

THE WEST ASHEVILLE STORY

A Publication of the West Asheville History Project

Sponsored by the Asheville-Buncombe Library System and The North Carolina Humanities Council

Volume 1, Issue 2 Winter 2001

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THE FRENCH BROAD RIVER



THE FRENCH BROAD RIVER FROM STRAWBERRY HILL , 1908. (STRAWBERRY HILL WAS LOCATED ON BREVARD ROAD "1/2 MILE SOUTH OF HAYWOOD RD."). STRAWBERRY HILL SANITARIUM OPERATED THERE UNTIL 1928. PHOTO, NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

THE STORY OF THE RIVER

By the time it reaches Asheville, the water flowing in the French Broad River has trickled down the mountainsides of Pisgah Forest, joining the waters of the Mills River and Cane Creek near Fletcher and receiving run-offs of numerous farms and industries. This river that cuts through the heart of Asheville—and marks the eastern boundary of West Asheville—is the third oldest river in the world. Only the Nile River in Egypt and the New River, near Boone, are older. The river is even older than the mountains themselves. Winding through the mountains, it joins the Holston River in Tennessee to become the Tennessee River. The water that flows through Asheville eventually makes its way through Tennessee to the Mississippi, and then to the Gulf of Mexico.

The most probable story about how the French Broad got its name, as related by Bob Terrell in the Asheville Citizen-Times, is that when the first white explorers got to the river and saw its expanse, they called it the Broad River. But there was already a Broad River, in the Hickory Nut Gap. They distinguished this river by calling it the French Broad River, since it flowed west into territory controlled at that time by France. Early residents of West Asheville used a ferry, called Sam's Ferry, to cross the river. Today five roadway bridges link West Asheville with Asheville.

James M. Smith built the first bridge near Craven St. in 1833. The bridge replaced Sam's Ferry and tolls remained about the same. Smith charged 25 cents for a driver with a team and buggy and 6 cents for a person on foot. (Tolls were the only way to pay for the upkeep of the bridge.) Edwin Carrier erected a bridge in 1889, just north of the junction of the Swannanoa and French Broad Rivers, to connect Meadow Road in Asheville with Amboy Road in West Asheville. He also laid tracks across the bridge so the electric

(continued from page 1)

railway could take passengers to his hotel at Sulphur Springs, in the area now called Malvern Hills. To the north, Richmond Pearson built Richmond Hill, overlooking the river; he built Pearson's Bridge in 1893 to bring visitors to his house. The West Asheville Bridge, built in 1911 near Roberts St., was the only bridge to survive the 1916 flood. The flood waters destroyed Smith's Bridge, Carrier's Bridge, and Pearson's Bridge. All were rebuilt. In 1950, the newest bridge to span the river, the Smoky Park Bridge, was opened to traffic. In 1969, it was widened to carry several lanes of traffic each way. Now engineers ponder the construction of another bridge, part of the proposed I-26 Connector.



SMITH'S BRIDGE AFTER THE 1916 FLOOD. SWOLLEN BY RAIN FOLLOWING 2 HURRICANES, THE RIVER ROSE 20 FEET ABOVE FLOOD STAGE IN JULY 1916. MORE THAN 40 PEOPLE LOST THEIR LIVES; RAILROADS, BRIDGES, AND BUILDINGS WERE SWEEPED AWAY. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY

SULPHUR SPRINGS

In 1827, Robert Henry and his slave, Sam, discovered the sulphur springs in the area now known as Malvern Hills. Soon people started coming to the springs to drink the iron-and sulphur-rich water as medicine and as a skin beautifier. Col. Reuben Deaver built the first hotel at the springs, then called "Deaver's Springs", around 1830. In the fall of 1849, A. McKeithen wrote that the spring "is 400 yards from the hotel in a valley. . .the taste of the water or its 'farewell' as it is called is exactly like the scent of a rotten egg." Deaver's Hotel burned down in 1862.

In 1885, Edwin Carrier arrived and began buying acreage west of the river, including the sulphur springs. He changed the name of the springs, first to "Carrier Springs" and then to "Sulphur Springs", and built 3 successive hotels on the site. The last of these, The Belmont, burned in 1892.

In the 1920's the Malvern Hills Country Club was built on the property. Today only the sulphur springs remain.

“The Belmont.”

Asheville, N. C. “The Land of the Sky.”

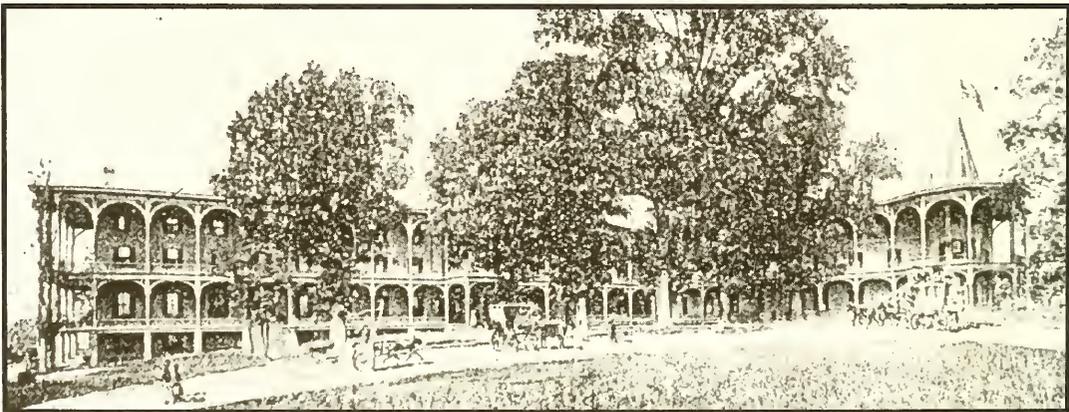
— OPEN ALL THE YEAR. —

The finest health resort in America. A new three-story brick building, located in a mountain grove of 65 acres, 2,500 feet above sea level. Delightfully cool in mid-summer, comfortably warm to sit out of doors in mid-winter. Three medicinal springs (White and Black Sulphur and Iron), which possess remarkable curative properties.

The best medical authorities pronounce the climate of Asheville the finest in the world.

The building has one quarter mile halls and verandas, steam heat, grate fires, private baths, electric elevator and gas light.

Take the HOTEL BELMONT electric car at the depot.



“THE BELMONT”, THE LAST HOTEL AT SULPHUR SPRINGS. IT DREW GUESTS FROM ALL OVER THE SOUTH. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

EDWIN CARRIER



Edwin Carrier

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Edwin Carrier is the single person most responsible for the development of West Asheville. In the 1880's, he was on his way from Michigan to Florida, when he stopped in Asheville. He was struck by the region's beauty and natural resources. In 1885, this lumber baron moved to West Asheville and bought up 1200 acres, which included Sulphur Springs.

In 1886, Carrier began construction on the Sulphur Springs Hotel, situated on the site of the Deaver Hotel, which had burned down in 1862. Around 1887, Carrier formed the West Asheville Improvement Company. Through this company he laid out the streets of West Asheville, named them, and began building brick buildings on Haywood Road.

In 1889, Carrier brought electricity to West Asheville when he constructed a dam and powerhouse on Hominy Creek in West Asheville. The powerhouse was equipped with a 60-horsepower turbine and a 40-kilowatt generator. This dam powered a commercial street car which ran from the Sulphur Springs Hotel to Asheville. Always alert for a new enterprise, Carrier built a large horse-racing track and fairgrounds by the river where Amboy Road is today. The racetrack was popular, attracting as many as 1500 people for a race. The site became known as Carrier's Field, and would be home to an airfield, and later, to the Asheville Motor Speedway.

Carrier also pioneered modern dairy and cattle-raising methods. He introduced purebred Hereford and Jersey cattle into the area, many of which were purchased by the Biltmore Estate to become the nucleus of the Biltmore Dairy operations.

Though many of his endeavors saw success, Carrier faced hardship when his hotel burned down in 1892 and his orange groves in Florida were lost in a freeze. He died in 1927 and is buried in Riverside Cemetery.



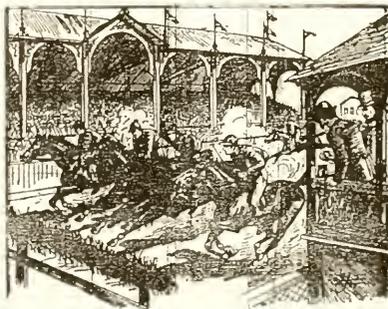
CARRIER DAM AND POWER PLANT ON HOMINY CREEK, 1905 OR 1906, THE FIRST POWER PLANT IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

THE FRENCH BROAD RACING ASSOCIATION

Will Give a Three Days' Meet at Carrier's Track, on Sulphur Springs Car Line.....

Aug. 20th, 21st & 22d

1896



The Association realizes that its patrons will be satisfied with nothing less than the best. Have spared no efforts to secure a list of well known horses to occupy the track and to honestly and fairly contest for the prizes offered.....

6 Races Each Day 6

RACES WILL BEGIN PROMPTLY AT 3 P.M.

There are now 40 horses on the grounds and as many more expected this week. Some of the best horses from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina and District of Columbia. This will be decidedly the best racing ever seen in this State. There will be no jockeying allowed, and races will be started without such tiresome long waits as usual. Everybody come and have a good time.

.....French Broad Racing Association.

ADVERTISEMENT FOR HORSE RACES AT CARRIER'S TRACK ON THE FRENCH BROAD RIVER IN WEST ASHEVILLE, 1895. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

RICHMOND PEARSON & RICHMOND HILL



Richmond Pearson was born in Yadkin County, NC, in 1852. Educated at Princeton, and admitted to the NC Bar in 1874, he was appointed U.S. Consul at Liege, Belgium, that same year. In 1879, Pearson acquired 300 acres on the west side of the French Broad. In 1889 he began construction of a large frame home on his property overlooking the river. On July 4, 1890, to promote a development scheme at Richmond Hill, Pearson paid 1,000 men \$1.00 an hour to help construct a road on the grounds—a mile of road was finished in one hour, and each man was paid one silver dollar. One who was there recalled years later that “the only trouble was that they only let each man work one hour”! Entertainment included Marston’s Zouava Band from Atlanta, and a large fireworks display in the evening, which concluded one of Asheville’s most memorable July 4th celebrations. Pearson continued his career as a legislator and diplomat until 1909. He then retired to Richmond Hill where he died in 1923. In 1984 the Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County had the house moved to its present location. In 1989 Richmond Hill opened as an inn and conference center.



RICHMOND HILL, HOME OF RICHMOND PEARSON, BUILT 1889. NOW RICHMOND HILL INN. PHOTO NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

BINGHAM MILITARY SCHOOL

The Bingham Military School was founded by Rev. William Bingham in Hillsboro, NC, in 1793. Rev. Bingham died in 1863, and his sons, William and Robert took over operation of the school. In 1865, the school was moved to Mebane, NC. After two disastrous fires within a few years, Robert Bingham began the search for a new location—a city large enough to offer fire protection. Charlotte and Asheville both sought the school. Asheville prevailed, and the new school was established on Bingham Heights on the west bank of the French Broad in 1891. The internationally-known school attracted students from all over the U.S. and throughout the world. A 1909 catalogue notes students from the Caribbean, South America, Asia, and Europe. The last Col. Bingham died in 1927, and the school was forced to close in May of 1928.



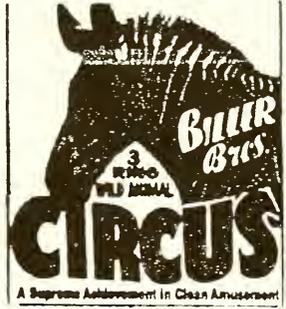
THE BARRACKS AT BINGHAM MILITARY SCHOOL, EARLY 20TH CENTURY. BARRACKS AND OTHER BUILDINGS WERE BURNED IN 1977 IN A TRAINING EXERCISE FOR WNC FIRE AND RESCUE PERSONNEL. POSTCARD, NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

LOGAN SHOWGROUNDS



Logan Showgrounds, along the river on Craven St. in West Asheville, were familiar to people throughout Asheville. Owned and operated by W.E. Logan, the Showgrounds were a venue for various public shows, including many circuses. In 1938, 10,000 people paid 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for children to see the Sparks-Downie Brothers Combined Circus. The circus featured over 300 acts, including bare-back riders, acrobats, high wire acts, 65 clowns, and Chief "No Knife" and his Indian Congress. In September, 1940, the original Lone Ranger, Les Powell, and his horse, Trigger, appeared at the Showgrounds with the Wallace Brothers Trained Animal Circus.

1 DAY ONLY - ASHEVILLE -
 LOGAN SHOWGROUNDS
TONITE 8:15
 1 PERFORMANCE 7:30 A.M. TO 7 P.M.
 DOORS OPEN 1 HOUR EARLIER



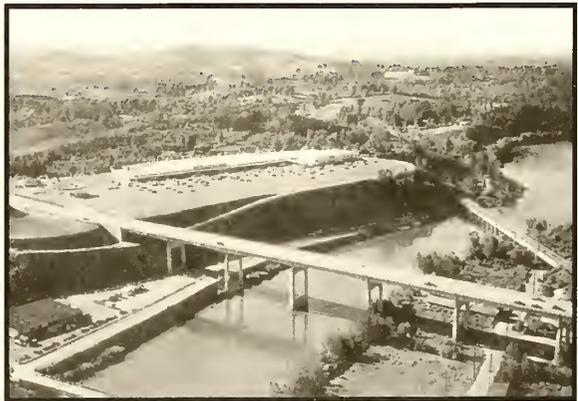
WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA LIVESTOCK MARKET



WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA LIVESTOCK MARKET, 157 CRAVEN ST. EWART BALL PHOTO, EARLY 50S, COURTESY CHARLES MESSER. LOCATED ALONG THE FRENCH BROAD ON THE FORMER LOGAN'S SHOWGROUNDS, OPERATED BY THE MESSER FAMILY SINCE THE 50S, THE MARKET COVERS ABOUT AN ACRE, WITH ROOM FOR 2,000 HEAD OF STOCK. IT HAS LONG BEEN THE LARGEST LIVESTOCK MARKET IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA.

OPENING OCTOBER 25TH
Westgate
 SHOPPING CENTER

In October, 1956, Westgate became the first shopping center in Western North Carolina. At the time it was the largest shopping center under one roof in the Southeast. Built on Patton Avenue overlooking the French Broad, at a cost of \$2 million, it advertised 1200 free parking spaces. Stores in the complex included Winn-Dixie, Bon Marche, W.T. Grant, Kirby Shoe Store, Tot Town Children's Nursery, and more. WNC's first drive-in church operated in Westgate's parking lot in the late 60's.



POSTCARD VIEW OF WESTGATE SHOPPING CENTER, 1957. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.



CARRIER FIELD SITE, SHOWING HANGAR AND RUNWAY. MALCOLM GAMBLE PHOTO, EARLY 60S. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY.

CARRIER FIELD

To entertain his guests at The Belmont Inn, Edwin Carrier constructed a horse racetrack in the sandy bottom along the French Broad. The track hosted bicycle races and trotting races as well and drew large crowds. Horse racing caught on, and the French Broad Racing Association was formed. The organization hosted 3-day meets, bringing people from all over the South to compete. The site was also home to a fairgrounds and baseball field.

In 1930, an airstrip was opened on the site with parachute jumping and stunt flying expositions. Throughout the 1930s you would have been able to catch a ride with "Pop" Knightly, a local pilot who flew a Ford Trimotor. This was before paved runways, control towers, and the FAA, and "Pop" was his own mechanic and flight attendant. Still, a Sunday School teacher trusted him enough to load her Sunday School class into the plane for a sight-seeing trip. This was nearly a bad mistake.

"Pop" saw that he was nearly out of gas, but didn't think it would matter, since they weren't going very far. He accelerated down the runway, lifted off, rose to 500 feet, and the engine stopped. Luckily, the Biltmore Estate offered an easy place to land. So "Pop" piloted the plane over the river and crash landed on the Estate. No one was hurt, but the plane was damaged. In 1955, O.G. Barker was doing "touch-and-gos" at the airfield. He took off, flew around in a circle, and landed, then took off again, practicing landing. It was getting dark and neighbors saw him circling around. They thought he was in trouble because he was flying so low, and called the police. The police were slow in arriving, so the neighbors all drove down to Carrier Field. There were no night lights on the Field, and they thought that was what Barker needed. They lined their cars up along the runway, headlights lit. Barker had his landing lights!

The airfield was a busy place. In addition to Knightly and Barker, Philip Van Treuren also operated an aviation business there. With Doc Owen, he owned a Curtiss Robin, with which he flew passengers and towed advertising banners.

In 1960, Carrier Field became the Asheville Motor Speedway.



BILL & FRED RUBY AT CARRIER FIELD, LATE 30S. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY. DONATED BY MARY RUTH DUYCK.



ASHEVILLE MOTOR SPEEDWAY, ON THE SITE OF THE OLD CARRIER FIELD ALONG THE FRENCH BROAD, SEPTEMBER, 1999, 2 WEEKS BEFORE THE FINAL RACE AT THE TRACK. PHOTO, STEVE DIXON. ©1997 THE ASHEVILLE (NC) CITIZEN-TIMES. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

ASHEVILLE MOTOR SPEEDWAY

In 1960, Carrier Field went back to being a racetrack. Instead of horses, stockcars now competed. The racetrack, paved and known as “The River”, was a stop on NASCAR’s Grand National Tour. Such nationally known drivers as Ned Jarrett, Junior Johnson, David Pearson, Ralph Earnhardt, and Richard Petty raced at the track in the 1960s.

The speedway was continuously popular among West Asheville residents, except for some who lived closest to the track. Throughout the years, the track was challenged by noise ordinances brought to light by annoyed neighbors. Track owners maintained a midnight curfew in order to address this issue.

In 1972, NASCAR dropped the track as a stop on its tour. The track continued to thrive, though, as Jack Ingram, Bob Pressley, Harry Gant, and others rode its asphalt to glory. The 1980s and 1990s saw the track serve as an important proving ground for young and old drivers attempting to break into Winston Cup competition.

In 1998, the track was sold to the nonprofit Riverlink Foundation, who donated the land to the city. The City announced plans to turn the site into a greenway. The track was granted a final season in 1999, ending with the last race, the Billy Joe Pressley Memorial Race, on September 17. The deed prohibited future motor racing on the site, so racing—horse and car—has likely seen its final days at the old Carrier Field.

FRENCH BROAD RIVER PARK

The new French Broad River Park is located off Amboy Road along the west bank of the French Broad, just north of the junction of The French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. It is Asheville’s first major riverfront park since Riverside Park was destroyed in the disastrous flood of 1916.



THE NEW FRENCH BROAD RIVER PARK OFF AMBOY ROAD IN WEST ASHEVILLE, WHERE CARRIER BRIDGE CROSSES THE RIVER. PHOTO, RIVERLINK FOUNDATION.

THANKS!

Asheville-Buncombe Library System • Asheville Citizen-Times • Biltmore Press • Rosemarie Brown-Taylor • Calvary Baptist Church • Mary Ruth Duyck • Friends of West Asheville Branch Library • Dale Groce • Barbara Hall • Betsy Murray • Rob Neufeld • Zoe Rhine • David Simon • North Carolina Collection, Pack Memorial Public Library • Special Collections, Ramsey Library, UNCA • Trinity United Methodist Church • West Asheville Business Association • West Asheville Lions Club • West Asheville Story Circle Participants • Ann Wright • Helen Wykle

WEST ASHEVILLE HISTORY PROJECT COMMITTEE

Pope & Dot Ballinger • Bruce Emory • Culley Holderfield • Freddie Hopper • Lissa Juedemann • Joan Johnson • Millie Jones • Minnie Jones • Frank & Nancy Leppert • Dan Lobdell • Karen Loughmiller • Glenn May • Kathy Newfont

SPECIAL THANKS

Bruce Emory • Harlan Gradin • Culley Holderfield • Freddie Hopper • Mrs. Inez Horton • Image 420 • Ed Sheary • Staff of West Branch Library • The PEOPLE of West Asheville!

STAFF

Project Director:
Karen Loughmiller

Writers:
Culley Holderfield, Phyllis Lang

Photographers:
Lissa Juedemann, Dan Lobdell

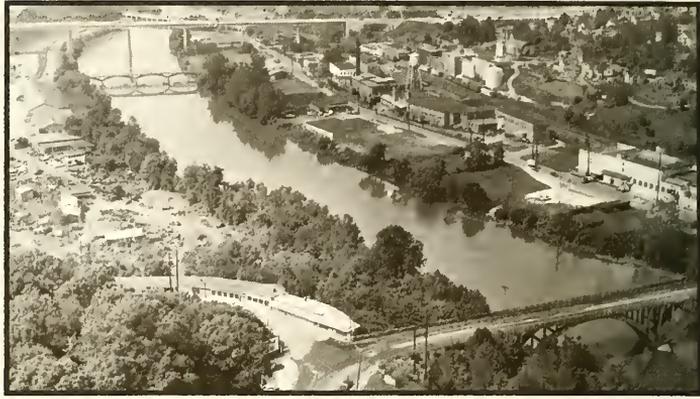
Research:
Bruce Emory, Millie Jones

Consulting Humanities Scholar:
Dr. Phyllis Lang

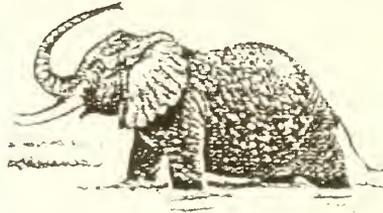
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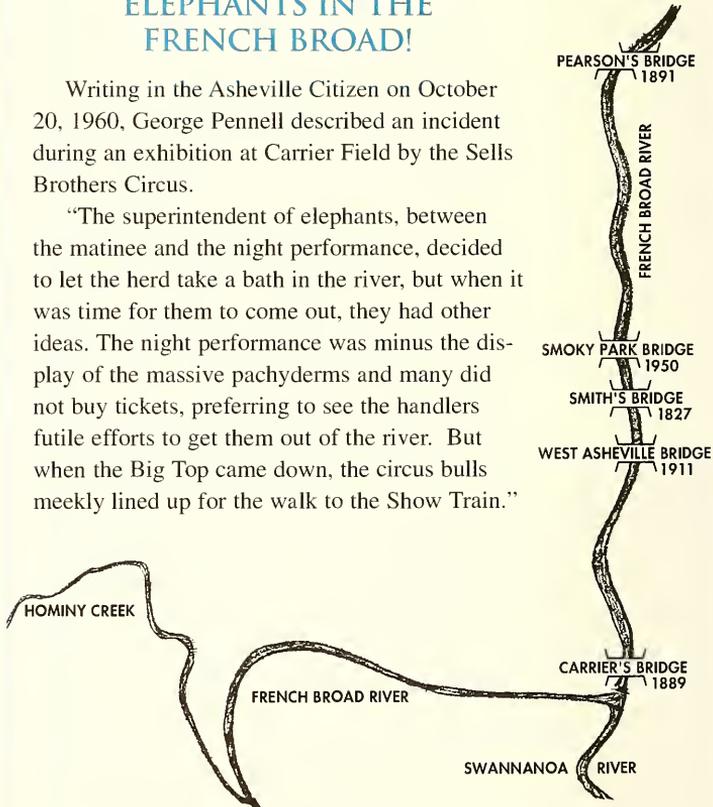
AERIAL VIEW LOOKING NORTH ALONG THE FRENCH BROAD FROM JUST SOUTH OF THE WEST ASHEVILLE BRIDGE, AUGUST 1960. PHOTO BY MALCOLM GAMBLE. NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY



ELEPHANTS IN THE FRENCH BROAD!

Writing in the Asheville Citizen on October 20, 1960, George Pennell described an incident during an exhibition at Carrier Field by the Sells Brothers Circus.

“The superintendent of elephants, between the matinee and the night performance, decided to let the herd take a bath in the river, but when it was time for them to come out, they had other ideas. The night performance was minus the display of the massive pachyderms and many did not buy tickets, preferring to see the handlers futile efforts to get them out of the river. But when the Big Top came down, the circus bulls meekly lined up for the walk to the Show Train.”



THE FRENCH BROAD RIVER

West Asheville History Project West Asheville Branch Library
942 Haywood Road, West Asheville 828-251-4990