



# Highlands Historical Society



HIGHLANDS  
NORTH CAROLINA

Fall 2025

To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands

Highlands, N.C.

## School's In Session

From the outset, town founder Samuel Kelsey was intent on establishing a “first-class school . . . (as) found in the best neighborhoods of the North or South” in Highlands. For the first few years, simply opening a school and ensuring attendance was a difficult task.

The first school year began in 1875 with classes held in the home of the first schoolmaster, John N. Arnold, a Confederate war veteran. Two of his students lived in Highlands, but the remainder came from the surrounding area, the children of farmers who needed them when crops were planted and harvested. Attune to the needs of the parents, Arnold adapted his school schedule accordingly to allow the children to help with the farming when most needed.

The following two years saw classes held in the single-room Law House located near the corner of First and Main Streets. Used prior to the founding of the town as a caretaker's cottage, the Law House was improved by adding a fireplace, new flooring, slab seats, a teacher's desk and a window. It served as a school, church, courthouse and community building. Two successive schoolmasters, the Reverend Robert E. Campbell and Miss Anna S. Porcher, dealt with increasing numbers of often unruly children as best they could with mixed results.



Horse Cove School Students and Teacher - 1898



The First Highland's School - 1879

The first official schoolhouse in Highlands, to be used primarily as a school, was built in 1878 where the Highlands Town Hall stands today. The site was donated by Samuel Kelsey and the building was constructed at a cost of \$300 by Arthur House, who owned Highlands first saw mill just down the street on Mill Creek. The school was constructed almost entirely of white pine planks and it had a dressed panel door with six framed windows. Originally called the Highlands Village School, the building served the town for the next forty years.

In the early years, there were also five other schools in the Highlands area: Shorthoff, Horse Cove, Clear Creek, Flat Mountain and Broadway Gap. In 1897, all five additional schools became part of the Highlands School District, but remained separate entities. This was the status quo until consolidation into one Highlands School occurred over the period of two decades beginning in the 1920's.

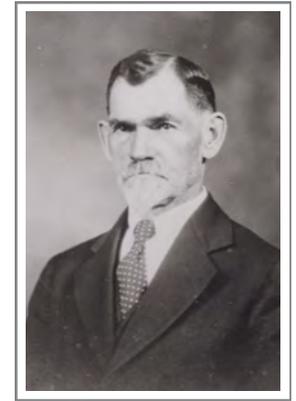
Despite the number of schools sprinkled about the Highlands Plateau, students were often forced to walk miles to get to school. Irene James told of walking with a lantern from her home in Clear Creek to Highlands School each day to light her path in the dark of the early morning, only to reverse the path each evening using the same lantern which she had hid in the woods during her school day.

Edward Baxter became the first principal in the school and he was succeeded by a series of head masters who all served a short time until 1886. In an attempt to offer that “first-class school” he had promised, Kelsey was determined to find a teacher “capable of telling B from bull’s foot at sight”, which was a high standard indeed. He found his man in Professor Thomas G. Harbison, a botanist, scientist and educator, who was simply visiting Highlands when offered the job by Kelsey. Thus was born the Highlands Academy, which Harbison led for the next ten years bringing a high quality education and much needed inspiration to a generation of Highlands children - eventually becoming one of the first public graded schools in North Carolina. The schoolhouse also housed the original Hudson Library using many of Professor Harbison’s personal books, before a separate library building was constructed in 1915.

“A crowded one-room building with poor furniture was filled to overflowing with pupils and students from six to twenty years of age, ungraded in subjects from the primary to algebra - nearly 100 of them.

Mr. Kelsey gave me to understand that I might have the honor and the glory, but that I might likewise take the cussing.”

- Professor Thomas G. Harbison



Professor Harbison



The Town Clock School - 1920's

By 1915 Highlands students had grown out of their small school house and construction of the second Highlands School - soon to be known as the Town Clock School on Knowledge Hill - began. It was a two-story building on the hill where the current police station is located and it was crowned by a magnificent clock and bell tower which held the bell from the first school house. That bell is currently located in the tower of the Town Hall building. Though the town had voted for a \$6,000 bond to cover the costs of constructing the new school, debts arose and the school was only completed after the generosity of local citizens like Henry Sloan. It finally opened for classes in 1919 and its bell sounded out so children from up and down the Plateau would know that school was in session.

One of the many excellent teachers who taught at the school was Ethel Calloway who taught grades four through ten over the years. Her favorite was fifth grade where she proclaimed “kids are the most real (because) nobody’s going to tell you the truth like a ten-year-old-boy.” She claimed to have taught or paddled over half of the leading citizens of Highlands through her thirty-one years as a teacher.

The current third Highlands School was completed in 1951 at the foot of Satulah Mountain in what locals referred to as “Muddy Hollow” - a nod to the many water problems the area experienced over the years. Today, Highlands School continues to uphold the tradition of a “first-class school” once envisioned by Samuel Kelsey.



Current Highlands School - 1968

The Highlands Historical Society would like to thank the following organizations for their generous grants in 2025:

- The Cullasaja Women’s Outreach
- Mountain Findings
- The Laurel Garden Club



## President's Letter - Fall 2025

This newsletter brings to a close two important time periods in my life. First, this is the last newsletter for 2025 which marks the end of the 150th Anniversary of the founding of Highlands in 1875. Even more personal to me, this newsletter is my last while serving as the president of the Historical Society.

The Highlands Historical Society has celebrated Highlands' Anniversary in a wide variety of ways which sought to honor the rich history of this special little village in the mountains. We began the year with our Season Opening Celebration in May, hosting over 200 people at the Historic Village with bluegrass music, ghosts presenting their personal history, a first look at the new Prince House audio tour and, of course, food and drinks. Beginning in May, we partnered with the Center for Life Enrichment and sponsored artists, authors and others as they told stories related to the history of Highlands. In June, we also partnered with the Boys and Girls Club of the Plateau and introduced local youth to Highlands' history.

In an effort to extend our reach beyond our own campus, we established an Historical Buildings Audio Tour of seventeen sites throughout downtown Highlands that allows anyone interested to learn some interesting history of the town while getting their steps in. This tour was sponsored, in part, by a grant from the Cullasaja Women's Outreach. In late June, we hosted a Historic Homes Tour which included a welcome by the ghost of the original owner and a docent led tour of three of the most famous homes on Satulah Mountain. This event raised over \$11,000 for the Historical Society.

In September, we hosted the 3rd Annual Descendants' Reception and 93 people who could trace their ancestry to Highlands back for 100 years or more attended. Carol Criminger Grantham sang beautifully and Mindy (Crunkleton) Musumarra, Anne (Wilson) Reese, Hal Duke and Steve Wilson told their family stories to the delight of the crowd. A special Family Video was produced and shown featuring sisters Wilma (James) Gordon and Geri (James) Crowe to inspire others to have their family videos made for the purposes of the Historical Society.

Of course, the best way to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Highlands was to learn the history firsthand at the museum. Docents Mary Jane McCall and Cora Bauman were available all year to regale visitors with the stories of Highlands which make it such a unique place. HHS had a record number of visitors this year.

My tenure as the president of the Highlands Historical Society ends with the close of this anniversary year. Price Kloess will be the new president and I will assume an ex-officio role with the board for the next two years. Price has been an active and enthusiastic board member the last two years as he was quick to step in to leadership roles with our ever-present building issues. I know that he will do a wonderful job as President and I hope to support Price just as I have been supported by recent past presidents, Harry McDonald and Obie Oakley.

As I conclude, I wish to express my appreciation to so many people. Thank you to all of the board members who have made my job easier by assuming many important responsibilities the past two years. Thank you to each of you who have supported the Historical Society through your gifts and participation in its events. HHS exists because of you and for you. I must also thank two special women who have made my life so much easier the past two years. Mary Jane McCall is the backbone of HHS as its lead docent, bookkeeper and head cheer leader. Thank you, Mary Jane, for your patience as you showed me the ropes. Finally, I want to thank my wife, Trish, for her love and support. Thank you, Trish, for being the safe harbor in the storms I brought home.

Merry Christmas!

*Tracy*

### Officers

Tracy Foor, President  
Peter Worthy, Vice President  
Carlton Cole, Treasurer  
Mike Thompson, Secretary

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Patty Jones  
Price Kloess  
Lee Lyons  
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Jerry Wilson  
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James Yaskiewicz

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Obie Oakley, Ex Officio  
Lance Hardin, Archivist  
Ran Shaffner, Archivist Emeritus  
Mary Jane McCall, Docent/Bookkeeper  
Cora Bauman, Interim Archivist

## Renew your Membership

Thank you for your past gifts to HHS! We hope you will continue your support and renew your membership by returning the enclosed donation envelope with your contribution. You may also renew online via credit card at [highlandshistory.com](http://highlandshistory.com) and use the **Donate** tab. You may choose to designate all, or part, of your contribution to two special funds - the **Ran Shaffner Scholarship Fund** or the **"Raise the Roof" Capital Fund**. Any amount not designated will be placed in our General Fund.

### Membership Levels:

<b>Individual</b> \$35	<b>Family</b> \$50
<b>Sustainer</b> \$100	<b>Major Donor</b> \$250
<b>Promoter</b> \$500	<b>Preserver</b> \$1,000
<b>Protector</b> \$2,500	<b>Highlander</b> \$5,000

# Descendants' Reception is a Hit!



HHS held its Bi-annual Descendants' Reception on September 27th at the Highlands Community Building and over 90 people who could trace their roots back to Highlands for 100 years or more attended. After a few introductions by HHS President, Tracy Foor, a musical performance by Carol Criminger Grantham kicked the event off. Board Member, Mike Thompson, introduced four family speakers - Mindy (Crunkleton) Musumarra, Anne (Wilson) Reese, Hal Duke and Steve Wilson - who regaled the audience with their family stories and memories of Highlands.

The keynote presentation was a family history video of the James family featuring sisters Wilma James Gordon and Geri James Crowe who graciously submitted to be interviewed for the video which told their family story. Attendees were treated to a light lunch and given the opportunity to have a family photo taken. Go to the HHS website at [highlandshistory.com](http://highlandshistory.com) to see the Featured Family video each month. The website also has a link to all of the photos taken that day. The next Bi-Annual Descendants' Reception will be held in 2027 at a date and time to be determined.



## Are you Interested in Having Your Family Video Recorded?

If your family can trace its roots back to Highlands for 100 years or more - whether your ancestors lived here full-time or were seasonal - and you would like to share your family history with HHS for its archives and use in a Featured Family Video, we encourage you to please contact us at [highlands100plus@gmail.com](mailto:highlands100plus@gmail.com) to let us know of your interest. We will schedule you, and/or other family members, for a brief interview and provide you with the information you need to prepare for the interview. History is best told by the people who lived it. By collecting family stories, we are able to make a video record of the history of our wonderful community that will be available for generations to come. Please consider playing a part in making this project a success!