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Local African-American History Explored Saturday

Library Hosts Mennonite Church Seminar

By Jeff Eason

Why do a majority of the African-American longtime residents of Boone live on the hill known as Junaluska above the Watauga County Public Library? Why do many of these residents belong to a Mennonite church, a Protestant Christian denomination more closely affiliated with Americans of Swiss and German descent?

These are just some of the questions to be explored at an interesting historic seminar at the Watauga County Public Library this weekend.

History from the Hillside: The Boone Mennonite Brethren Church and the History of African-Americans in the Watauga County Area is the subject of a program at the Library Meeting Room on Saturday, April 26 at 3 p.m. The program is free and open to the public.

"The Mennonite Brethren North Carolina District is made up of seven congregations and is the only Mennonite Brethren Conference in the United States with a majority of African-American members," said Dr. Conrad "Ozzie" Ostwalt, professor of philosophy and religion at Appalachian State University.

Ostwalt will be one of the featured speakers at Saturday's program along with Morris Hatton, associate pastor of the Boone Mennonite Brethren Church and Reverend Reggie Hunt, current head pastor of the church.

Ross Cooper, director of the program for the library, stated that the program will investigate African-American History in and around Boone from colonial times to the 21st century. The program will have a particular focus on the Boone Mennonite Brethren Church, its community, and its history.

"The original idea for this particular program came to me as the Library was preparing for the observance of Black History Month in February," said Cooper. "Due to the lack of time to prepare proper publicity at that time—not to mention the incessant wintry weather, which might have caused its cancellation—it was recommended by (head reference librarian) Evelyn Johnson and our new library director, Megan Johnson, that this program be slated as one of the Library's spring programs. The potential for a great turnout for this event, given the most interesting and rarely documented subject matter, made this plan seem a particularly wise course of action."

Cooper has been interested in the history of the church since he first found out about it as a youngster.

"My elementary and high school bus routes went through the Junaluska section of Boone, located on the lower portion of the slopes of Rich Mountain, not far from the heart of downtown Boone," said Cooper. "By strange synchronicity, this historically African-American section of Boone is also immediately adjacent to the new Watauga County Public Library building. My job at the library, in addition to a course in Appalachian Studies last fall, re-awoke the spark of interest in the 'Church on the Hill' and surrounding community."

The Boone Mennonite Brethren Church is one of only a handful of predominantly African-American churches within the Mennonite family. The sect originated in the 16th



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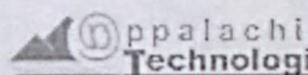
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century in Central Europe. The Mennonite Brethren branch of the faith was brought to America by Germans looking to escape compulsory military service in the Russian Empire around 1870. A Mennonite missionary family came to the Boone area around the beginning of the 20th century and founded schools and churches specifically designed for the Black population around the High Country.

For more information on Saturday's program, call the Watauga County Public Library at (828) 264-8784.

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