

“Shreds and Patches”: Reconstructing Affrilachian Cultural History

The distinguished American anthropologist Robert Lowie famously remarked that culture was a thing of “shreds and patches.” The archives and libraries of Appalachia contain only shreds of documentation concerning the history and culture of African Americans in the region.

Researchers must try to identify these often random shreds of information and to patch them together into some kind of coherent account of black life in Appalachia. First this should be done on a community by community basis. No matter how coherent the finished accounts appear they will be incomplete and biased. Second, comparisons of African-American life in various local communities within the larger region should be compared. In spite of their shortcomings, these kinds of reconstructions help us better understand the larger dimensions of Affrilachian cultural history, what are its commonalities and what are local adaptations? In this presentation, I attempt to patch together the shreds of documentation on black life in Watauga County, North Carolina, culled from the various holdings in the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, to make a very tentative reconstruction.

[ARTHUR]

The earliest evidence of Africans in what is now Watauga County, cited in John Preston Arthur's *A History of Watauga County North Carolina with Sketches of Prominent Families* (1915) was that of Burrell, "an old African slave" (19, fn 3) who told Daniel Boone that a log cabin--later known as the Daniel Boone cabin--was used by Ben Howard for his herders. Arthur also tells us that Jesse Boone, his wife, and "his negro girl, Dina" joined Three Forks Baptist, the county's oldest church; that Dorry and Loddy Oaks made enough powder on Powder Creek "to buy a negro man"; that Ellington and John Cousins were "dark of skin" (147), coming to Boone from Forsyth County and bringing with them white women; and that Mr. And Mrs. William Mast, living in Valle Crucis were "poisoned by drinking wild parsnips in their coffee" (200). Either the slave woman, "Mill or Milley," who had been whipped for stealing did the poisoning in revenge, or that she and her slave lover, Silas Baker, were both involved. Mill was sold to John Whittington and taken to Tennessee. Silas was taken to Texas with Jacob and Elizabeth Baker Mast. The only other antebellum reference to an African in Arthur's work is mention of Jesse Mullins and his wife, who lived on the South Fork of the New River about four miles from Boone. They had two slaves stolen from them who were later found in a "Southern city" (202) and were returned to the elderly couple.

Historian Daniel Whitener in his little book *History of Watauga*

*County, North Carolina 1849-1949 and History of Appalachian State
Teachers College 1899-1949: A Souvenir of Watauga Centennial*

(1949) reviewing the first federal census from 1790 concluded that there were ten slaves owned by five individuals in the area that was later to become Watauga County.

Census data is, of course, one of the librarian's and archivist's primary resources for finding information on blacks in Appalachia. Former W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection Librarian, the late Eric Olson, in an unpublished 1984 paper "Blacks in Watauga County, 1770-1870," analyzed the federal censuses done prior to the formation, in 1849, of Watauga County--primarily out of Ashe County but including smaller parts of Wilkes and Yancey Counties--and found many of the same surnames among the slaveholders that later were the names of prominent families in Watauga.

[MAP OF COUNTY]

The 1850 census lists 39 slave owners and 129 slaves. Most owners

had only one or two slaves but Jourdan Council had 13, Joel Mast had 10, Jonathan Hardin had 9, as did Jonathan Horton. The community around Council's store later became the town of Boone and Council, Mast, Horton, and Hardin have been prominent families in the county, their names still affixed to communities, streets, stores, and people of both black and white skin. That these men were more affluent than nonslave owning farmers is apparent in Olson's comparisons: slave owners owned over twice the acreage, their farms had three times the value, their equipment five times the value, and their livestock almost three times the value as that owned by those who did not have slaves.

[MAP OF BOONE SHOWING SLAVE CABINS] from Ben

Horton's *Glimpses of Yesteryear in Watauga County* (1975)

In 1860, there were 31 slave owners and 93 slaves with Jordan Council and John Whittington each owning 11 people. The 1860 census also counted slave houses and Council had 3 and Whittington had 2. Other slave owners had one slave house or none at all. In 1860, there were 78 free blacks: 6 in Blue Ridge township, 15 in Beaverdam, 7 in

Cove Creek, 5 in Laurel Creek, 16 in Mountain Home, and 29 in Boone.

In both 1850 and 1860, the majority of slaves and free blacks lived in Boone township. Slavery declined over the decade and the number of free blacks rose.

[1860 MAP]

By 1870, there were 210 blacks in Watauga County: 106 in Boone, 27 in Blue Ridge, 24 in Cove Creek, 19 in Mountain Home, 12 in Beaverdam, 10 each in Laurel Creek and Valley Crucis, and 2 in Meat Camp. In 1870, blacks were 4% of the county's total population compared with a state average of 33%. (In 1911, Mountain Home township became part of the newly formed Avery County.)

[1870 MAP]

[1911 MAP]

After the Civil War, there were a number of small rural black communities in Watauga and surrounding counties with a larger

concentration of African Americans in Boone. According to Boone native Frazier Robert Horton's 1942 NC A&T masters thesis *Negro Life in Watauga County*, there was one black school in the county in 1885 but three by 1887. The first teachers were white since no blacks in the county had enough formal education to teach and the school typically lasted only a couple weeks a year. All of the early school houses were of log construction. Horton described them as being built of "rough hewn logs. The chimneys were built to the 'hip' of rocks and the remainder was made of timber and mud. Ofttimes the timber of the chimney caught fire, only to be extinguished by the teacher and larger pupils. The seats were made of rough logs, raised to the desired height by supporting sticks, called legs. The teacher's desk was often a box. The children used slates and slate pencils. . ." (14).

[BEAVERDAM PAGE OF SCHOOL CENSUS]

Horton notes that there were four black schools by 1890 and this is confirmed by the 1892 school census which includes four districts with "collard," "colard," of simply "col" students corresponding to Boone (where school was held in the Boone Methodist Chapel), Cove Creek, Elk Creek, and

Beaverdam townships. Black teachers were often recruited from outside the county. In one of the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection's oral history collections is a taped interview with Gertrude Tolbert Folk. Folk told how B.B. Dougherty, founder of Appalachian State University and Superintendent of the Watauga County schools, while on a speaking trip to Carson-Newman College, recruited her at age eighteen in Jefferson City, Tennessee, to come to Watauga County where she taught in the schools at Beaverdam, Cove Creek, and Boone.

The census for District 3, or Beaverdam, indicates that the children of Wesley Read (or Redd) attended that school. Redd and his family lived on the North Fork of the New River on Snake Mountain. The Redds had been forgotten until Pat Beaver and her students recovered some of their history and discovered the remains of their family graveyard in Pottertown, a place notorious for feuding, violence, moonshining, and suspicion of, if not outright hostility to, outsiders. Theresa Burchett in "The Story of Wesley Red" published in October-November 2000 issue of the *Appalachian Cultural Museum* newsletter, told their story.

[STONE MTN PORTRAITS, MCQUEEN CABIN,
HORACE, ROAD SIGN, CHURCH, DAVE
THOMPSON PICTURE, THOMPSON HOUSE, DAVE
THOMPSON SONG]

According to Coolidge Cornett, a white neighbor, Dave's wife Nellie chewed tobacco and kept the tobacco down in her blouse. "Coolidge's boys used to go up and she would give them a little chew. They called it 'titty baccer'." [*Ballads and Songs of Tradition from the Folk-Legacy Archives* CD-125]

The number of black schools fluctuated. In 1900, there were six but by 1905 there were only two. In 1925, there were three, one each in Beaverdam, Cove Creek, and Boone. In 1932, the Cove Creek school was "consolidated" with the one in Boone and in 1937, a new frame building, was constructed by the W.P.A. in Boone according to the unpublished *Historic and Architectural Resources of Watauga County, North Carolina, ca. 1763-1952* (2003) to create "Watauga Consolidated School." This school added 8th and 9th grades and consolidated the

Beaverdam and Boone schools. At first, the black families of Beaverdam refused to send their children to school in Boone until the county took legal action against them. Horton, who at the time was the school's primary teacher, described the new school: "[It] has five rooms. Two large classrooms can be combined to make an auditorium. It has two large cloak rooms, with toilet, wash basin, and drinking fountain in each; and a spacious lunch room with store room. The class rooms are very large and well lighted. Electricity is used as a source of light and power. Each room has a large book case. Book shelves are in the grammar grade room. The Rosenwald Fund supplemented by the county gave the school a very complete set of books. Many of these books are about Negroes and by Negro writers. The Library had a volume of some 500 books. In 1937 the Dayton Public Library of Dayton, Ohio, sent the school a large selection of good used books and the Appalachian State Teachers College, Boone, N.C., also gave the colored school about 200 books which were on the elementary school level. . . . The seats of the class rooms are of the most modern type. In the primary room is a piano. Each room has sufficient blackboard space. . . . The lunch room, which is in the basement of the school, is a large plastered room. Screened windows and doors help to make it sanitary. . .

. Hot and cold running water is available in the lunch room.”

[WCSCHOOL]

In 1942, there were five black churches in the county: Little Zion Church in Cove Creek (originally Missionary Baptist but by 1942 Mennonite, and in some our oral histories referred to as “Mennonite Baptist”), Little Lion Baptist Church now known as Mount Olive Baptist, originally pastored by a white man, in Beaverdam, in addition to three churches in Boone: Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, Boone Methodist Chapel (the first black church in Boone built in 1898 and the only black church until 1917 was closed in 1989), and the Little Rock Zion Missionary Baptist (est. in 1940). The Missionary Baptist Church, according to Nell Ray’s oral history interview, was established by community members who were unhappy with requirements of Mennonite worship and baptismal services and with its outsider, white leadership. The church struggled on into the 1970s. Two Hagler brothers

established a charismatic church but it only lasted about three years. The Methodist Chapel is documented by Jodie Danielle Manross in her 1996 ASU honors thesis *A Cultural History of the Boone Methodist Episcopal Church* and failed attempts to save the building were documented by Manross and Sue Keefe in their 1999 *Appalachian Journal* article "Race, Religion, and Community: The Demolition of a Black Church" (26/3).

[PICTURES OF METHODIST CHAPEL--CLIPPINGS FILES]

By 1942, there was also a seasonal black population of 200-300 people living in Blowing Rock. Only one black family owned a residence in Blowing Rock and it was the center of black social activity there. Blacks in Blowing Rock used the white Presbyterian Church building to hold their own religious services. By 1949, the Tin Top, a tavern featuring drinking, dancing, and gambling existed and according to Barry Buxton in *A Village Tapestry: The History of Blowing Rock*

(1989), the white community wanted to offer the black population an alternative to the Tin Top. Prominent whites in Blowing Rock built the Blowing Rock Negro Community Church on the outskirts of town on Possum Hollow Road. The Negro Community Church closed its doors in 1980 due to a dwindling membership--this building is still standing and is now used by a white Baptist congregation.

[BR NC CHURCH]

The story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren in northwestern North Carolina has been told by Katherine Siemmens Richert in her 1984 book *Go Tell It On the Mountain: The Story of the North Carolina-Tennessee Mennonite Mission*, and in other assorted publications: in Mrs. Joseph Tscetter's memoir *My Life Story* (1945), and in a number of articles in *The Christian Witness*, a serial publication of the Mennonite Brethren published in Inman, Kansas, as well in the scholarly publications of Conrad Ostwalt and the 1997 UNC-Chapel Hill masters thesis, "*How Firm a Foundation*": *Denominationalism and Congregational Identity at an African American Mennonite Brethren Church* by Elizabeth Miller.

[MENNONITE CHURCH]

The Boone church was established in 1917 and today is the only functioning black church in Watauga County. Its first black minister, Morris Rockford Hatten was ordained in 1927. He--along with Rhonda Horton, a Boone native and the second ordained African-American Mennonite pastor--helped establish other churches such as the one in Cove Creek requested by the five Whittington brothers who lived there with their large families.

In 1940, there were 59 black families in the county and 42 black home owners. 15 black families lived on farms of one acre or more and 32 had "exceptionally large gardens, upon which they greatly relied" (Horton 1942:9). 20 blacks worked as cooks and dishwashers in commercial establishments and 20-30 black women worked as domestics. Blacks in Watauga also worked as orderlies, service station attendants, janitors, bellmen, and plasterers. Twenty blacks owned cars and 32 owned radios. In the black section of Boone there were two small grocery stores with stocks of less than \$200 and a one-chair barbershop. We know from Sandra Hagler's

unpublished genealogy, *Hagler, Horton, Grimes: 1820-1986*, that in the 1940s, there was also a black club in Boone, the "Chocolate Bar," and an organized black baseball team, the Boone Mountain Lions.

[HAGLER, HORTON, GRIMES]

Today, the small black communities and individual farms that once dotted the landscape of Watauga County are mostly gone. Most of the county's blacks now live in Boone. Others migrated to large urban centers or to the coal fields of Virginia, West Virginia, or Kentucky and they did not return. Earlier in the 20th century, many Watauga County blacks migrated seasonally to work in the coal mines. One favorite location was Tom's Creek in Wise County, Virginia where Reverend Rhonda Horton joined other Watauga County blacks in the mines.

The black community in Boone developed and grew after the Methodist Chapel was established in 1898. The reverse process also worked; the decline of communities meant the loss of their churches. Rev. Horton, in a 1984 oral history interview, described the decline of

black churches and communities in the area: "See there's never been too much work for people in this part of North Carolina. But all the work was at Lenoir for black people. About all there was to do was work around on the farm or something like that and a lot of our people then left, has left this country and went north, a lot of them. And our churches kind of dwindled down. And I was the one that got to see it. Some of the places where our churches was, they's not even any black people there. Take down at Shell Creek, they's one family left."

This dispersal is illustrated in the mailing list of those who attended the annual Hagler/Horton/Grimes reunion in the late 1980s: 11 were from Philadelphia; 8 from Jonesville, NC; 3 each from Pittsburg, Winston-Salem, and Mountain City, TN; 2 each from Lexington, NC, Virginia Beach, and Wilkesboro, NC; and one each in 18 other locations with many of them in New Jersey and Pennsylvania in the general vicinity of Philadelphia.

When Rhonda Horton (bn 1895) was a small boy there were only "4 or 5 or 6" black families "on the hill," on Howard's Knob above Boone--

today this is the primary black community in Watauga County and is now referred to as the Junaluska community after the name of the principle road up from town. In 1973, Horton described how Howard's Knob now heavily wooded was all cleared then. The black men kept it cleared for the white owners in a sharecropping arrangement: "There's a lot more trees. You see, after people, the way they kept their land cleaned up--Now my Daddy he's rent land and clean it up and they'd give him all he made on it for two years and the third year he'd get two thirds and give the landlord a third. The fourth year he'd get half but most of the time he'd only two or three years and they kept the land cleaned up that way. We raised a lot of corn and potatoes and beans and cabbage and pumpkins."

[BOONE CEMETERY, CLARISSA RIDGE, TOMBSTONES]

Boone Grimes recounts how he came to Boone from above the Johns River in adjacent Caldwell County when he was twelve years old to work on a large farm in what is now known as Perkinsville in east Boone. Susie Mathis' family was brought from Avery County to do farm work in Perkinsville too. In spite of there having been more cleared land in the vicinity of Boone, Grimes described a place more abundant in wildlife: "We'd get out on that farm in the mountains and see the wolves, wild wolves and painters in droves. Bears and deers was

plentiful. Now they're not, where you can see them. Is that--you could see them anytime through the daytime or night, either one you wanted to."

Grimes and others interviewed in the 1970s and 1980s remembered the gardens that everyone maintained, the hogs they kept, how when hunters killed a large animal they split the meat with all their neighbors, and they remembered cooperative community events like log rollings and corn shuckings usually with a bottle of apple brandy hid at the bottom of the pile of unshucked corn. James McQueen recalled that in his childhood there were a number of local blacks with skills such as brick masons and plasterers. These were skills learned in slavery but after the old men died out these jobs were no longer available to African Americans. A number of informants remembered white and Native American ancestors. Reverend Horton stated of his mother's people: "they was Indians and white people."

Many of these black Watauga Countians also talked about race relations. Revs. Horton and Hatten often preached and even conducted funerals in white churches and Rev. Horton remembered white people in his Cove Creek congregation. Rev. Hatton's son, Rev. Morris Hatton, still conducts revivals in white rural churches. He also plays keyboards and sings saying his music is neither black nor white but "blight."

[HATTON PICTURE AND SONG] [Words of the Gospel LP]

Although informants remembered discrimination and abuse at the hands of white people, and Kenneth Mathis remembered the black school children putting on minstrel shows for the white schools, they also generally agreed that race relations were better in Watauga County than in most places. James McQueen said: "The whole town was pretty, pretty well open, and it, it always has been. Even as a child, there was lots of things that you couldn't do only twenty-eight miles from here, going in either direction, that we could do in this town, as far as, say, go in the drugstore and sit down and drink you a Coca Cola or eat a sandwich in Boone Drug. I did that back, oh, when I was ten, twelve, thirteen years old, and there was really nothing said about it." Leroy Kirkpatrick, who was born in Charlotte but grew up in the coal fields where he met his wife, a Boone native, in Kentucky with members of her family who were working seasonally as miners, said: "White and colored all be together. We just the same as--well, like it is now. . . . I used to work for a man, and when dinnertime comes, we'd come right into the table and sit down with them and eat, all be right together." McQueen attributed

the better race relations to the fact that "this entire community is--it was so small, until everyone knowed everybody by name, and I think this made a, a great big difference."

[WATAUGA CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL]

There was enough sentiment against racial integration among local whites that in 1959, the county began construction on a new black school. The new Watauga Consolidated School, made of brick and looking off toward Grandfather Mountain was opened in 1960, six years after the Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court decision. Serving grades 1-12, this school was the county's first to offer a complete high school curriculum to black students. The school was closed in 1965 when the county's high schools were consolidated and the school system integrated. According to the Bicentennial Committee's report, *Development of Public Education in Watauga County North Carolina* (n.d.), in its last year, the Watauga Consolidated School had 49 students and three teachers.

Obviously this is a very incomplete account, a thing of shreds and patches. Incomplete as it is, this reconstruction has value because it

paints a picture different from that of the popular perception of African Americans in the mountains.

Initial research in the shreds and patches of documentation on Afrilachian life in neighboring counties suggests a similar history of once widely dispersed black communities and individual homesteads from just after the Civil War to the middle of the 20th century and their almost complete disappearance in rural sections since that time with blacks becoming concentrated in the region's towns or leaving the region altogether. To determine whether this pattern was prevalent in other places in the Blue Ridge Mountains or in other Appalachian subregions will require a lot more work in our region's libraries and archives.