

Highlands Historical Society

Spring 2010

To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands

Highlands, N. C.

EARLY HIGHLANDS – PART ONE

Samuel Kelsey and Clinton Hutchinson arrived on the Highlands Plateau in March of 1875 and bought 839 acres for the creation of the new town that would become Highlands. Their vision was to establish a community with a healthy environment where they would live and raise their families, where exceptionally fine fruits and vegetables could be grown, and where people from the cities of the South would enjoy a summer resort.

The two men lived in an unoccupied log cabin while they cleared a small area for cultivation and planned the layout of streets. There were no other residents living within the town limits, and no roads entered the town. Jim Webb, the young son who came to the Highlands Plateau with his pioneer family in the mid-1850s, remembered,

Highlands Main Street (where the street would later be located) was a laurel hell when we first got here. We had to cut through thickets a rabbit couldn't have gotten past for the oxen to pull our household goods and rations over.

The first person to establish a residence in Highlands after the two founders was T. Baxter White, a native of Marblehead, Massachusetts. Intending to travel to the west, Mr. White passed through New York on his journey and there learned of the new town being established in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He changed his plans and came to Highlands in 1875. He immediately bought land on what would become Main Street and built a home that would also serve as the town's first store and post office. This store opened in July, 1875, and was the entire business district of the town.

Mr. Hutchinson returned to Kansas after a few months, and only Mr. Kelsey remained as a permanent resident to develop and promote the town. While his ef-

forts were vigorous and imaginative, growth of the town remained very slow in the early years.

Prospective newcomers were discouraged by the difficult access, lack of stores and accommodations, and sparse population. At the end of the first year, most of the planned streets had been staked but not cleared, and the few existing streets were little more than lanes where the trees had been cut but the stumps remained. The closest access road in 1875 was a primitive wagon trail that came no nearer than two miles from Main Street. Travelers approaching Highlands were warned of its shortcomings by neighbors in surrounding towns that were at lower altitudes. A letter to the newspaper reported that,

during the winter of 1876, two men from Minnesota were passing through Seneca bound for Highlands. They were told that Highlands was buried under six to eight feet of snow, and they turned around and went back to Minnesota.

But it appears that Mr. Kelsey was not discouraged. His promotion of the new town was in full swing from the beginning, and he was not modest in his acclaim. He prepared

a promotional pamphlet that was distributed throughout the country in 1876. In this pamphlet he declared there is "no better place in the world for health, comfort, and enjoyment" and "no climate or country that brings surer returns to the farmer, fruit grower or stock raiser." A pamphlet published in 1887 described Highlands as being "The Greatest HEALTH and PLEASURE RESORT in the United States" and "The Most PERFECT CLIMATIC SANITARIUM in the World." Dr. H. P. Gatchell contributed to this pamphlet and wrote, "Highlands is distinguished for giving tone to the digestive apparatus and for the natural concomitant—a vigorous appetite."

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Main Street looking East from 3rd, 1883

Determine never to be idle...It is wonderful how much may be done if we are always doing.

~ Thomas Jefferson

You've heard it all before.

History is dull and boring.

Why bother learning about our past?

Well, we all know for a fact that our history and heritage can be fascinating and certainly never dull— simply read the cover story of this edition. But it is our objective to pass that passion for history on to others, allowing them to learn more about what has made and continues to make our community great. In order to obtain our objective, we must never be idle, but always active. We may be a small group, but we are vibrant and dedicated. These qualities will continue to help us educate and inspire others to become more involved, insuring that our history and heritage will always be preserved. We've got a big year planned. I think Jefferson would be proud.

In 2009 we accomplished an incredible feat. Our mortgage on the oldest house in Highlands, the Prince House, has now been paid in full. Your commitment and dedication to the historical society made this feat possible, and we thank you for your continued support.

Now, our current board is dedicated to keeping that momentum rolling in 2010. How can we do that? Writer, politician, and great Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero once said, "Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to be always a child. If no use is made of the labors of past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge." He may have been the first documented to say it, but we all know the importance of understanding and preserving our heritage. Our mission as the Highlands Historical Society is "To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands for present and future generations." This year our board will continue to fulfill this mission by focusing on outreach, education, and partnership within our community. In addition to our annual Walk in the Park, Home Tour and Kelsey Kids events, we will reach further out into the community, partnering with other local non-profit organizations in an attempt to continue educating our community on its heritage.

Please stay involved. We would never have been able to accomplish so much in such a short period of time without your generous support. Thank you!

Sincerely,


Eric NeSmith

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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

The historical society is always in need of volunteers. If you are interested in volunteering in any of the below categories, please let us know!

HHS Volunteer Opportunities

Areas of interest:

- Museum docent (three hours on a Friday or a Saturday from Memorial Day Weekend through October)
- Publicity
- Newsletters
- Genealogical research
- Grounds and building maintenance
- Creation of museum displays
- Activity suggested by you

Frequency of Involvement:

- Weekly
- Monthly
- Annually
- Other _____

Contact us today at highlandshistory@nctv.com or call (828) 787-1050.

Eleventh “Walk in the Park”

The Historical Society has presented ten previous programs of “Walk in the Park,” but never one like this year’s! For the first time the actors will all be women, representing seven “Unsung Heroines” of Highlands.

All the women lived during the time women, even educated women, were not allowed to vote. They operated businesses, taught the Town’s children, and provided housing for relatives and tourists, but were not allowed to vote. Two of those featured, Eléonore Raoul and Charlotte Elliott, helped change that. One, Mary Amanda Davis, operated the Town’s most elegant hotel, the Davis House. Albertina Staub was the Town’s librarian for 17 years, then became a realtor and civic worker. Two sisters, Martha Norton Gottwals and Vinetta Norton Rice, operated

boarding houses. And Corinne Froneberger operated a private school. Their remarkable stories will be presented at Highlands Memorial Park on June 25 and 26, and at the Performing Arts Center on Chestnut Street on June 27.



Colin Long plays Henry Bascom in 2009

The actors who will perform at “Walk in the Park” include Glenda Bell, Jeannie Chambers, Helen Regnery, Marsha Shmalo, Virginia Talbot, Sandie Trevathan, and Elaine Whitehurst. Shuttles will run from the Community Building on North Fourth Street next to the ball-field every 15 minutes from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. on June 25 and 26. Sunday’s performance begins at 4:00 p.m. Admission price for adults is \$15.00; students are admitted free. Proceeds help the Historical Society maintain the buildings at the Historic Village at 524 North Fourth Street.

KELSEY KIDS

Applications are now being accepted for this summer’s class of “Kelsey Kids,” sponsored by the Highlands Historical Society. Enrollment is limited to twelve children ages 9, 10, and 11. Highlands School, Summit Charter School, and home-schooled students are eligible to apply.

“Kelsey Kids” learn about the history of their hometown through interactive projects and field trips on nine consecutive Thursdays from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 or 2:00 p.m. The first session, scheduled June 17, will be a trip to the Foxfire community in Clayton where live demonstrations of blacksmithing, broom-making, spinning, etc. show what life was like in the mountains before 1875 when Highlands was founded. The

“Kelsey Kids” will also take a wonderful trip to visit two of our local farms, witnessing first hand where milk and

eggs come from and how butter is made. Another special event this year will focus on the role the game of Golf has played in Highlands history, with a visit to Highlands Country Club to learn about the game and about Bobby Jones, an early member of the Club who won the grand slam of golf. And another highlight will be a walking tour of historic sites in Highlands.

Lunch is served at each of the sessions, and due to a grant from the Eckerd Family Foundation, all Kelsey Kids activities are free to the children selected for the program. Call (828) 787-1050 to request an application form.



Seven 2009 Kelsey Kids were (front row, left to right) Cole and Seth Satterwhite, Benjamin Miller, Grace Craig, and Emily Crowe; (back row) Christian Trevathan and Carter Potts.

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At least the part about the appetite continues to be true. Another statement made in the pamphlet also continues to apply, “nobody should come here without money.”

While enthusiastic, these promotional efforts brought little response. At the end of 1876 there were five homes in Highlands. Eleven persons had bought land by July of 1878. Twenty-two lots and three other tracts had been sold in the first three years of the town’s existence, and Baxter White had bought eight of these properties.

The number of early residents was small, but they came from throughout the country. John McKinney came from Cashiers Valley to Highlands in December, 1875 and George Jacobs came from near Franklin early in 1876. But after these two, most of the early residents were from distant parts. James Soper came from Pennsylvania, Rev. David Keener from Baltimore, Henry Bascom from Illinois, Arthur House from Connecticut, Charles Allen from Maine, William Munger from Utica, New York, Dr. George Kibbee from New Orleans, and John J. Smith from Illinois, all arriving by the end of 1878. Most brought or soon sent for their families. Some stayed to become long term residents while others like Arthur House, Oscar Ricketson, and Charles Allen were disappointed and left the community after a few months or years.

By 1880, five years after the founding of the town, the population had risen to only eighty-two. A frost in early May, 1881, killed the entire fruit crop in the area, and this put a damper on promotion of the town as a place well suited to growing fruit. Panthers were killing sheep and other animals in the area in 1883, and wolves were still roaming Whiteside Cove in 1884. There was no public water or electric power in the town. An editorial in an 1883 issue of the *Blue Ridge Enterprise*, the first newspaper in Highlands, lamented,

A line of ferry boats should be established at some of our street crossings for the accommodation of the public. In some places the water and mud is too deep to ford during the rainy spells, and as we are not all swimmers, drowning accidents are liable to occur.



Main Street looking West from 5th, ca. 1890

When the town was founded, the closest road led from Franklin over the Highlands Plateau passing near the 15th green of the Highlands Falls Country Club and down through Whiteside and Horse Coves to join the Walhalla Turnpike that ran from Walhalla to Webster. Access to the town was somewhat improved in 1876 when a new but crude route was opened to tie Highlands with the existing road from Franklin to Whiteside Cove. A more significant improvement came in 1879 when a new road running directly between Walhalla and Highlands was put in use. This road, called the “Stooly Road,” climbed from town up the east side of Satulah Mountain, crossed the mountain at Buckhorn Gap, and then followed the route of Old Walhalla Road down the mountain and on to Walhalla. The first road connecting Highlands directly to Franklin was opened in 1889, fourteen years after the town was founded, and the road to Dillard was not opened until 1906. All were dirt roads that were always difficult and at times almost impossible to navigate when the weather was bad.

After 1879 when the dirt road from Walhalla to Highlands was opened, visitors usually came by railroad to Seneca where they changed trains to Walhalla and then traveled on to Highlands by carriage or wagon. This improved access from distant places, but it remained difficult. Train accommodations to Walhalla do not appear to have been convenient. The Blue Ridge Railroad time table published in 1883 showed only two trains arriving in Walhalla each day, one at 6:40 in the morning, and one at 11:40 at night. It seems that a night on the train or an overnight stay in Walhalla was required for passengers going to or coming from Highlands. The thirty-two mile wagon trip from Walhalla to Highlands was a two-day ride with the night often being spent at Russell’s Farm by the Chattooga River.

Access was difficult, accommodations were limited, population was sparse, and growth was slow in the early years. But better times were coming.

SEE PART II IN NEXT ISSUE