



# In Memoriam The Crosses of Bloomington Maryland

**AT THE BASE OF BACKBONE MOUNTAIN**, along Route 135 just west of Bloomington, Md., stands a weathered concrete wall painted with 24 white crosses. The partially crumbled wall serves as a memorial in honor of those who lost their lives while trying to negotiate a treacherous 90 degree turn located at the end of four miles of highway with a nine percent grade. Most fatalities have involved trucks hauling raw materials, livestock and other cargo as they descended Maryland's highest mountain.

The Westernport Heritage Society maintains these painted crosses, now 24 in number. Retouching the paint has become a Memorial Day tradition for the group, which has maintained a museum since 1996 to preserve memorabilia from the region's heydays.

According to officials with the Maryland State Highway Administration (MDSHA), this stretch of road is an approved truck route. MDSHA traffic counts indicate that in 2008, daily traffic on this section of Route 135 averaged

more than 3,500; from 2005 to 2007, daily truck traffic averaged more than 2,000.

Truck drivers are especially likely to run into trouble on this stretch of road. Those unfamiliar with this section of Route 135 often don't realize just how dangerous it can be until it's too late. Poor weather conditions caused by the mountain's elevation can obscure vision or create dangerous conditions on the road surface. Applying pressure to the brakes can cause them to overheat, crystallize and glaze over to the point of failure. When a truck driver gears down to control his speed, sometimes the transmission fails. And so the driver loses control of his rig.

Ironically, according to *The Bloomington Story: 1995 Post Scripts*, the notorious wall sits at the base of what locals call "Cemetery Hill." When Route 135 was upgraded in 1956 to its present grade and alignment, this retaining wall, constructed to prevent downslope movement, also prevented vehicles from hurtling into the nearby Potomac River.



Written by **Sara Mullins**  
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

It also controlled access to what was then the Westvaco Luke Mill, now owned and operated by NewPage.

By 1965, after five fatalities at the wall, local residents had come to view the site as a death trap; 350 people representing Backbone Mountain, Bloomington and the Savage River area signed a petition requesting a hearing at the Garrett County Courthouse to see what could be done to prevent future tragedies. The Maryland State Roads Commission authorized a safety study that, in 1967, resulted in a 10 mph speed limit for trucks and the installation of three truck stop areas for testing brakes, a flashing light at the mountain's base and extensive wood signage featuring huge white letters upon a red background. Drivers were warned of the steep downgrade and advised to descend in the lowest gear. Several suggested a last resort remedy: **"IF BRAKES FAIL DITCH TRUCK IMMEDIATELY."**

In 1984, signage and flashers were upgraded. But the crashes continued, and in 1992, SHA District Traffic staff

recommended an evaluation to consider the installation of runaway truck escape ramps. In 1994, the MDSHA conducted meetings with the public, first responders and local politicians. The fire chief of the Bloomington Fire Department took a lead role in organizing a focus group to explore preventive strategies with input from community groups. Later that year, the MDSHA released a 15-year accident analysis, from 1978 – 1992, that reported 23 accidents on the Route 135 downhill grade.

Occasionally truckers have chosen the Route 135 option to bypass the Interstate 68 Weigh Station near Finzel. In 1995, a trucker hauling charcoal to Baltimore chose this option and lost his life. To prevent further fatalities, in 1997, MDSHA installed signage along I-68, U.S. Route 40 and U.S. Route 219 advising east-bound truckers to use Maryland Route 36 rather than MD 135 to access Luke and Westernport.

Because the wooden signs posted on the downgrade took a beating from Backbone Mountain's often harsh



**Top:** The wall is located just across the Allegany County line as you cross the Savage River on Rt. 135 from Bloomington (Garrett County). This area is unique in that it's the confluence of the Savage River, the Potomac River and where Allegany and Garrett Counties come together, as well as where West Virginia and Maryland join.

**Bottom:** Coming down Rt. 135 (Backbone Mtn.) in Garrett County just before Bloomington and crossing the Savage River.

weather conditions, MDSHA officials initiated efforts in 1998 to upgrade signage. This project was completed in 2008 with the installation of 25 large, colorful signs that begin more than a mile before the downgrade begins. These metal signs include information about the grade's length and speed, truck escape ramps, and pull-off locations for brake checks. Other measures include highway lighting on the escape ramp and the clearing of vegetation near the turn at the wall.

As an additional safety measure to help truckers gauge their speed during their descent, the MDSHA recently installed a runaway truck warning system that can detect the length and speed of a truck as it passes beneath an overhead sensor. If the truck exceeds the maximum safe speed, the system activates flashing lights on an overhead warning

sign ahead that says, "TRUCK RUNAWAY DANGER WHEN FLASHING – ESCAPE RAMP ONE MILE." Drivers can then use the ramp to slow their trucks, cool the brakes if necessary, proceed down the mountain and safely round the curve at the wall. In March of 2008, a driver was able to escape injury by following these procedures.

To date, the MDSHA has spent \$3,841,244.38 on safety upgrades for the Route 135 downgrade.

"We look at all of it," says George Small, assistant district engineer of the MDSHA's District 6. "We don't want to see any more crashes." He credits the community, especially the Bloomington Fire Department, for its efforts to improve safety and raise awareness. The ultimate goal is well stated in *The Bloomington Story*: "May there be no more crosses at the foot of Cemetery Hill!"