

Highlands Historical Society

Summer 2008

To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands

Highlands, N. C.

HENRY M. BASCOM, MERCHANT PRINCE

Henry Martin Bascom came to Highlands from Illinois in 1881 in search of restored health. When he arrived he suffered from a lung disease that made him unable to buy life insurance. In Highlands, he lived to the age of eight-eight.

Mr. Bascom was a native of Illinois and the son of a Presbyterian minister. He had worked since the age of eleven to support his two younger sisters and brother. Apprenticed to a tinsmith, he had little opportunity for formal education but read extensively and was said to devour a book each day.

When he arrived in Highlands with a wife and infant son, Mr. Bascom had \$300 in his pocket and would become one of the town's leading citizens and businessmen. An article about Highlands in the New York Tribune called him "Town Builder and Merchant Prince of Highlands." He always dressed as a gentleman in coat, vest, and tie.

He opened a tin shop soon after his arrival and then a general store. In 1883 he constructed a fine two story building at the northwest corner of Main and Fourth Streets.

This structure housed both his tin shop and store which carried drugs, hardware, plumbing, and candy. Later, meat was added, and coffee. Soon after the first automobile appeared in Highlands in 1913, Mr. Bascom had a fifty-five gallon barrel of gasoline available for sale at his store. The gasoline was hauled by wagon from Mountain Rest, South Carolina, and a siphon was used as a pump

Mr. Bascom was elected one of Highlands' first three town commissioners in 1883, and then became its sec-

ond mayor when the first holder of that office resigned in 1885. Over the years, he served as mayor five times for a total of seventeen years. He was also a member of the town's first police force, a group of seven men elected in 1883, and he was a road commissioner as well as Highlands' first notary public. In 1887, after the death of his wife, he married Amanda Florence Coffin, called Florence.



During the years when he served as mayor, the town ordinances included a prohibition of animals in certain areas of the town. On one occasion he spotted a lady at some distance riding a horse on the sidewalk and sent a constable to charge the woman with a violation. He later learned that she was his wife. Being conscientious in his duties, he fined her as the law required. This incident was recorded in the town records, but the records do not reveal the nature of the reception that the mayor received when he returned home that evening.

In 1889 Mr. Bascom began construction of Davis House located on the hill between Church and Spring Streets. This was a stately three-and-a-half story hotel surrounded by wide verandas on two levels. Mrs. Mary Davis, the adopted mother of his new wife, managed the hotel with great success. Davis House became one of the finest inns in the South and one of only three in the nation to be given a three star rating by the Baedeker guide. The hotel was sold in 1923, but Mr. Bascom's daughter, Louise Barratt, bought it back in 1930. After her death in 1949, her husband, Watson Barratt, assumed management of the hotel and renamed

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President's Letter

We appreciate all of you who have supported the Historical Society by renewing your membership this year and hope that others will take a few moments to join.

Our cover story for this issue features Henry Bascom whose surname has been given to the new arts center under construction on the old Crane stable property. We would like to remind our readers of the historical background behind The Bascom name and the debt we owe to Mr. Bascom, his daughter, Louise, and her husband, Watson Barratt.

The Society is collaborating with the Highlands Chamber of Commerce to publish a new walking tour – the Highlands Heritage Trail. A new brochure available at our museum and at the Chamber lists 51 historic structures and sites, and the Society is in the process of placing identifying markers on each. We have approval from over half of the property owners to affix these small signs and are hopeful that we will soon have approval for all 51!

We would also like for you to know about our oral history program. Some years ago we began recording the recollections of old-time Highlands residents as a way of preserving their personal knowledge for future generations. This program had languished over the last few years but we are committed to reviving it and have appointed a committee chaired by Eric NeSmith to direct the renewed efforts.

Our two remaining events this year are the Tour of Historic Homes on August 9 and the Christmas Showhouse on December 6 and 7. I think you would enjoy both. The museum, archives, and Prince House remain open until October 31.

This brings me to my final point: volunteers. They are the mainstay of our organization and can help in so many ways. Please let us know if you have an interest in being a part of our efforts to preserve Highlands history and the way of life that we all enjoy.

Walter Wingfield

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Memorial Day–Oct. 31: Museum and Archives
(Fridays & Saturdays)
August 9: Tour of Historic Homes
December 6-7: Christmas Show House

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CHRISTMAS SHOWHOUSE

“Christmas Past” comes alive each year when the Highlands Historical Society opens one of the town’s historic homes decorated for the holidays by a talented group of decorators. This year one of the finest remaining Joe Webb cottages will be featured, the Satulah Mountain home of Jim Green.

Merchants and decorators donate their talents and services to provide decorating ideas to present-day homeowners while they visit a historic Highlands home. Decorations will include a variety of traditional displays. The chair of this year’s event is Elaine Whitehurst.

Joe Webb built carefully crafted and aesthetically pleasing log homes in Highlands from the 1920s until the 1940s. The home featured in this year’s Showhouse was constructed in 1930 and was described in the survey for the National Register of Historic Places as “one of the finest and best preserved” of the Joe Webb houses.

The Showhouse will be open from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, December 6 following the Christmas Parade and Sunday, December 7. Plan now to view a beautifully decorated historic home Saturday after the Parade, or Sunday after church service. Tickets at \$40 each will be available at the Civic Center where you will park and take a shuttle to the Showhouse.

TOUR OF HOMES, AUGUST 9

For generations families have flocked to Highlands to escape the heat of summer and the fast pace of city life. On August 9, this year’s Tour of Historic Homes, sponsored by the Society, will highlight six of those historic summer retreats.

Aptly dubbed “the Clemson Colony,” many homes featured on this year’s Tour were built or owned by Clemson professors and faculty during the late 1920s and 1930s along the south shore of Mirror Lake on Cullasaja Drive.

One of these is the Harcombe home currently owned by Jim Peterson. According to a tribute appearing in the Clemson University News Services, Captain James D. Harcombe was Mess Hall Officer at Clemson College beginning in 1920 and continuing until his death in 1946. Fondly referred to as “Cap’n”, Harcombe was known to help cadets financially



and serve as a career and personal advisor to them. The unique feature of the Harcombe home is its rare chestnut bark siding, one of the few examples remaining in Highlands today.

This year’s tour will also include three excellent examples of cabins designed and constructed by legendary Joe Webb.

A general admission ticket of \$40 includes a tour of all six homes and refreshments. The Tour will run from 10:00 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, August 9. Shuttles will leave from the Recreation Center on North Fourth Street with the last shuttle leaving at 2:45 p.m. Tickets may be purchased at Country Club Properties, Highlander Newspaper, Cyrano’s Bookshop, Macon Bank, or the Rec Center on the day of the Tour. Funds raised by this event will be used to support the Highlands Historic Village.

WALK IN THE PARK

This year’s Walk in the Park held on June 20, 21 and 22 saluted the opening of The Bascom art center by presenting seven of the artists from Highlands history. These were Louis Zoellner, a violinist from Germany; Louise Bascom Barratt, writer, painter, and theatre critic whose husband bequeathed the funds to establish the Bascom-Louise Gallery named for Louise and her father; Polly Knipp Hill, whose etchings preserved life in Highlands in the mid-20th century; Henry Scadin, a photographer whose photographs of Highlands and environs recorded its natural beauty; Huger Elliott, architect and art historian who designed the original Hudson Library building and held several important posts in the world of art, including a director of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art; Fred



Allen, who served for 17 years as an early director of the Highlands Community Theatre; and Almetta Picklesimer Brooks, who became a recognized painter and sculptor at the age of 70.

Actors who dedicated themselves to portraying the historic personages were Hunter Coleman, Josh Diamond, Lee Lyons, Jennifer Royce, Becky Schilling, Wiley Sloan, and Dean Zuch.

Performances were held Friday and Saturday evenings at Highlands Memorial Park, where several of the artists are buried, and Sunday at the Performing Arts Center.

This year’s chairman of the event was Elaine Whitehurst who was assisted in researching and writing the scripts by Sue Potts, Kathleen Wilson, Anne Doggett, and Ran Shaffner.

HENRY M. BASCOM

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it Bascom-Louise in honor of his wife and her father. It later was known as Lee's Inn before being destroyed by fire in 1982.

Mr. Bascom also owned a large livery stable on the site presently occupied by Trader Joe's on Main Street. The stable provided transportation for travelers to and from Highlands and also for the provisions which Mr. Bascom would sell in his store.

In addition to his many other activities, Mr. Bascom was also a real estate investor. He bought and sold several properties including all of the lots still owned by Samuel Kelsey, the founder of Highlands, after Mr. Kelsey left in 1890 to found the new town of Linville. Mr. Bascom also owned a house on Laurel Street which he sold to A. M. McAfee, an African-American, in 1910. Mr. McAfee was employed at the tuberculosis sanatorium and was one of only two African-Americans to own a home in Highlands at that time. Mr. Bascom repurchased the home from Mr. McAfee in 1923.

While Mr. Bascom generally prospered in his business ventures, not all were successful. In the early years, supplies for the town were brought from Walhalla by horse-drawn wagon which required two days under the best of circumstances. Believing this was not efficient, Mr. Bascom and a partner organized the Highlands Traction Company. A tractor powered by an old steam engine was developed to pull three wagons at the same time. When finally put in service, three days were required for the tractor to pull three empty wagons down the mountain to Walhalla. Then, with 82 sacks of cotton seed meal in the wagons, the return trip began just as foul weather arrived. Three weeks later the two drivers walked into Highlands, each with a single sack of meal on his back. This was the end of the Highlands Traction Company.

The first Highlands home for Mr. Bascom was on Main Street east of Sixth Street. Then, in June 1892 he acquired the site on Satulah Mountain which would become the permanent residence of the Bascom family. There he built a fine two-story Italianate house on the ridge facing eastward toward Whiteside. His skills as a tinsmith were used to build a wood-burning furnace that provided central heating, an unusual feature for that time. Over the next few years he acquired adjoining lands to protect the privacy of his family, and by

1916 they owned twenty acres surrounding their Satulah home.

Mr. Bascom's second wife, Florence, was born in 1858 in Indiana of parents who were native North Carolinians. After the death of her mother when Florence was five years of age, she was legally adopted by her mother's sister, Mrs. Mary Amanda Davis. Florence was still a young woman when her adopted mother left their Indiana residence and came to Highlands in hopes that the mountain climate would improve her health. Mrs. Davis rented the living quarters above Mr. Bascom's store and became manager of the Stanhope Hill House for boarders.

Florence remained in the Midwest and took a job in Kansas City as a typist using one of the first treadle typewriters. When glowing letters from her adopted mother convinced Florence of the pleasures of life in the mountains, she came to Highlands where she married Mr. Bascom in 1887. The new Mrs. Bascom was a very active horsewoman, botanist, and traveler.

Mr. Bascom's daughter, Louise, born in 1885 to his first wife, was a graduate of Wellesley and married Watson Barratt, a New York stage designer and Broadway producer. She lived in New York during most of her adult life and became a nationally known author writing for *Harper's Weekly*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and others. When Louise died in 1949, only three years after her father, she left all of the Highlands real estate including the Bascom home to her husband.

Mr. Barratt designed sets for many plays on and off Broadway beginning in 1918 with *Sinbad* and including Sigmund Romberg's *Student Prince* as well as others which were acclaimed as some of the most beautiful ever seen in New York. When Mr. Barratt died in 1963 he left the Satulah home to the Hudson Library with the provision that Mrs. Barratt's companion, Miss Helen Augur, would have a life tenancy that gave her the use of the property for as long as she lived. The bequest to the library was for the purpose of constructing a gallery to display the works of local artists.

When Miss Augur died in 1981, the property was sold, and the proceeds provided much of the funding for the construction of the present Hudson Library building, which for many years housed the Bascom-Louise Gallery. This was the origin of The Bascom, our new center for the visual arts.