Big Sandy Mush: A Rural Farming Community European Settlement circa 1800

There is value in a community knowing the past, working diligently in the present and having a vision for the future.

For at least 7,000 years before the first European settlers arrived in western North Carolina, the Cherokee inhabited this land. As noted by anthropologists, there is evidence of selected seeds being moved from planting site to planting site as the Native Americans found that sources near springs often produced seed of superior quality. Cherokee agriculture was quite advanced, indicative of a sophisticated understanding of seed selection and propagation; they grew varieties of beans, squashes, sunflowers and corn. The Cherokee developed a sophisticated society which embraced concepts of shared decision making and democratic agreements. They hunted, fished and farmed in what is now Sandy Mush and had what is believed to be an encampment in this valley as substantiated by numerous artifacts indicative of a more permanent settlement. For many years, arrowheads, stone implements and pottery have been found on freshly tilled ground, reminders of once considerable activity.

After European settlers began moving to Sandy Mush, key factors in establishing the farming community were mills, roads and schools.

Shope W R, 350 A, 2 m N

Shope B G, 130 A, 2 m N

Shope J M, 150 A, 1 m N

Stroup S A, 85 A, 1 m W

Stroup S F, 100 A, 2 m N

SANDY MUSH.

Brown Frank, carpenter, 1 m S

Wilson J B, genl mdse, 1 m E

Nash Wilson, 6 m S W

Big Sandy (union), 1 m W

Boyd R M, 300 A, 4 m W

Childs L L, 50 A, 1 m W

DeBoard T C, 60 A, 21 m S W

Duckett D M, 230 A, 5 m S

Ebenezer (Baptist), 4 m S W

Wells Jno W, 3 m S

West Henry, 5 m S

Magistrates.

Churches.

Principal Farmers.

genl mdse, 1 m W

A farmers post-office on creek of same Presswood I S, 66 A, 1 m S

name, 18 m W by N from Asheville. Randall J L, 660 A, 2 m E

Tobacco planting and stock raising are Randall W R, 375 A, 1 m S

around this office. Alexander, 14 m Reynolds J H, 200 A, 1 m W

Mails tri-weekly by horseback from Robinson J D, 420 A, 3 m W

Furgusson Thos J, flouring mills, 3½ m W Wells A B, 300 A, 4 m S W

Reeves John, flouring and saw mills Wells R C, 400 A, 4 m S E

Sprinkles & De Board, genl mdse and Worley E J, 160 A, 2 m E

the leading industries in the country Reeves John, 250 A

Childs L L (Lee & Childs, Asheville), Wells M C, 125 A

Stevenson D C, 97 A

Furguson T J, 250 A, $3\frac{1}{2}$ m W

Garrett John, 700 A, 3½ m W

Jones J F, 587 A, 3 m S

King M A, 200 A, 4 m S

King V T, 65 A, $3\frac{1}{2}$ m S

King J M, 160 A, 1 m E

Lowry J M, 40 A, 2 m W

Payne W R, 200 A, 1 m E

Robinson M L, 330 A, 3 m W

Robinson A C, 500 A, 3 m W

Surratt O W, 180 A, 4 m W

Wells Jno, 80 A, 4 m S E

Wells Jno W, 350 A, 3 m S

Wells D M, 270 A, 1 m W

Worley Henry, 56 A, 5 m S

Worley W J, 1600 A, 1½ m S

SILVER SPRINGS.

A suburb of Asheville, beautifully

situated on the W bank of French-Broad

river, which is here crossed by a fine iron

bridge. Contains a good hotel, two

Henry J L (Henry & Cummings, Ashe-

Silver-Springs Hotel, A A Banks, propr

stores, and several other industries

Mails daily—J B Cole, P M

Cole J B, grower of small fruits

ville), attorney at law

Knight St Clair, genl mdse

Lambert Thos, boarding

1883 Asheville City Directory and Gazetteer of Buncombe County

Hughes & Collins, genl mdse

Wells J W T, 205 A, 3½ m S W

Lunsford Henry, 200 A, 1½ m S

Traveling Sandy Mush Road:

Fulmer Duckett on Horse 1923

At least three key mills were located in Big Sandy Mush; the Ferguson, Lowry and Wells' mills were all built in the 1800s and were still in existence at the turn of the 20th century. The Lowry mill changed ownership and was rebuilt at some point. Additionally, other mills were in existence at various times.

The practice was for a mill to exact a "toll" from farmers for grinding grain; the toll was paid in grain which was later ground by the mill for sale to others. Corn, wheat and oats were ground in Big Sandy Mush. Because the first mills were water powered, they were all located by key water sources. The mills were water-powered grist mills up until the 1920s when Commodore Surrett and his son, George, built a new mill at the location of the former Lowry/Waldrop mill and utilized an internal combustion engine. In the 1940s when Carl Ball ran this same mill, he operated it as both a grist and hammer mill. Grist mills ground fine oats, corn and wheat for human consumption while hammer mills ground the whole ear, shuck and cob for cattle feed. There is evidence that the Lowry/Waldrop and Wells' mills were also operated as sawmills.

Not only did the mills serve the people in Big Sandy Mush community, people came from surrounding communities as well. In the early 1800s, a Mr. Ferguson from Fine's Creek traveled through Chestnut Gap to take grain to the Lowry mill.

The first settlers followed creek beds to travel into the valley. Throughout the 1800s, roads, in their various forms, were built which connected coves, valleys and rural communities to one another. Some traces of these old roadways still exist; they generally followed the lay of the land, and provided the most direct route from one cove to another, often going over a mountain rather than around. These routes were traversed on foot and by horse, sled and wagon. Mountainous terrain, which makes building and traveling roads more challenging, contributed to the isolation of Big Sandy Mush. Even today, the terrain helps the area maintain its rural, agrarian character.

In the early 1800s, the first official road was built leading into Big Sandy Mush following Sandy Mush Creek. It was the 1890s before the first road was built over Early's Mountain. This route was laid out by Jesse Lowry, son of James M. Lowry, and it joined the Sandy Mush Creek Road. It was 1951 before Early's Mountain Road was paved in its current configuration, the third configuration of this route.

According to a J. Lowry diary entry from 1896, people were able to "ride a buggy" to Haywood County through Beaverdam Gap. Based on stories and marriages, it appears that Big Sandy Mush residents, regularly socialized with communities "just over the mountains" including Fine's Creek, Long Branch, Crabtree and Spring Creek. The adjacent valleys of Little Sandy Mush and Big Sandy Mush have always comprised part of the greater Sandy Mush community, although, in 1851, Little Sandy Mush became part of the newly-formed Madison County.



Sandy Mush School Students 1912

Front Row Left - Miss Rector, Earl Hall, Richard Keener, Bobby Wells, Vonley Hall, Blanche Wells, Exie Rogers, Margie Hall, Cliff Worley, Roy Rogers, Lula Keener

Back Row Left - Gudger Clark, Hass Worley, Linnie Hall, Richard Wells.

Back Row Left - Gudger Clark, Hass Worley, Linnie Hall, Richard Wells, Annie Capps, Guy Worley, Phebe Brown, Hershel Hall

Education has been valued from the community's early years with families donating land and helping finance school buildings and materials. The earliest schools were subscription schools; families paid a subscription for their children to attend classes. The schools often shared a space with churches, in some instances, the school predated the establishment of the church. The Palmer family donated the initial land to build the first church/school building in 1837; by 1859, a two story brick building that served as a school during the week and church on the weekends was built. This is the Big Sandy United Methodist Church locally known as "Brick Church" even though the present clapboard structure replaced the brick structure circa 1904. From records it appears that both the school and church predated 1837; it is likely that a private home was utilized until the donation of land and designated structure was built. There were at least six known schools in the community.

In the early 1890s, "adequate schools supported through public taxation" reform became commonplace in mountain regions of the state. A bond measure was successfully passed in 1925 that provided \$50,000 to build a new Sandy Mush consolidated school; it is the current brick building used as the Sandy Mush Community Center. Students attended school here from 1927 to 1966. Additionally, in the 1920s, some adults attended evening classes after farm work to learn to read and write. These were known as Moonlight Schools, and were located in existing school and church buildings.

For over 200 years, community residents have been dedicated to investing in this community; they built the mills, roads, schools, churches, homes and stores; they were the postmasters, teachers, doctors and farmers. How we will continue to invest in our community and our human resources?



Photograph Courtesy Wells Family

Sandy Mush School - 11th Grade Class 1947

Left - Pearl Wells, Virginia Black, Willie Jean Auldridge, Faye King, Dora West, Geneva McCracken, Tom Fish