

# 2019 Historian of the Year

## Society of North Carolina Archivists

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On October 12th at Davidson College the North Carolina Society of Historians presented Highlands Historical Society Archivist Ran Shaffner with its highest honor: 2019 Historian of the Year. "Given to an individual who has contributed, in some very special way, to researching, recording, and perpetuating North Carolina's rich history," the award focused on forty years of Shaffner's devotion to public education and active promotion of the heritage of Western N.C. In particular, he was cited for his creation, preservation, and publication of what Walter Evans in the *North Carolina Historical Review* has called "the definitive history of Highlands." In accepting the award, Shaffner attributed his interest in Highlands to the characters and personalities of its unique residents and their fascinating stories.



## **NORTH CAROLINA SOCIETY OF HISTORIANS**

### **2019 HISTORIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD**

Presented to Dr. Randolph Shaffner during the Society's Annual Awards meeting, held at Davidson College on October 12, 2019

Dr. Randolph Shaffner's efforts in the creation, preservation, and publication of history have focused primarily on forty years of public education and active promotion of the rich heritage of Western North Carolina. A native North Carolinian, born in the Piedmont, he retired from teaching and moved to the mountains in 1978 to establish a general book store in the small town of Highlands. From the outset he became involved in community affairs, serving as Chairman of the Zoning Board of Adjustment, treasurer of the Highlands Biological Foundation, member of the Highlands Cultural Arts Center, founding member of the Highlands Permanent Endowment for Scholarships, president of the Hudson Library Board of Trustees, trustee of the Highlands Land Trust, co-founder and moderator of the Western Carolina University—Highlands Lecture Series, etc.

From these direct contacts with the community he gained an interest and insight into its people and their lives and wrote a history of their library, *Good Reading Material, Mostly Bound and New: The Hudson Library, 1884-1994*. It portrays how it and the town grew together from infancy to maturity over the 110 years of its existence.

John Ehle remarked, "I know of nothing else quite like this. Into the history of a town library, Ran Shaffner has woven stories of the town and its growth, as well as many of its people and all manner of evidence of books. I think book lovers of all types will love the memories it evokes." And Wilma Dykeman concluded, "The original and delightful addition to Shaffner's history is his skillful interweaving of local and world events. The small community is not isolated from the larger world."

Out of this history of the library grew a history of the town. Eleven years of research, interviews, and writing produced *Heart of the Blue Ridge: Highlands, North Carolina*, which Walter Evans in the *N.C. Historical Review* called "the definitive history of Highlands, N.C." Gary Carden described it as "detailed accounts of early history, prominent families, anecdotes, economic growth, cultural development, and a narrative account of every building in Highlands, including churches, summer resorts, local businesses, inns, post offices and roads. . . . Certainly it deals with a region and a people that are unlike any other in western North Carolina."

And Barbara McRae of the Franklin Press concluded, "*Heart of the Blue Ridge* is huge (737 pages) and exhaustively researched, but it is also a delightful and satisfying read. The book overflows with exquisite black and white images and tasty tales of the folk—rich and poor, common and famous—who have made this mountain town unique. Shaffner's storytelling style, almost chatty at times, makes you forget you are reading 'history.'"

*Heart of the Blue Ridge*, which Shaffner published doing business as Faraway Publishing, received the N.C. Society of Historians Book Award in 2002. The second edition was a recipient of an American Association of State and Local History Award in 2005.

As a direct result of the publication of *Heart of the Blue Ridge*, Shaffner became the Highlands town historian and co-founded a reactivation of the Highlands Historical Society. He documented the oldest house in Highlands, which the Society purchased as a living history museum. And in 2002, when the library building was moved next door, he served as curator of the Highlands Historical Museum, which exhibited the history of the town. He sought out one of the few remaining tent-houses of the Highlands Sanatorium, where tuberculosis was cured in the early 20th century. The tent-house was moved to become part of the Highlands Historic Village. The Historical Society awarded Shaffner a ten-year service citation in 2009.

After serving on the Macon County Heritage Council and the Macon County Historic Preservation Commission Task Force, Shaffner contributed articles to the second volume of *The Heritage of Macon County*, which included many family stories from the people of Highlands.

Shaffner's DVD, "A Brief History of Highlands," a visual history of the origin and growth of the town, and accompanying pamphlet won the N.C. Society of Historian's Multimedia Award in 2007. In 2015 his DVD, "A Botanical History of the Highlands Plateau: Voices of the Ancients," made in conjunction with the Land Stewards of the Highlands Plateau, again won the Society's Multimedia Award, on which the judges commented, "It was difficult to breathe while watching this DVD since spectacular pictures of the flora gracing the Highlands Plateau flashed on the screen! One breathtaking scene after another, vintage photographs of important people connected with the recording of the flora as well as the protection of it, and a superb script made it impossible to venture away. . . . It was a pleasure to judge this entry and only disappointing seven minutes later when the video ended!"

The research for this DVD provided enough material for an exhibit in the Highlands Historical Museum, displaying the botanical history of the plateau from its creation 300 million years ago to its preservation in the present. This exhibit is still on display at the museum today.

For the Chamber of Commerce, the Historical Society, and the Town of Highlands, Shaffner produced "Highlands Heritage Trail: A Walking Tour of Many Highlands Historical Buildings and Landmarks," featuring a map of fifty-one businesses and homes with individual sketches of their historical significance for the general public.

Genealogy being popular on the plateau, Shaffner compiled genealogies for over fifty families and authored a pictorial history of families that inhabited the plateau a half century before and after the town's founding. Published as *Highlands* in Arcadia's Images of America series, it won the N.C. Society of Historians History Book Award in 2009. It was dedicated to the people of Highlands and its surrounding communities who have preserved and continue to preserve their family photographs for future generations.

It was during this time that Shaffner served on the board of the Friends of Mountain History, edited their monthly newsletter, which serviced the museums of the Western North Carolina mountains, and managed their website. He also created and manages a website at <https://highlandshistory.com> for the Highlands Historical Society.

In 2016 the N.C. Society of Historians honored Shaffner and the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust with its History Book Award for *First Creation: 100 Years of Land Conservation*, a photographic essay of landscapes, flora, fauna, and viewsapes preserved by the oldest land trust in North Carolina. The judges remarked, "The only thing that overshadows the magnificent, well-researched and chronicled text are the most breath-taking color photographs of the areas protected by this land trust. Simply spellbinding! Photographs that penetrate the mind and reach the very soul of the reader. Vintage visuals tell the story of the areas long ago, while current pictures tell the story of how these same areas are to this day."

Apart from publishing his own history, *Heart of the Blue Ridge* and the Land Trust's centennial *First Creation*, Shaffner published and promoted histories of the area by other authors: *Highlands, North Carolina . . . The Early Years*, a history of Highlands in photographs, by Angie Jenkins and *Satulah: The Mountain*, a history of families and homes on Satulah Mountain that are now on the National Register, by James E. Green.

Shaffner's promotions of Highlands for state-wide recognition began with a North Carolina Historical Highway Marker (Q-55) in 2003 for *Thomas G. Harbison*, a botanist who pioneered the study of flora in the southeastern U.S. while based as an educator in Highlands. In 2013 he secured a Marker (Q-17) for *André Michaux*, the French botanist whose first visit to North Carolina was to the Highlands plateau to study its flora in 1787.

In 2018 he documented the Marker (Q-60) for Mary Lapham, a physician who operated a sanatorium in Highlands in 1908-18 and became the first physician in the United States to successfully use lung collapse for the treatment and cure of tuberculosis. Most recently, in 2019, he procured a North Carolina Legends and Lore Marker, one of the first in the state, to commemorate the *Moccasin War*, which was fought in Highlands in 1885 and became the subject of a popular folk tale about moonshining in the mountainous backwoods of North Carolina and Georgia.

Three books outside the area of Western North Carolina that Shaffner edited early in his career were publications by John F. Blair Publishing in Winston-Salem, N.C. *Papa D* was an autobiography of Edward Danziger, who emigrated from Germany after World War II and established the popular Rathskeller, Villa Tao, Ranch House, and Zoom Zoom restaurants in Chapel Hill, N.C. A first book of *Ghost Tales* by journalist and author Fred Morgan, feature editor of the *Stanly News and Press* in

Albemarle, N.C., was set in his native Uwharrie Mountains. And Judge Charles Whedbee's *Legends* was his first book of the lore, legends, and ghost stories of the Outer Banks, which he told on the "Carolina Today" TV program in Greenville, N.C., to be put into print, followed by many others. These were first books by subsequently popular North Carolina authors.

One publication outside the area of North Carolina history is Shaffner's *Father of Virginia Military Institute: A Biography of Col. J. T. L. Preston, CSA*, published in 2014, which is as much a history of VMI as it is a biography of its founding father. Writing for *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Bradford Wineman called it "a fascinating, well-researched and long overdue biography of the Virginia Military Institute's most unheralded founder and underappreciated champion of educational reforms." Lt. Col. Richard Hap wrote, "The book was so good that I 'rationed' it like a wonderful dessert! But alas I finally finished it. . . . Shaffner has done a great job of capturing the man, the family and the times."

Apart from his overriding focus on the preservation of historic names, people, and places, Shaffner's efforts to preserve the natural environment have extended from his role as co-founder, president, and trail supervisor of the Highlands Plateau Greenway, which seeks to protect and connect the natural settings and historic sites of the Highlands area and to promote the public's respect for and appreciation of the beauties of nature. He published its Greenway Trail map and created a website at <https://highlandsgreenway.com> for easy access to the trail system.

Similarly his work as a volunteer for the U.S. Forest Service has been devoted to trail building, supervision, and maintenance on Whiteside Mountain as part of the public's enjoyment of the Nantahala National Forest. His chairmanship of the Design Committee for the North Carolina Small Town Main Street Program from 2010-14 fostered the creation, organization, and presentation of wayfaring signs to guide visitors along the streets and roads of the town.

Finally, his membership in the Coalition for Nonnative Invasive Plant Management helped promote the preservation of native plants and the removal of invasives on the plateau. He published the Coalition's pamphlets, "Nonnative Invasive Plants of the Highlands Plateau: Identification, Management, and Native Alternatives" and "Do Not Buy: Nonnative Invasive Plant List for the Highlands Plateau," for which he was made an Honorary Land Steward in 2014.

Shaffner's lectures on historical subjects, from among seventy given, have focused on such topics as "Four Quagmires of the Historian," "Caught in the Web of Genealogy," "A History of Scouting," "A History of Churches in Highlands," "A Window on the Creative Soul: A History of the Fine Arts in Highlands from the 1840s to 2006," "A Bolt from the Blue: A History of Lightning in Highlands," "Fascinating Discoveries in the Archives of Highlands," "George Masa: Greatest Photographer of the Smokies," "Wit and Wisdom of the Southern Appalachians," etc.

For his efforts to preserve and champion history, especially that of the Highlands plateau in Western North Carolina, the North Caroliniana Society honored Shaffner with membership in 2016 for his dedication to the promotion and increased knowledge and appreciation of North Carolina's heritage. And in 2017 for his overall achievements locally, nationally, and internationally, he was granted the Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award.

NCSH Judges' Collective Comments: "For ALL the Reasons mentioned above regarding Dr. Shaffner's mammoth contributions to researching, recording, and perpetuating North Carolina's rich history, we, THE NORTH CAROLINA SOCIETY OF HISTORIANS, are deeply honored to be able to assign him the title of **2019 HISTORIAN OF THE YEAR!**"