-mile journey that is going to lead them back in less than six months," Anderson says. "Part of the enjoyment is seeing a large group of something so well designed."

**Pilot Mountain State Park**
*1792 Pilot Knob Park Road*
*Pinnacle, NC 27043*
*(336) 325-2355*
*ncparks.gov*

*Back to Top*

*Pilot Mountain's Endless Granite*

Pilot Mountain's knob is made of quartzite. But about 20 miles northeast, near Mount Airy, you can access what's deep beneath the knob and most of the area: a seemingly endless field of granite, the official state rock of North Carolina. The area — locals call it The Rock, The Quarry, and The Hill — is the world's largest open-face

quarry. In 1889, the North Carolina Granite Corporation was formed on the site. "They drilled down 500 feet, and it's still solid," says recently retired employee Burnard Allen, whose family has a long history at the mine.

A landscape feature so dominant will shape its surroundings. The quarry certainly affected the lives and fortunes of Allen's family. He worked for the mining company for 47 years. His father worked there, too, as did three of his brothers. "Me and my dad rode to work together for years," Allen recalls. In the late '60s and early '70s, there used to be a little store on the entrance road. "Every morning, we would stop, and Dad would either buy a fig cake or an oatmeal cake. And then he'd get a banana.

Whole family trees have sprung up around the granite mine in Mount Airy. Allen was one of 15 children. After his father died of a heart attack at age 58, Allen became worried about his own heart. But he didn't stop working. "Coming here every day was just like home," he says. He was such a dependable employee and friend that his coworkers voted him union president more than 25 years in a row.

At North Carolina Granite Corporation, the largest open-faced quarry in the world, workers have mined, cut, and shaped the famous Mount Airy white stone since 1889.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EMILY CHAPLIN

During Allen's decades-long tenure at the quarry, he worked in every department: removing rock from the ground, hauling rock into the sheds, cutting rock, and carving rock. "If you don't go home with some dust in your neck and the cuffs of your pants, you ain't done nothing,"

he says with a chuckle. Of every job Allen held, from bagging grit to traveling to meet with clients, he says, "working on The Hill was my favorite." It was not the carving work with its inherent artistry that he most loved, but the hard labor of extracting granite from the ground.

"To see this great big, old rock pulled out and loaded on a truck, and then the next time you see it, it's in so many different pieces, it was amazing," he says. "I've been up there and had icicles hanging on me, but I loved it. That doesn't ever leave you."

And it never will. Truly. Allen has made his headstone out of white Mount Airy granite. He also made stones for his father, mother, and the nine siblings who have predeceased him.

"All mine needs is a death date on it," he says, before adding with a laugh, "and I can't put that on there yet."

*Back to Top*

*Mayberry's Major Attraction*

The directors of *The Andy Griffith Show* never gave viewers even a glimpse of Pilot Mountain. But the characters spoke of "Mount Pilot" often enough that fans could imagine the landmark for themselves. Likewise, the fictional town of Mayberry became interchangeable with Griffith's real hometown, Mount Airy. But it wasn't until decades after the show ended in 1968 that the real and make-believe towns finally merged. In 1990, Tanya Jones, executive director of the Surry Arts Council, was at an estate sale in Raleigh when the head (or Presiding Goober) of *The Andy Griffith Show* Rerun Watchers Club asked what the council was planning to do for the show's 30th anniversary.

"I'm standing there totally unaware it was the 30th anniversary," Jones says. But the opportunity was too good to pass up. She quickly pulled together a collection of events inspired by the show — Aunt Bee's Bake Sale, an Ernest T. Bass Rock Throwing Contest — and called it Mayberry Day. Jones even led Mayberry-themed walking tours of town. "Anything anyone asked that was possible without a cost, I said yes."

That first year, more than 1,000 people came; last September, the crowd had grown to 30,000. "People come to find out what about this small town influenced Andy Griffith to do what he did," Jones says. And what Griffith did was create a show that has never gone off the air, despite lasting only eight seasons.

In 2009, when the town opened The Andy Griffith Museum, 40,000 people visited the exhibits. Last year, 60,000 came. Now, streaming services are introducing the Mayberry characters to a new generation: At last count, the Mayberry Days Facebook page had 140,000 fans. (And note the "s" in Mayberry Days — the event now stretches a whole week.)

For some fans, a week may not be enough. Betty Lynn, who played Thelma Lou on the show, moved to Mount Airy in 2007. Now 93, Lynn lives in a local retirement community, and one Friday a month, she greets a long line of people. The fans may be old or new, but all want to show their appreciation for a hometown that's never gone out of style.


The Andy Griffith Show first aired 60 years ago, but in Mount Airy, it might as well have been yesterday. Some 30,000 people attend the town's weeklong Mayberry Days events to see the people, places, and props — like Sheriff Taylor's cruiser — that they remember.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM MOWERY

Back to Top