

Highlands Historical Society

Winter 2009

To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands

Highlands, N. C.

HIGHLANDS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Highlands Historical Society is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year. In March, 1999, Dennis DeWolf invited Ran Shaffner to join him for coffee. DeWolf was keenly aware of how fast Highlands was changing and was convinced that its history should be preserved. An earlier organization, Highlands Historical Preservation Society, had been formed twenty years before but had long been inactive. It had not held a meeting in eighteen years. A new effort and new organization were needed.

DeWolf found Shaffner easy to persuade. For several years, Shaffner had been researching Highlands history for his book, *Heart of the Blue Ridge*. He had interviewed many Highlanders who showed him documents and mementos that had been stored in their attics, cupboards, closets, and basements. He knew that these should be assembled in one secure location where they could be preserved, viewed, and appreciated.

The two men concluded that an active society should be formed. They called a meeting of a few interested citizens on April 7, 1999. Edna Bryson, Isabel Chambers, Jan Chmar, Tammy Lowe, Sue Potts, and Walter Taylor attended. More meetings followed over the next few weeks, sometimes twice a week. Officers were elected with Isabel Chambers as president. The name Highlands Historical Society was chosen, and the mission statement that still guides the organization was adopted: "To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands for present and future generations."

The most important question was where to store the documents and artifacts that would be collected. The oldest residence in town, the Prince House, was vacant and could be bought. But the old town jail on Maple Street was available for lease and would be far less expensive. The town cooperated splendidly. The old jail was leased to the Society for \$1 a year, and this small building was

intended to be the home of the museum and archives.

Efforts began immediately to assemble items from the community. The first artifacts to be stored in the old jail were books from Prof. Thomas Harbison's library that had served Highlands' first school in the 1800s.

Several months passed, but the members of the new organization could not forget the Prince House. In November, a decision was made to explore this possibility further. Sue Potts, the first secretary of the Society, went to her son, Tony Potts, and asked, "How can we get the Prince House?" Tony was the manager of Macon Bank's Highlands office, and he went to work. He found ten Highlanders who each agreed to guarantee \$25,000 of

a loan on condition that their names not be made public. Tony committed Macon Bank to provide a loan of \$250,000, and a group of interested and dedicated citizens contributed another \$25,000 in cash.

When a purchase price of \$275,000 was negotiated, it became possible to buy this historic structure. But undertaking a commitment of this size was a difficult decision for an organization with only a hand-full of members and almost no money.

One member of the board resigned over the issue, feeling that the risk was too great. And he may have been right. But the majority concluded that this daring step was warranted, and the Society moved forward. With the \$250,000 loan from Macon Bank and the \$25,000 of contributed cash, the Prince House was purchased at a cost of \$275,000. It has become a living museum filled with furnishings typical of various stages of Highlands history, and its grounds provide a site for the Historic Village.

Also in that first year, the Society established a standard for fund raising that has been followed ever since. Fund raising activities would serve a dual purpose: raising money and promoting Highlands history. The first

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President's Letter

In this Thanksgiving season, it seems appropriate to review the blessings this year has brought to the Highlands Historical Society.

We are most grateful to the supporters who made it possible to pay off the mortgage on the Prince House. At year's end 2008 a stock transfer from a generous benefactor made it reasonable to hope for the payoff in 2009. Then NED and LINDA NEW gave a challenge gift that inspired enough other contributions to reach that goal. Thanks to every giver!

Through the ten years of ownership of the Prince House, moisture had been a persistent problem. We are grateful to Tommy Chambers for personally climbing through the attic and onto the roof, identifying the chimney as the source of the problem, and correcting it. Even with all our recent rain, the interior is nice and dry.

We are grateful to painters AL ARMSTRONG and his son for patiently sanding the old paint on the exterior of the Prince House down to bare wood for better adherence of primer and finish paint. Many say it looks better than they can remember.

CATHY DAVIS, landscape designer from Asheville, donated her time to help us spruce up the grounds of the Historic Village. JEFF ZAHNER of Chattooga Gardens donated soil amendments and some of our new plants. And BRIAN STIEHLER, Golf Course Superintendent of Highlands Country Club, volunteered to care for our grass. It looks great, and we are so grateful.

Although we charge modest prices for attendance at Walk in the Park and our Tour of Historic Homes, these are more educational events than money-making projects. We are very grateful to all the actors who gave so much time to this year's Walk in the Park; many say it was the best ever. They included DEAN ZUCH, NICK BAZAN, THOMAS CRAIG, COLIN LONG, JEANNIE CHAMBERS, BECKY SCHILLING, and WENDI DIAMOND. Thanks to all of you.

We are deeply grateful to DR. AND MRS. JOHN NICKERSON, IAN AND DEBI DICKSON, and DR. AND MRS. ERNEST FRANKLIN for opening their homes for our Tour of Historic Homes.

And thanks to each of YOU for your support of HHS!

Elaine Whitehurst

2009 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

December 5-6 Christmas Show House

GRANTS APPRECIATED

We gratefully acknowledge grants received during 2009 from the following benefactors:
Eckerd Family Foundation
North Carolina Community Foundation
for Macon County
Town of Highlands

RENEWED YOUR MEMBERSHIP?

We hope you will do it now.
Family \$50 • Individual \$35 • Sustainer \$100
Business \$250 • Promoter \$500 • Preserver \$1,000
Protector \$2,500 • Highlander \$5,000
And we hope you will add a donation, as many of you have done so generously in the past.
Highlands Historical Society
Post Office Box 670
Highlands, NC 28741-0670

OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS

Elaine W. Whitehurst, President
Eric NeSmith, Vice President
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Jim Green, Newsletter Editor

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The showhouse will be open Saturday and Sunday, December 5-6, from 1:00 to 5:00 each day. The first shuttle leaves the Highlands Community Building (by the ball park) at 1:00, and the last at 4:30. Admission price is \$15.00, and tickets may be purchased from Cyrano's Bookshop, the Chambers Agency, or The Highlander newspaper before the event or at the Community Building on the days of the Showhouse.

CHRISTMAS SHOWHOUSE – DECEMBER 5-6

The Highlands Historical Society presents the 2009 Annual Christmas Showhouse with one of the oldest homes in our area. The Stewart House located just off Hickory Street will come to life once again just for you and will showcase some of Highlands' most talented decorators.

In 1890, Henry Downing from Yazoo, Mississippi, had this two-story home built on a site known as Seminary Hill. Nine years later, Henry Stewart, a prominent early resident of Highlands and well-known agricultural writer from New Jersey, bought the home as a year-round residence for his family. The current owner, Bill Evans, has graciously allowed the Society free reign to decorate his home for the Holidays.

The fact that the Stewart House is an unfurnished home



posed an exceptional challenge for the decorators. It is our hope that those attending this year's event will take their time to look at the details in each room, as absolutely everything is the product of a variety of imaginations and was wrought from a bare room. Many of the items shown will be offered for sale by the decorators. We are extremely grateful for the time these decorators have donated to make this year's Showhouse a success.

The Christmas Showhouse is a wonderful time to view a beautiful old, historic home all decked out with Holiday greens, get some great decorating ideas, and start the Christmas Holiday Season off right.

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KELSEY KIDS PROGRAM

A grant from the Eckerd Family Foundation enabled the Highlands Historical Society to expand its programming this year to include a children's event. Children aged 9, 10, and 11 participated, meeting at the Historic Village every Wednesday for five weeks. Participants included Grace Craig, Emily Crowe, Gracie Crowe, Carter Potts, Seth and Cole Satterwhite, Christian Trevetan, Austin Forrester, and Benjamin Miller. Adult leaders were Sue Potts and Jim and Elaine Whitehurst. Each of the boys received a bib cap and each of the girls a visor bearing the logo: "Kelsey Kids." They also received throw-away cameras to record their activities. Each session included lunch.

The first session acquainted the "Kids" with life on the Highlands Plateau before 1875 when the town was founded. They went to the Foxfire site in Mountain City where 22 historic log cabins have been assembled. A guide demonstrated such skills as blacksmithing, broom-making, and woodworking. The Kids all tried their hand at using such tools as a draw-knife and crosscut saw.

When they gathered the second week, the children walked to several interesting sites. They were surprised when they arrived at the chimney left after the Kelsey

home burned. There stood Dean Zuch in costume as Mr. Kelsey. He addressed them as Mr. Kelsey and explained how he and C. C. Hutchinson had founded the Town, and he offered each Kid an apple that he said came from his orchard in Highlands. They were shown Mr. Hutchinson's home and then heard Wendy Diamond speak as librarian Mary Chapin Smith on the porch of her former home, Wolfgang's Restaurant. Next, they met Margareta Ravenel portrayed by Jeannie Chambers in her elegant costume. They learned that Mrs. Ravenel and her sister had donated the funds to build the Presbyterian Church, the oldest church building in Highlands. Nick Bazan addressed the Kids near Rosenthal's where T. Baxter White opened the first store in Highlands



and served as the town's first postmaster. And finally Thomas Craig introduced them to Professor Thomas Harbison, who started Highlands Academy in 1886.

In later sessions the Kids toured the Prince House, a farm, garden, and apple orchard to view life 100 years ago. They learned to quilt and clog and enjoyed old-fashioned food served by the Satulah Club. Applications for next year's program will be available in the spring.

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project was a Christmas Showhouse at the historic Ravenel home on Wolf Ridge, and "Walk in the Park" was initiated in the following year under the leadership of Chambers. Both events are continued annually and successfully.

In the summer of 2001, Tammy Lowe was president when the Episcopal Church offered to donate the old Hudson Library building if the Society would assume the cost of moving. This was another challenge. The building had served the townsfolk for more than 85 years, and members of the Society did not want to see it destroyed. Efforts began immediately to raise the \$200,000 needed to relocate and restore the building, and a large number of Highlanders responded with generosity. The structure was moved to the grounds of the Historic Village. A site was excavated and concrete poured for a daylight basement to house the archives in a humidity- and temperature-controlled environment. When placed on this foundation, the historic structure had a new home. The museum, archives, and an office for the Society are located in this building.

In 2002, when Mary Berry was president, the Society organized a tour of Joe Webb cabins, an event that became the first of what is now the annual Tour of Historic Homes. Also in that year, the Society received the North Carolina Society of Historians' prestigious Malcolm Fowler Society Award, citing its important contribution to the accumulation and preservation of North Carolina history in only three years of existence.

Refurbishing of both the Prince House and the old library building continued through the presidency of Luther Turner. In 2004, when Wiley Sloan was president, the Society was a grateful beneficiary of yet another pleasant surprise: the offer by Ran Shaffner to serve on a volunteer basis as archivist. This offer was quickly accepted, and Shaffner has worked with diligence in the following years to produce exceptionally fine and comprehensive archives, probably among the best in the nation for a community the size of Highlands.

Activities to raise the funds necessary to retire the mortgage and to maintain the Prince House and the former Hudson Library building continued through the presidency of Walter Wingfield. Contributions of documents and artifacts were solicited and received to significantly enhance the museum and archives. And, in 2008, a "tent cottage" from the grounds of the Highlands Tuberculosis Sanitarium was donated by Dwight and Barbara Davis

and moved to the Historic Village. This was restored and is now on display as another structure of significant historical interest. Also during 2008 a newsletter was initiated, under the editorship of Jim Green, to offer historical education and publicize the activities of the Society.

In this year of 2009, the Society's tenth anniversary, another significant accomplishment has been recorded under the presidency of Elaine Whitehurst. The mortgage that financed the purchase of the Prince House has been paid in full. This is of great importance, freeing the Society to move forward with new programs. Among these is the Kelsey Kids program initiated this year to educate children in the ways of life in early Highlands.

Today, the museum is housed in the main room of the old library building. Some 500 items of significant historical importance and interest are displayed there. An entire room has been dedicated to the display of nearly 100 photographs by the celebrated photographer, George Masa. This outstanding collection was donated by Beverly Cook Quin whose father had hired Masa to promote the Highlands Plateau. The extensive archives contain some 1,800 catalogued items. Writers, historians, and individuals wanting to learn of our town's history or trace their genealogy come to see the many journals, diaries, and extensive collection of historic newspapers.

All of these accomplishments have been made possible by the dedication and hard work of many volunteers, board members, advisory members, and supporters of the Highlands Historical Society, and by the generous donations of artifacts, documents, and money by many people. Larger grants have come from the Town of Highlands, Eckerd Family Foundation, Alice and Kent Nelson, Mountain Findings, Mrs. Charles Webb, the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, and the Macon County Funding Pool.

The Historical Society's vision of "preserving the rich heritage of Highlands" is no longer just a dream. This objective is being effectively accomplished. And the mission becomes increasingly important as time passes. Among the most important of the town's many favorable attributes is the style of life enjoyed by residents and visitors since the founding of the town. The inevitable forces of change tend to erode this cherished ambience. Knowledge of the past brings an awareness and appreciation of its virtues. We believe that the activities and facilities of the Highlands Historical Society will help us be aware of the values of earlier times and encourage us to preserve those things that are most important.