

THE ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES

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Crossing the line

Asheville's red-roofed Grove Park Inn peeks between the golf course trees as dark storm clouds and a blazing maple battle for attention overhead. More about this 106-year-old hotel on the last page.

Crossing the line

The drive from Cary to Asheville covers 242 of the 424 miles of Interstate 40 that runs from Wilmington, on the North Carolina coast, to the Tennessee line deep in the Pigeon River Gorge of the Great Smoky Mountains.

It's the six miles or so from Old Fort up the face of the Blue Ridge to Ridgcrest that covers the greatest psychological distance, taking you from Piedmont to the mountains, the North Carolina connected to the Atlantic Coast into the American heartland.

The climb covers only about 1,500 feet, but at the top you're standing on the rim of a giant saucer.

The Swannanoa River that trickles down the gentle western slope from Ridgcrest is not connected to the other North Carolina river systems. It joins the French Broad River 22 miles away in Asheville, which joins the Holston River in Knoxville to form the Tennessee

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Driving along Crabtree Mountain Road near Clyde, North Carolina in Haywood County.

Crossing the line

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River, which joins the Ohio River at Paducah, Kentucky, which joins the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois and finally reaches ocean below New Orleans.

This saucer – the Mississippi River watershed – stretches from Ridgecrest, via the Arkansas River, to beyond Pikes Peak in Colorado. Via the Missouri River it reaches to the tops of the tallest mountains in Glacier National Park of northwestern Montana. The watershed covers 1.2 million square miles.

When I was the police reporter for the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, there was hardly a week that I wasn't called out to cover a wreck caused by a tractor-trailer rig that reached the rim of the saucer and lost its brakes on the way to Old Fort.

Sometimes it went over the side of a cliff. Sometimes it took out a car or two. Occasionally it reached one of the runaway ramps, where it bogged down in deep sand, frequently saving the driver.

Over the past 40 years the road has been improved and the Asheville where I lived has grown and changed.

The one-room apartment, built on stilts on the side of Sunset Mountain, which I rented for \$67.50 a month, furnished, has been replaced by a three-level, 3BR, 2½-bath house on stilts in the same footprint. Zillow estimates you could buy it for \$462,860.

Whatever the price, you're still peeing in the Gulf of Mexico.

The paper plant in downtown Canton puffs away in the valley of the Pigeon River.

*North Carolina Arboretum
in Pisgah National Forest,
an affiliate of the
University of North Carolina*



Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), above, was the father of American landscape architecture. He's best known for the gardens on the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, of which this arboretum was once a part, Central Park in New York City, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and the master plans for the campuses of the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University.



The view from the terrace of the Grove Park Inn is south across the city of Asheville and the French Broad River Valley to the Blue Ridge.

The Grove Park Inn

As the 19th Century faded into the 20th, much of Asheville's appeal was the cool mountain climate and its supposed healing qualities.

Railroad heir George Washington Vanderbilt II of New York finished his Biltmore Estate on the south side of town in 1895 with 33 bedrooms for his guests seeking respite from the city (my newsletter from that Asheville visit is here <http://bit.ly/2eAxwKK>).

Patent medicine king Edwin Grove of Tennessee finished the Grove Park Inn's 200 rooms on the north side of town in 1913 to be a place where people like he, who suffered from chronic hiccups, could recover.

He razed several of Asheville's TB sanitariums to clear sufficient land and built the walls five feet thick from granite boulders to keep it cool inside. The hundreds of rooms added in the late 20th Century are cooled by other means. Here's a video history: <https://youtu.be/3xKDa1EKYyw>.



One of the two fireplaces at either end of the Grove Park Inn lobby.