

Our Beautiful Mountain: A Brief Floyd County History

While no single, comprehensive history has yet been written of Floyd County, several important accounts do exist. Attached to this brief history is a synopsis of the Town of Floyd Historic District Statement of Significance, which includes important details not included in this summary. These documents are intended to generally represent Floyd County, but unfortunately, information is not yet readily available for some segments of people, time and geography. Several efforts are currently underway to document Floyd County history; see "Works in Progress" at the end of this document.

According to tradition, present day Floyd County was among the first areas explored when Virginia colonists began to push into the mountains of Virginia:

Beginning with Jamestown in 1607, the Virginia colonists were first settled along the James River, but they seem not to have followed up that stream in their search for a passage through the mountains of the west. They were trying to locate a South Sea, and their expeditions generally followed up the Roanoke River to the South of the James.

Their interest in exploring the interior of the continent began to manifest itself about 1645 and in the decades immediately following. About this time, Gen. Abraham Wood was placed in command of a fort and trading post at the falls of Appomattox River (near Petersburg) in eastern Virginia and began to develop a trade with western Indians.

Tradition has it that Gen. Wood led the first party of Englishmen to enter what is now Floyd County. He is supposed to have crossed the Blue Ridge at Wood's Gap, which bears his name to this day, and to have gone through the present Floyd County and down Little River to its junction with New River, a stream which bore his name, Wood's River, for many years. This exploration is reputed to have taken place about the year 1654, but has never been proved.

In 1671 General Wood did send out an expedition which followed the Roanoke River, crossed the Blue Ridge at some point, and explored. . . the New River for some distance. This appears to be the earliest recorded entry of Englishmen into Southwest Virginia, but that someone had preceded the party is evidenced by markings on trees which they found and recorded in their journal. (Sumpter)

Early History

The Cherokee Nation owned land in the southwestern part of Floyd County until a treaty ceded that land to the British in 1768 (Map of Former Territorial Limits of the Cherokee Nation of Indians, 1884). Additionally, other parts of Floyd County were apparently used as hunting grounds by many Indians, including the Canawhay tribe (Williams; Humphrey). Both Indians and white travelers used Indian trails, which

generally followed rivers including the New and the Little (Sumpter). According to Sumpter, “A brisk trade was established with the Cherokee Indian Nation in eastern Tennessee as early as 1700.”

Amid numerous acts of violence between Native Americans and settlers, the first white settlements in the area were in the mid-18th century. Settlements beyond the Allegheny watershed were officially prohibited until the Treaty of Fort Stanwix was signed in 1768 (McIlhany). Chroniclers of expeditions in 1758 and 1765 along the Little River in present day Floyd County mentioned two settlers living in the area, Francis Eason and Richard Rattlecliff. One of the expeditions was searching for Indians, and the other seeking the safety of a fort along the New River (Sumpter).

About two decades passed before substantial white communities were established in present-day Floyd County. By the 1790’s, English, German, French, Scottish and Irish immigrants settled in what is now Floyd County. Several of those first settlers came from the vicinity of York, Pennsylvania: Weddles, Bowers, Epperlys, the Goodykoontz, Harmans, Kittermans, Morrises, Phlegars, Slushers, Sowers, and Spanglers. Other prominent names of settlers of this period included: Bishop, Cox, Dickerson, Duncan, Gardner, Holms, Howard, Thurman, Wade, Simmons, Smith, Shelor, Lester, Howell, Poff, Hylton, Conner, Reed, and Phillips (Humbart and Houston). One of the first industries, Spangler’s Mill, was established in the late 1700’s (Wood).

Coming onto the crest in what is now Floyd County, settlers were often astounded by the natural beauty, particularly in the Spring when the Chestnut blooms made a sea of white. Writing of their new plateau homeland, they often referred to it as “our beautiful mountain” (Williams).

Most of the settlers stayed in the eastern or central portion of the County. The western portion of the County was generally settled later, since 25,000 acres in the area had been given as a land grant to Lighthorse Harry Lee. Though he never lived on it, Lee’s land stretched from around Buffalo Knob (now Buffalo Mountain) to Willis and on into what is now Carroll and Patrick Counties. His son, Charles Carter Lee, brother of Robert E. Lee, moved to Floyd County and penned what is believed to be the first book written here, *The Maid of the Doe*. It was a book of poetry about the Revolutionary War, and he had it published after he moved to New York. Following the death of Harry Lee’s mother, the Lee land in Floyd County, including Spring Camp, was sold to the Burwell family (Williams). The Burwell family, of English descent (Lewis Burwell came to America from England in 1640), became a prominent Floyd County family (Wood).

Church History

The first church in Floyd County, Salem Church, was constituted by Primitive Baptists in 1784. This church was also known as the “Head of the River” church for its location near Little River (Wood). In 1791, German Lutherans began meeting outside and in homes near the present Zion Lutheran Church. A church may have been built there as early as

1809, and the congregation was formally organized in 1813. The oldest inscribed stone in the church cemetery is dated 1817 (Houston). Around 1820, the first Methodist church in Floyd County, “Iddings Chapel,” was built in the Locust Grove area. By the 1850’s, the Missionary Baptists and Presbyterians were well- established local congregations as well (Wood).

Floyd County Established

From 1734 to 1745, Floyd County was part of Orange County. From 1745 to 1770, present-day Floyd County was the eastern most portion of the newly created Augusta County, “which at the time stretched across the Mississippi” (Schaeffer and Williams). It was in this time period that Virginia began sending constables and justices of the peace to these western reaches (Williams). From 1770 to 1772, Floyd was part of Botetourt County.) In 1772, Floyd County became part of Fincastle County, which was then divided in 1777, and Floyd became part of Montgomery County (Schaeffer). By 1831, “citizens of what is now Floyd County were anxious to set their own direction” (Houston). Two prominent citizens, Colonel Jacob Helms and Senator William Ballard Preston¹, led the effort to form Floyd County (Cox).

In January, 1831, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation creating Floyd County from Montgomery County. The County was named for John Floyd, then governor and native of Montgomery County (Houston). Ten Justices of the Peace held the first County court. They presided over court and also served as the governing body. Within a few months, five additional Justices were appointed. In June, 1834, the first courthouse was completed on land donated for the County seat by Manassah Tice and Abraham and Margaret Phlegar. Later, in 1871, a narrow strip of land about 5 miles in length was added to Floyd County from Franklin County (Humbart).

The second courthouse was constructed in 1851. The current Courthouse was constructed in 1951-52 and renovated in 2003 (Schaeffer). The current courthouse square is generally located on the one acre given by Phlegar, while most of the remaining five acres was divided and sold to pay for the cost of the public buildings (Sumpter).

According to the 1830 Census, Montgomery County’s population was 12,306. In 1840, the first Census of Floyd County reported a population of 4,453 of which 320, or 7.2 percent, were slaves.

¹ William Ballard Preston, a “founder” of Floyd County, would go on to become Secretary of the Navy. Later, he submitted legislation to withdraw Virginia from the Union. He also served in the Confederate Senate. Yet, he died young, only in his 40’s. One district in Floyd County, Ballard, is apparently named in his honor (Williams).

Antebellum Economy, Population and Education

In the early 1800's, the local economy was predominantly agricultural, except for the establishment of three iron furnaces around 1800 and other limited industries serving local needs. The first iron furnace in the County is reported by the Historical Society to be the first one in southwest Virginia. The iron ore in Floyd County was unusual due to the amount of copper in it, which resulted in pots and products that were very strong and marketable. The Shelor Furnace stacks, perhaps built around 1820, still stand and may be the oldest standing structure by man in Floyd County (Schaeffer).

Arsenic was also mined in the Lick Ridge area of Floyd County in this period. According to some records, this was the only one arsenic mine in the eastern United States at this time (Schaeffer).

By the 1850's, transportation improvement in the region (railroad in Radford and Pulaski and turnpikes locally) and the growth of tobacco locally led to increasing connection between the local agricultural economy and larger economies (Houston).

The population grew rapidly to 8,236 by 1860, including 475 black slaves (5.8%) and presumably 16 free blacks (Houston). Among the free population in 1860, 75 percent of household incomes were based in agriculture, 12 percent on skilled labor, 5 percent on unskilled labor, 3 percent on domestic labor, and roughly 1 percent each in service, civic and professional occupations. Many of Floyd County's 1,215 farmers owned less than 3 acres of land and only 2 owned 500 acres or more. Roughly 40% of the County's farmers rented the land they worked. Floyd's 89 slaveholding farmers owned an average of 155 acres of workable field versus less than 68 acres owned by non-slaving holding farmers. Though the 116 slaveholders were a small minority of the population, they were wealthy and held many positions of authority in the community (Dotson).

Reflecting Floyd County's economic success and early interest in education, the Jacksonville Academy was established in 1846. By 1850, it had enrollment of about 40 students from Floyd and surrounding counties. "Most students boarded in the homes of merchants and businessmen" (Houston). The Jacksonville Academy was located in one of the two buildings that is now Schoolhouse Fabrics (Schaeffer).

Civil War

Though it officially supported Virginia's choice for secession and many local citizens volunteered to fight for Virginia and the Confederacy, Floyd County experienced decreasing enthusiasm for the Confederacy during the Civil War. "Aside from occasional troop movements and skirmishes," there was very little military action in Floyd County throughout most of the Civil War. In early April, 1865, though, just days before the signing at Appomattox, Major-General George Stoneman's Federal cavalry raided Floyd, capturing fresh horses and supplies. Ironically, some of the County's staunchest

Unionists reported being harassed and mistreated. Stoneman's raid "signaled the end of even theoretical Confederate control on the County" (Dotson).

Reconstruction Economy, Population and Education

The major institutional and social changes of the Reconstruction period came to Floyd, including the freeing of slaves and the Virginia mandate for universal, free education for all by 1876. A County Board of Education was established and first led by superintendent, Dr. Calohill Minnis Stigleman. At the first meeting in December, 1870, the board decided there should be one school for every 100 students in each of the six districts (Speer in Houston). Many counties in the state were now in compliance with the new law in 1876, but Floyd County had its public schools in operation. In 1900, there were around 100 schools in Floyd County (Schaeffer); seven of the schools were black schools (Houston).

Though Floyd County was not as dependent on slave labor as were areas in the non-mountain South, yet, the death or injury of many local soldiers and the regional chaos of the time were still devastating to the local economy. Though the "Toll Road from Floyd to Christiansburg" was completed during the late 1850's, it fell to disrepair during the War. After the War, though, the road was repaired and two toll gates were erected (Wood).

The local economy continued to be dominated by agriculture, with land particularly well suited for grazing. Tobacco, corn, oats, wheat and buckwheat (which Floyd County led production in) were also raised. Orchard and dairy productions were "large and valuable." Mineral deposits were diverse, including gold, iron, copper, lead, manganese, asbestos, plumbago [graphite] and soapstone, but "compared to other counties, those deposits were relatively minor" (Houston).

In the 1880's, sheep were raised and their meat and wool were essential for family use. In the late 1880's, people carried their wool on horseback to a Vaughn-Dunn Woolen Mill, a carding factory in the Burkes Fork area. About 1900, the factory's services expanded to include wool washing, spinning, and weaving (Schaeffer).

Floyd County experienced dramatic population growth between the Civil War and 1880, when the population reached 13,255, including 9.6 percent black. The "Floyd Courthouse" population jumped to 500 (Houston). Rev. John Kellogg Harris and his wife Chloe established the Oxford Academy in 1875. It continued operating until 1904 (Schaeffer). A co-educational facility, "the Academy ranked among the state's finest preparatory schools of the period" (Houston). Though Rev. Harris was a Presbyterian minister, the school was not affiliated with the church.

In 1885, Hylton, Graysville, Copper Hill and Turtle Rock were singled out by the Virginia Gazatteer as important villages (Houston). By 1892, there were reportedly 68 post offices in Floyd County, serving over 15,000 people (Schaeffer). Rural Free Delivery (RFD) began in Floyd County on November 6, 1902, and there were three

routes initially (Schaeffer). There was an unsuccessful bid for a rail connection to the County in 1885. Freight continued to go through Blacksburg and Christiansburg stations (Houston).

Population growth continued, but at a slower clip, through the 1880's and 1890's. An 1895 directory showed Jacksonville having seven stores, three hotels, ten lawyers, four doctors, two resident ministers, one academy, and two good county schools (Houston). By 1900, the County's population peaked at 15,338. The County seat, originally known as Jacksonville for president Andrew Jackson, changed its name to Floyd in 1896 (Floyd-Floyd County Comprehensive Plan).

During this period, Rear Admiral Robley D. Evans, who was born in Floyd County in 1846) rose to national prominence. Educated at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Evans fought in the Civil War, and later led the "Great White Fleet" for President Theodore Roosevelt (Spanish American War website and Evans in Wood).

Early 20th Century, World War I, Great Depression and World War II

Acreage in corn, tobacco, potatoes, and sweet potatoes reached peak in 1900, and then declined steadily. Livestock—sheep, lambs, horses, mules, and dairy cows—decreased during the 1920's; only swine production increased. The last crop of American Chestnuts was in 1922, following infestation by an Asian blight fungus. The local economy suffered significantly from this loss (Schaeffer). Population declined steadily from 1900 to 1930, too (Census Bureau).

Around 1905, Ed Mabry constructed a watermill in the southwestern corner of the County. One of over 120 water-powered grist mills that once operated in the County, Mabry Mill served as a gristmill, as well as blacksmith and wheelwright shop (Jean Schaeffer notes). Later, the National Park Service would buy the mill and create an expanded image of the time period. Mabry Mill would become a visual centerpiece of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and a tourism magnet for the County.

Other occupational changes, driven by local growth and mechanization, were noted during this time as well. By 1917, there were bankers, barbers, blacksmiths and wheelwrights, canners, carriage and wagon manufacturers, building contractors, dairies, grocers, insurance agents, jewelers, livestock dealers, lumber dealers, painters, photographers, telephone company, and veterinary surgeons. Occupations now gone or in severe decline included: dentists, distillers, druggists, hotels, iron foundries, land agents, mines (gold, iron, silver), sawmills, saddle/harness makers, undertakers, and woolen mills (Houston).

More textile factories opened in Floyd, including the Shirt Factory, owned by J. Friezer & Son. Later, DonnKenny would take over this location and add another (Schaeffer).

Despite the local decline in mining during this period, arsenic was mined in Floyd County by Chipman Chemical Engineering for production of World War I supplies. The plant was abandoned after the war. A lasting reminder of Floyd County's significant mineral and ore deposits, though, are the soapstone used in local buildings (Houston).

In the early 1920's, a secondary school for African Americans was started on Newtown Road. At first the school offered a two-year program, and later it offered a 4-year program (Schaeffer).

Fifteen to 20 portable sawmills were operated in the County by 1930. Oak and Chestnut were the principal timber products, shipped out primarily for flooring and furniture plants.

Since many families still farmed or had farmlands, the impact of the Great Depression was not as drastic as in urban areas. Yet, many families with debt could not make their payments and had to sell their farms. The construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Civilian Conservation Corps brought needed work to some in the County. Yet, several families were displaced by the Parkway, and the federal land acquisition was controversial (Schaeffer). The County population actually increased slightly from 11,698 in 1930 to 11,967 in 1940 (Census).

The Great Depression ended with the advent of World War II. Many people left to support the war effort--either as soldiers or factory workers—or to find other work amidst the new boom in urban areas such as Washintgon, DC, or Cincinnati.

Second half of 20th Century

Floyd County population dropped in 1950, 1960, and 1970, as the agricultural decline continued. Some basic textile and manufacturing jobs came to the County, such as Pannill Knitting, Dee-K Enterprises, and later Crosscreek Apparel and Legacy Linens. But the economy was largely still agricultural with ever more residents commuting out of the County to work (Comprehensive Plan). Cars offered ever greater mobility and opportunity, and they also ushered in new forms of entertainment, including drive-in movies and stock-car racing. NASCAR legend and business man Curtis Turner was born in Floyd County.²

In the 1970's, Floyd County was "discovered" by back-to-the-landers seeking rural refuge. Many of the new residents were artists or artisans. In Floyd County, they found a land of natural beauty, a unique geography with all waters flowing out, rich hand-craft and music traditions, and open opportunities for creative living.

² Curtis Turner is reported to have won 346 races of all types. He won 17 Winston Cup races. He ran and won the famous Pikes Peak climb. Also a pilot, Turner died in a plane crash at the age of 46. He is recognized in National Motorsports Hall of Fame in Darlington SC and the International Motorsports Hall of Fame in Talladega (Hawley).

By 2000, most of the basic textile plants had closed and moved off shore, and more than half of the labor force commuted out of the County to work (Census). Many local dairy farms had converted to beef cattle operations. Nursery stock and Christmas trees were major and growing industries. Driven in part by authentic and diverse musical offerings, the arts and natural beauty, tourism to Floyd was also increasing dramatically by 2000.

Amid these economic changes, Floyd County was increasingly seen as a highly desirable place to live, not only by natives and back-to-the-landers, but also by professionals, retirees and others seeking a simpler life. Citizens, the local telephone cooperative, began investing in fiber optics in the 1990's, offering people the freedom to live in Floyd County and telecommute to work for companies or industries elsewhere. Thanks in part to the natural, cultural and technological amenities, the population in 2000 was up 16% over 1990, to 13,872 people.

From the 1700's to now, as Americans still seek their own piece of ground, a better way of life, and a safe place to be, they continue to re-discover Floyd County.

"God made Heaven and had a little left over so He made Floyd County."

*~Willie E. Graham 1887 - 1969**

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Floyd County History Works in Progress

- Ricky Cox is compiling a history of gristmills in Floyd County.
- Gino Williams will write a book on Floyd County based on his many years of research.
- Jean Schaeffer is compiling a book of stories and history from her father, Max Thomas' writings.
- Local history groups are collecting oral histories and creating a digital archive of images.

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