

Our 'Green . . . and Blue' State



By Thomas Kaufmann, Architectural Historian and Preservationist

One of the great joys of researching and documenting Alabama's lookout towers is discovering the beauty of our great state, as many lookouts are located in rural forested areas on the highest elevations in their locality.

When I have had the opportunity to climb a tower and take in the 360-view, I've never been disappointed – ever. Ours is a land of green and blue; green expanses of grass, depending on where you are, but more often than not, an ocean of forest green timberland, which provides us with beautiful colorations during fall and gray hues in winter. And then there are the blue wetlands, creeks, rivers, and lakes which grace our scenic mountains, valleys, fields and pasturelands, and flow into the Gulf – not to mention our beautiful blue skies.

Years ago after completing post-graduate studies in New York City, I had an opportunity, it seemed, to work there. But the time in New York, and the city itself, as much as I enjoyed it, wasn't enough to keep me there . . . I longed for Alabama's natural 'green and blue.' On my return flight back to Montgomery, looking out the window of the plane, I can still remember what a beautiful day it was . . . everything was green and blue, set against a beautiful cerulean-blue July sky, with epic cumulonimbus clouds in abundance on the horizon. That was in 1992.

Today, the state of Alabama still retains much of its beauty, but the vast expanses of uninterrupted green, living earth are beginning to recede away. Through the years, I have had opportunity to travel extensively throughout the state, and I must say that some scenic highways from 25-30 years ago are shockingly different now – significant sections of green are gone, replaced by strip malls, fast-food franchises, and new housing. I fear that in the pursuit of economic growth, our natural resources are being unnecessarily sacrificed to accommodate new industry.

In 2004, I had an opportunity to travel to Seattle, Washington, and Missoula, Montana. While I was in that region of the country, I took note of a number of things, especially pertaining to how the environment/natural resources were being conserved,

and which issues seemed to be most important to the populace. Upon returning home, it seemed that my thoughts crystallized more clearly on what the difference was between that region and ours: in the Pacific Northwest, 'quality of life' appears to have more priority than 'economic development.' By contrast, 'economic development' generally appears to have more priority than 'quality of life' in the Southeast and Alabama. Making an assertion or observation such as this usually has the consequence of creating hostile fallout among those who are in the related fields which design, plan, and create the built environment, as though the idea of development is always and forever a bad thing. It is not, and definitely not always the case, and it doesn't ever have to be the case. The great success will indeed be when the 'development paradigm' shifts more fully and completely toward a 'best practices' approach with respect to the environment.

Trees indeed make a difference; indeed, forests make the difference. Trees mean green earth under their driplines at a minimum. They just do so much for us. If it is possible to begin thinking of reversing unnecessary hardscape back to 'green,' that would be a tremendous boon toward realizing a 'greener and bluer' Alabama. Concerned citizens and groups are already at work in this realm, including the wonderful riparian initiatives, and are to be congratulated for their significant contributions already in restoring the environment back to us. The keys to success in any effort largely depends on a high degree of collaborative 'civitas,' education, and awareness of the issues in order to problem-solve on the side of conserving our natural environment, with the end goal being one of our citizens and visitors enjoying more green and more blue than ever before. And believe me when I say that the best views from the lookouts are always 'green and blue.' ☘

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