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Cowee-West's Mill Historic District, Macon County, NC

From: Keith Nicholson 1 Aug 2003

A document submitted to the National Registry of Historic Sites. It describes the "Euchella Site" of which 299 acres was sold to **Joseph Welch** by the state in 1821. The dates and locations are well documented and pretty solid.

SUMMARY

The Cowee-West's Mill Historic District is a rural historic district located along the Little Tennessee River and Cowee Creek and centered around the crossroads community of West's Mill. The 369-acre district occupies a valley of the Cowee Mountains just north of Franklin. For centuries, most likely as early as A.D. 600, Native Americans lived and farmed in the broad valley of the Little Tennessee River. During Cherokee occupation in the eighteenth century, Cowee (Cowe) was the principal town of the Middle Cherokee. In his travels in 1775 naturalist **William Bartram** described the Cowee community as consisting of one hundred dwellings dominated by a townhouse atop an earthen mound. The district encompasses several important archaeological sites. The Cowee Mound (NR, 1973), likely built during the Mississippian period and later used by the Cherokee, stands in the northwest portion of the district. Just to the west of the mound archaeologists have documented the **Euchella farm**, the site of a citizen Cherokee farm taken over by a white settler in the early nineteenth century. Separate deposits of prehistoric ceramics were collected at two sites (31MA65 and 31MA66) on the west bank of the Little Tennessee River by archaeologists in 1965.

Beginning in the eighteenth century this fertile valley attracted white settlers, who mined lead, silver, and gemstones, farmed the Little Tennessee and Cowee valleys, and established the community of West's Mill, named for the mill established by the **West family** likely as early as the late eighteenth century. West's Mill continued as an important trading and community center for the northern part of Macon County in the nineteenth century when country stores and a post office were established. During the late nineteenth century, a small community of African Americans settled here and established a school and the Pleasant Hill AME Zion church; their small frame chapel still stands in the northeast corner of the district. The community prospered in the twentieth century, with most residents growing crops and raising livestock. During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps built the Art Deco-influenced Cowee School of local stone. By 1954, activity in the community had slowed enough to warrant the closing of the West's Mill post office.

The Cowee-West's Mill Historic District retains its historic buildings and structures as well as the surrounding rural agricultural and natural landscape ringed by mountains and intersected by the Little Tennessee River and Cowee Creek. The district is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the areas of exploration/settlement, agriculture, and community planning and development. The district is also eligible under Criterion C for architecture due to its outstanding collection of residential, commercial, and institutional buildings typical of North Carolina's rural mountain communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, the Cowee-West's Mill Historic District is eligible under Criterion D at the state level as the important site of both Mississippian and Cherokee activity. Containing the best described eighteenth-century Cherokee town in North Carolina, the district possesses unusually rich potential for correlating archaeological study with the contemporary description. The period of significance begins in A.D. 600 and extends to 1954, a period during which this community served as an important center of social, economic, and cultural life for Native Americans and white and African American residents.

The significance of the Cowee-West's Mill Historic District is discussed in the Multiple Property Documentation Form "Historic and Architectural Resources of Macon County, NC ca. AD 600-1945," in Context I: Native American and Early White Settlement, pre-1938; Context II: A Period of Transition: White Settlement in the Early Nineteenth Century; Context III: The Birth, Division, and Growth of Macon County: 1827-1874; Context IV: The Richness of Macon's Resources Realized: 1875-1904; and Context V: The Transportation Revolution in Macon County: 1905-1945. The district meets the registration requirements for significance in the history of the county's architecture outline in Property Type 1: farm complexes; Property Type 2: Houses; Property Type 4: institutional buildings; and Property Type 5: commercial buildings.

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HISTORIC BACKGROUND

For thousands of years, the Little Tennessee and Cowee valleys have been centers of human settlement because of their fertile soils and accessibility to water sources. **Cowee is a Native American word meaning "place of the Deer Clan."**¹ Before Cherokee settled in Cowee, most likely by the mid sixteenth century, and established what became the principal town of the middle Cherokee in the eighteenth century, pre-historic people formed a community here and built an earthen structure occupying the southern banks of the Little Tennessee River just north of its confluence with Cowee Creek. The Cowee Mound (NR, 1973), likely constructed by the Middle Mississippian period, served as the settlement's spiritual and cultural center and remains the largest of four known flat-topped earthen mounds in the upper Little Tennessee Valley built by Mississippian cultures. It is believed that Native Americans inhabited the area approximately 11,000 years before white settlement began.

White explorers and traders frequently traveled the valley at least by the mid eighteenth century. In 1775, the renowned naturalist **William Bartram** visited several Cherokee towns including **Nikwasi, present-day Franklin, and Whatoga**. Of Cowee he wrote:

[It is] situated on the bases of the hills on both sides of the river, near to its bank, and here terminates the great vale of Cowe...ridges of hills rising grand and sublimely one above and beyond another, some boldly and majestically advancing into the verdant plain ...whilst others far distant, veiled in blue mists, sublimely mount aloft, with yet greater majesty lift up their pompous crests and overlook vast regions.²

At the time of **Bartram's** visit, the Cherokee town consisted of about one hundred dwellings situated on both sides of the river and was dominated by a large circular townhouse sitting atop the ancient mound. **Bartram** provided a glimpse into Cherokee farming: "All before me and [on] every side appeared little plantations of young corn, beans, ...divided from each other by narrow strips of grass."³

Merchants from Charleston, South Carolina and other major commercial centers knew the town of Cowee as the largest center of trade with the Cherokee people prior to the American Revolution. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Wedgewood pottery of England purchased several tons of white kaolin clay from the Cherokee, from the banks of the Little Tennessee River at Cowee but more accessible sites were found and the trade did not continue.⁴

During the eighteenth century Cowee and other Middle settlements were attacked and destroyed by American and British troops. While some smaller settlements folded as a result of the conflicts, Cowee was rebuilt several times. In 1761 a British force under **Lieutenant Colonel James Grant** occupied Cowee and used it as a base camp from which to destroy nearby towns before burning Cowee itself. In 1776 **General Griffith Rutherford's** North Carolina militia destroyed Cowee. In 1783 **Major Peter Fine** and **Colonel William Lillard** led a group of Tennessee volunteers to Cowee where they burned the town. Despite the destruction, Cowee was rebuilt and continuously occupied by the Cherokee until 1819.⁵

There had been a few white settlers in Cowee before the last quarter of the eighteenth century including a trader who lived

¹ The original spelling was "Kaw'yi." It later became Cowe.

² William Bartram, *The Travels of William Bartram* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 221.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources highway historical marker on NC 28 near Will West House.

⁵ Vicki Rozema, *Footsteps of the Cherokees: A Guide to the Eastern Homelands of the Cherokee Nation* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1995), 262.

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there well before the 1770s. An 1819 treaty relinquished Cherokee lands east of the Nantahala Mountains, including Cowee, and opened all of the territory of what is now Macon County to white settlement, except for a portion along the Nantahala River. White settlement and land claims rapidly accelerated after the treaty. **Macon County was formed in 1828 from a portion of Haywood County. In 1836, the United States government forced the removal of Cherokee from the territory east of the Mississippi along a route from North Carolina to Oklahoma in an event that became known as "the Trail of Tears."**

Most of the white families who settled in the area received their land as land grants from the government after Cherokee removal, although **John West** is believed to have "bought land and a village from **Old Jake, a Cherokee chief**" on the north side of Cowee Creek in the 1820s.⁶

Several Cherokee in Cowee participated in a federal government program set forth in treaties drafted in 1817 and 1819 that allowed each head of a Cherokee family who wished to become a citizen of the United States a life reservation of 640 acres with reversion in fee simple to his children. A reservee's removal from the land claim would result in the title passing to the United States government. The government also agreed to pay for improvements to land left by Cherokees who vacated their reservations. Over 300 heads of Cherokee families enlisted for reservations under the conditions stated in the two treaties.⁷

Many Cherokees who participated in the program experienced problems with their white neighbors and in some cases, state governments. The North Carolina government failed to make provision for natives when land was surveyed, and releases were eventually obtained from the reserves. The inability of the United States government to enforce the treaties of 1817 and 1819 led to many legal cases in the following years. One of the best-documented cases of the transition of land from Cherokee control to white ownership is the **Euchella** reservation. This farm was located at the southwest bank of the Little Tennessee River and encompassed much of the site of Cowee Town. The site is approximately 450 meters southwest of the Cowee Mound. It is presently pasture land that has been intensively cultivated during the last 150 years.⁸

Euchella registered his claim of land at Cowee in 1819. His claim indicated that three people made up the household. **Joseph Welch** purchased 299 acres of the reservation in the state sales of 1821. **Welch** dispossessed **Euchella** of his claim and the native man filed a suit of ejectment against Welch in Buncombe County Superior Court. **Judge John Hall** ruled in favor of **Euchella**, but pointed out that the life estate was invalid because neither the President nor a commissioned surveyor had signed the survey certificate. Court documents noted that **Euchella's** land included "a field cleared and fenced, a crib within the enclosure where he housed his corn and a hut." Euchella vacated the land at Cowee sometime prior to September 1819 settling in Euchella Cove near the Nantahala River. He resided there until Cherokee Removal. After he helped Federal troops capture **Tsali and his sons**, **Euchella** was granted immunity from removal and became head of Wolf Town in the Qualla settlement where he lived until his death.⁹

Katherine Porter, approximate age seventy-seven, was raised on and still lives on the former Euchella Reserve. According to Ms. Porter, her great-grandfather acquired all 640 acres of the Euchella land during the 1820s and Cherokees continued to occupy the property throughout her grandmother's childhood. She remembered the ruins of the **Welch house**, a log cabin, on the hillside overlooking the former Euchella farm.¹⁰

⁶ Jesse Sutton, ed., *The Heritage of Macon County, North Carolina* (Franklin, NC: Macon County Historical Society, 1987), p.3.

⁷ David Keith Hampton, *Cherokee Reservees*, n.p.

⁸ Brett H. Riggs, "An Historical and Archaeological Reconnaissance of Citizen Cherokee Reservations in Macon, Swain, and Jackson Counties, North Carolina" Report Submitted to the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1988, 30-32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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Several other Cherokee enlisted in the reserve program held claims in and around Cowee that they had registered in 1819. **Au-to-weh, Axe and Ah-see-nee** held reserves on the Little Tennessee River at Cowee. **Whipperwill** held a reserve "on a small creek near the Trout's place; the **Trout** was another Cherokee claimant.¹¹ **Deer in the Water** registered his claim in July for reserve located "at West's old mill place."¹² The **Fence**, with six members in his household, had a reserve at Cowee. Other Cherokee holding reserves around Cowee included **Ne-ne-tu-ala**, whose household included five individuals, **Too-naugh-he-ah** who lived with seven household members, **John Quchey**, and the **Old Mouse** whose household included four other individuals. The exact locations of these reserves remain unknown pending archaeological investigation.¹³

Among the early white settlers to Cowee were men from the Indian campaigns and their descendants who, knowing of the fertile soil and abundant natural resources found in the Cowee Valley, returned to settle in the following decades. Presbyterian minister **William Hall** who accompanied Rutherford's troops, preached a sermon of victory in 1776 from the top of Cowee Mound.

During the nineteenth century, the Cowee area evolved from a frontier settlement to a prosperous organized farming and trading community. Cowee established a post office in 1852 and then discontinued the office in 1866. Apparently, after the Civil War the area came to be known as West's Mill because records indicate that the West's Mill post office opened in 1875 with **Pinkney P. McLean** as postmaster.¹⁴ The name Cowee would not disappear however. Sometime later, most likely in the mid to late nineteenth century, the township containing the community of West's Mill would be named Cowee. Since the nineteenth century, the community immediately surrounding the village of West's Mill has been referred to as Cowee.

Farms in Wests' Mill and Cowee were largely self-sufficient, but because roads were few and poor, a small commercial and community centers grew up to serve the needs of local families. Community centers in rural Macon County contained businesses for buying and selling goods and products, small manufacturing and service concerns like mills and blacksmith shops, and community buildings such as churches and schools. The Wests, one of the first families to settle in the area, in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, built West's Mill, from which the community derived its name.¹⁵ The mill was located on the banks of Cowee Creek just before it drops onto the floodplain of the Little Tennessee River. Gristmills were very important to rural communities of the period since grinding grain efficiently could not be done at home; consequently mills were often among the first commercial establishments in a community and became the business and social center of rural hamlets in mountain counties.

In the earliest years of white settlement at West's Mill, subsistence and livestock farming, principally hogs run on forest land, were predominant. As farms developed, with more improved land for pasture, hay, grains, and other crops, cattle and poultry and a few cash crops such as tobacco and corn became important supplements to subsistence activities. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the number of farms in Macon County increased from about six hundred to over a thousand, but the actual amount of acreage remained nearly steady and crop production went up, meaning that the average farm size was smaller but land was being used more intensively.

¹¹ Hampton, p.8

¹² Hampton, p. 9.

¹³ Hampton, p. 12.

¹⁴ Vernon S. Stroupe et al, eds., *Post Offices and Postmasters of North Carolina*, n.p.

¹⁵ Although the construction date of the mill remains unknown, the mill was mentioned in the 1819 reserve claim of a Cherokee named Deer in the Water. His reserve was documented as located "at West's old mill place." See Hampton, p. 9.

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Production of tobacco, an important cash crop, increased greatly during the last half of the nineteenth century because markets became more accessible to farmers as transportation improved. The legacy of tobacco production is evident in the tobacco barns still standing in the district. The timber industry, an important contributor to the cash economy, grew throughout the period, up until the Depression. In the earlier decades, logging had been mostly restricted to farmers cutting timber off their own land in more accessible areas. Handling timber was cumbersome and time consuming. But after the railroad reached nearby Murphy in 1890 and railroad spurs extended into Macon County, lumber companies began to exploit the rich timber resources, including steeper, more easily damaged areas. The railroad never reached West's Mill, but much timber was cut in the area and many men were employed in the business. On a much smaller scale, fruit orchards became more profitable during this time for the same reason. Apples and peaches were the primary crops in West's Mill. Livestock remained a dominant element in the agricultural economy of West's Mill throughout its history and up to the present because even poorer land was suited to grazing and less management is required, allowing even part-time farmers to manage pastureland.

William West emerged as one of the most prosperous farmers in West's Mill during the late nineteenth century. In 1880 on his eleven hundred acres, **West** held oxen, cattle, sheep, swine, and poultry. He had forty-three acres in corn, thirty acres in wheat, fields of sweet and Irish potatoes, and apple orchards. More typical of the period was the small-scale operation of John West who rented seventeen acres whereon he held two cows, three sheep, and five heads of poultry, and grew corn, wheat, and pulse on twenty-five acres.¹⁶

One of the more prominent farms to be established in the nineteenth century was the **James and Emmeline Bryson** farm (#25). **James Bryson** (1823-1904) and his wife **Emmeline Shepherd Bryson** acquired the property in 1856 from her parents, **Nancy and Thomas Shepherd, Jr.**, who had received the property as a state land grant soon after the Cherokees were removed. Both the Bryson and the Shepherd families had been in Cowee since at least the early nineteenth century: **Thomas Shepard** is believed to have been the fourth white man to settle in the valley among the Cherokee and **James Bryson's** father is believed to have settled in Cowee around 1815. The Bryson farm, typical of farms in West's Mill during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, produced corn, wheat, rye, vegetables, cane syrup, livestock, and tobacco. In 1863 **James and Emmeline Bryson** built a substantial farm house on their land. In the 1920s James and Emmeline's grandson, **Carr Bryson** (1894-1981) and his wife **Frances Rickman Bryson** (b. 1906) took over the farm and implemented some of the common progressive farming techniques of the period including soil conservation practices. **Carr Bryson** worked for the local CCC unit during the Depression and later for the Soil Conservation Service. The Bryson farm retains forty-four acres and an eclectic assortment of outbuildings including a burley barn, wash house, spring house, shed, livestock barn, garage, and privy.

While West's Mill remained a viable rural community throughout the twentieth century, the self-sufficient farmstead persisted as the basic agricultural unit in Macon County until the 1930s when the small farm way of life began to wane somewhat. In the early twentieth century, better opportunities in logging, commerce, and professions presented more options in ways to make a living and many families supplemented their income with outside work. At the same time, farms were divided up among family members, making them less profitable, and agriculture in marginal areas all over the country declined as large-scale agriculture and shipping grew. Government policies did not favor small farms either. In 1928, a resident of West's Mill lamented that "the poor farmers are taxed until they can't live...all the young men are leaving the farms."¹⁷ Though cash from farming was scarcer during the Depression, family farms provided many of the needs of their residents. Part-time farming continued as part of the community economy and lifestyle. Even during the depths of the Depression in July 1932, a local newspaper reported, "farmers of this place are busy stacking wheat and laying corn while

¹⁶ Census of Agricultural Production, 1880 (microfilm).

¹⁷ *Franklin Press*, 1928.

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the ladies are getting ready to take care of the berry crop.”¹⁸

In addition to farming, key to the development of West's Mill as a community in the nineteenth century was the establishment of commercial enterprises. In the early years of the community, businesses were established on family land to serve the immediate community and when feasible to facilitate trade with the outside. Items produced locally, like animal hides, tobacco, mica, and corn were often bought by local merchants and hauled to outside buyers, rather than being marketed by individual producers. By the late nineteenth century the crossroads community boasted several stores, gristmills, churches, small manufacturing concerns including a coffin-making shop, two schools, and a post office and a dentist office. Inaccessibility due to difficult terrain, poor roads, and numerous creeks and rivers remained obstacles to commerce with the outside world.

The **T.R. Rickman** Store (#19), built by **John Hall** around 1895, stood as a focal point of the community for over a hundred years. **Hall** had an earlier store on the bank of Cowee Creek, but had to relocate to more healthful, higher ground, as he suffered from tuberculosis. **Horace Bryson** bought the store in 1920, and **Tom Rickman**, who had been renting it from **Mr. Bryson**, purchased it in 1925. **Rickman** operated the store continuously until his death in 1994. The building was originally raised up on posts to allow wagons to drive under it to load and unload; **Rickman** lowered it to ground level when he bought it. He operated a gristmill next to the store and stored apples to sell from his own orchard in a stone apple cellar attached to the building. The first telephone in the community was in the store and **Rickman** would deliver messages about births and deaths and other important news from the outside world. He also had the first gasoline vehicle in the community, a truck that was used not only for hauling but also as an ambulance and hearse. The store sold some local products like eggs and apples, but most things that could be produced locally were produced by each family. More important were manufactured goods and certain staples and imported foods—shoes, plows, coffee beans, hardware, cloth, animal feed, bananas, patent medicines. **Mr. Rickman** said flour was the biggest seller because everyone baked bread. Near the end of his life he declared, “I couldn't give a bag of store bread away.”¹⁹ He also bought animal skins and furs and sold them to dealers and hauled mica from the valley to Sylva and Asheville. To get the power company to bring electricity to the store, he put up his own pole, after which the company agreed to run the line from lotla, located between West's Mill and Franklin. The store held an important social function for the community for people would gather to play checkers and horseshoes or just to pass the time of day. Up until **Tom Rickman's** death, on a winter's day a few old timers could be found sitting around the wood stove and **Mr. Rickman** knew the name of every school child that came in after school at the nearby Cowee School to buy a treat. Continuing the tradition of local trade, today the store sells fresh eggs and vegetables grown across the road at the **T.C. Bryson** House by the current store owners. The original counters, shelves, floors and woodwork, apple cellar, signs, and many reminders of years gone by preserve the flavor of the old **T.R. Rickman** Store.

In the late nineteenth century gemstones, including rubies, emeralds, and sapphires, were discovered at Cowee and surrounding communities. Around 1880 American Prospecting and Mining Company began to operate in the upper Cowee Valley, stimulating the local economy. Although major commercial quantities of gems were not found, notable individual gems were located. A September 1954 newspaper reported “oldtimers in the Cowee section still talk about a \$65,000 pigeon blood ruby found in the area in the late 1890s although none remembered seeing it.” According to the paper a local boy, drunk on moonshine, discovered the area's first ruby and had it sent to New York. Long time residents of the Cowee section told the paper that “By the time it reached New York, two men from there were on their way here to tip up 1,600 acres of land for mining.” A company operated commercial mines at Cowee until around 1912 after which the mines were opened only occasionally.²⁰ In a local paper in 1932 area resident **John E. Rickman** commented that the gem mines at Cowee “were large producers of fine rubies, and are known the world over. It is here that the pigeon blood rubies are found,

¹⁸ *Franklin Press*, July 2, 1932.

¹⁹ *Heritage of Macon County* (Franklin: Macon County Historical Society, 1987), p. 78.

²⁰ *Franklin Press*, September 2, 1954

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being mined only one other place on earth."²¹ Mica mines proved more commercially viable and mica was mined from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Stores in West Mill bought and hauled the mica to markets in Sylva and Asheville. According to local residents, evidence of hand-dug mica pits is found on most farms in the community.

Early post offices at West's Mill were housed alternately in the **Rickman, West, and Morrison** (demolished in the 1930s) mercantile stores. The former post office remaining in the community dates to the late 1920s; it was moved one lot to the east in 1935. It ceased operation in the 1954, but members of the **West** family continued to live in the domestic quarters contained in the building. The post office served an important community function since traveling to Franklin to pick up mail would have been difficult and time consuming. By the 1950s, home delivery was established in the rural areas, and it was easier to get to Franklin to pick up mail, as well, so that rural post offices in small communities throughout the county ceased to operate.

The establishment of schools was as important to the development of West's Mill as commercial enterprises. In 1840, Macon County established a school board and public money was allocated to subsidize local schools, allowing for an extended the school year. In 1897, one dollar was allocated for each student. In 1903, Macon County passed the first compulsory attendance law in the state, requiring children to attend school until the age of fourteen.²² In the West's Mill the **Peabody School** was built in 1875 near the cemetery of the **Snow Hill Church** (#11). It was considered to be one of the best schools in the area and students from neighboring counties and communities boarded with local families so they could attend the school. The **Peabody School** closed and a new school was built in 1897 on the land where the **Old Cowee School** (#13) is located. The **Old Cowee School** was built in 1914 when the original building burned. The WPA built the current **Cowee Elementary School** (#16) in 1943 when the smaller schools of Cowee, Tellico, Liberty, Harmony, Rose Creek, and Oak Grove were consolidated.

The presence of a sizeable African American population made Cowee and West's Mill unique in rural western North Carolina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most substantial black populations were found in larger towns or in the region's only city, Asheville. Many of the original African American residents of Cowee came in bondage while others settled as free blacks. **William Morrison, Sr.**, an early settler in the area, was opposed to slavery and had freed his inherited slaves in Burke County. He brought his family to Macon County to find peace, away from the other slaveholders who were angered by his actions. A number of freed blacks came with him and they and their descendants lived in Cowee and West's Mill. With its rich farming, the Cowee Valley attracted large-scale farming and created a demand for labor that was met with slavery. Among the slaveholders in Cowee before the Civil War were **William West**, who owned nine slaves eight of whom were mulatto, and **John West** who owned three slaves including one mulatto.²³

Just after emancipation in 1870, the African American population in the county totaled 397, with eighty-seven individuals or fourteen families living in Cowee. Outside of Franklin, Cowee had the largest African American population in 1870. By 1910, the county's black population was 557, with 154 individuals living in Cowee.²⁴ In 1920 twenty-one African American households lived in Cowee.²⁵ Meanwhile the 1930s proved a racially tense period in the county seat of Franklin. In October 1932 the local newspaper reported that "Negroes driven off streets by band of young white men and boys following the arrest of three Negro women on disorderly conduct charges."²⁶

²¹ *Franklin Press*, May 24, 1932.

²² *Heritage of Macon County*, op cit., p. 63.

²³ Slave Census of 1860.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 84.

²⁵ Population Census of 1920, Macon County, North Carolina.

²⁶ *Franklin Press*, October 6, 1932.

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James Deal (b. 1849, death date unknown), an African American farmer, settled in Cowee as a young man. In 1936 an Asheville newspaper reported that **Deal**, also known as **Uncle Jim**, a former “body servant” of **Col. Clinton Huger**, owned a 160-acre farm at Cowee. **Deal** served as a hostler, or caretaker of horses, to **Huger** and lived in Charleston at the opening of the Civil War. A year after the war began he and his family were sent to Anderson, South Carolina where they were sold first to **John Cowen**, and then to **Abraham Taylor** who brought them to Macon County. Fearing separation from his family, **Deal** ran away from **Taylor**, but in 1863 he was captured and sold to **James Deal** of the Holly Creek community for \$1,200. Upon emancipation **Deal** attended the newly-organized school for African Americans in Cowee. He later bought a farm just below West's Mill post office, where, like the majority of his neighbors, he grew garden produce, wheat, and corn and raised livestock and poultry. Twenty acres of his farmland was tilled or used for pasture; forests occupied the remaining acreage.²⁷

Before the Civil War, a limited number of African American children in Macon County attended community schools with white children. After the war, students were segregated and two schools opened for African Americans—one in Franklin, and one in Cowee. A May 2, 1957 article in a local newspaper recounted the history of the African American school in Cowee:

The first colored school (in Cowee) was in a log cabin building located on a hill about one-fourth mile from where the colored church now stands. For several years after the Civil War it was taught by white teachers. It was later moved on the ridge back of the colored church. At this time it was financed by county tax money and colored teachers were employed to supervise the advancement of colored children. Later it was consolidated with the Franklin (Chapel) elementary colored school.²⁸

Two black churches were established in Cowee after the Civil War—**Piney Grove Baptist and Pleasant Hill AME Zion** (#15). The Pleasant Hill congregation purchased one acre of land in 1871 for eight dollars. The present church was constructed in 1929, and it is believed there may have been a log church on the site before that time. The cemetery includes graves of former slaves who lived in the community and the grave of the last member of the church, Mr. **Escomoe Howell**, who died in 1987, and is still used by descendants of members.

Like most communities in western North Carolina, the Great Depression had a great impact on West's Mill. Many residents abandoned the community in search of better opportunities, but for those who stayed, the federal government, through New Deal work relief programs, namely the CCC established in 1933, provided jobs building roads, buildings, trails, campgrounds and planting and thinning trees. One of the county's most active CCC camps was established in West's Mill at the site of the Cowee Elementary School. A period newspaper reported the county's four CCC camps furnished “labor for beautifying portions of the Nantahala forest in Macon, and for grading and surfacing new roads.”²⁹

Several West's Mill residents found employment with the CCC at camps outside the community. **Clyde Anderson**, a timber cutter, served twenty-four months beginning in April 1939 at the camp in **Smokemont** in Swain County. **William Lee Rickman**, whose reason for enrolling was “to help grandmother who is invalid,” worked at the **Otto camp** from October 1938 to September 1940. **Weaver Hurst**, whose father was a carpenter, only served at the Otto camp for six months in 1941 before he was drafted into the Army. **Frank Hughes'** tenure was ever shorter; he deserted the CCC camp at Smokemont after only twenty-one days.³⁰

²⁷ *Asheville Citizen-Times*, March 3, 1936.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 87.

²⁹ *Asheville Citizen-Times*, ca. 1933 (clipping in the WPA Writers Project files, North Carolina State Archives).

³⁰ Civilian Conservation Corps Records: Enrollment and Discharge Records, Macon County (North Carolina State Archives).

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Agricultural production in the Cowee Valley and along the Little Tennessee bottoms rebounded in the 1940s. An Asheville newspaper reported in 1940 that "corn, small grain, potatoes, cabbage, truck crops, apples and other fruits...find a ready market" and are suited to the area's rich soils.³¹ In 1945, 315 farms were scattered around the county. **Frank Gibson** was typical of the West's Mill farmer in 1945. On the ten improved acres of his seventy-acre farm he produced two acres each of corn and hay and smaller parcels of potatoes and garden crops. His livestock consisted of two cows and thirty-five hens. Sixty acres of his land remained woodland. **C.N. West** who owned a local mercantile held forty-nine acres; a tenant worked twenty-five acres of his land. **West** was slightly more diversified than **Gibson** growing corn, oats, different varieties of hay, and potatoes, but like his neighbor, also raising hens. Only fourteen acres of his farm remained woodland. In general, hens and pullets, or young hens, were plentiful, while few farmers raised pigs. Cows were common, but not in large herds. Most farmers owned one or two head. Fruit trees were common as were crops of corn and potatoes. Compared to earlier in the century, few farmers raised wheat or oats.³²

After World War II many people left West's Mill and other rural mountain settlements to find better work and ore prosperity elsewhere. Some went no further than Franklin or Asheville, while others traveled to the Northwest where work could be found in the logging industry. The exodus of locals to the west had its roots earlier in the community's history. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, local men, like **J.W. Slagle**, who moved to Washington, and **Ed Slagle**, who settled in Idaho, sought prosperity elsewhere. World War II did not mark the end of the West's Mill as a community. This small settlement remained active after the war. In 1954, a lunchroom was added to the **Cowee Elementary School** to accommodate a growing student population and a \$28,000 addition was made to the **Cowee Baptist Church** (just outside the district). The Cowee Rural Development Organization was established at mid-century to provide residents with an opportunity to socialize and communicate their concerns with one another.³³ Into the 1950s the county's only newspaper, *The Franklin Press and Highland Highlander* reported local news in a column entitled "Wanderin' in West's Mill." The only indication that development in West's Mill was slowing came when the post office closed in October 1954.

Today West's Mill remains a quiet picturesque settlement tucked away in a valley along NC 28 as it meanders its way along the Little Tennessee River from Franklin north to Graham County. Evidence of Native American traditions, perhaps thousands of years old, remains visible in the Cowee Mound. The history of African Americans stands proud in the **Pleasant Hill Church** and cemetery, while prosperity by whites shows in the substantial two-story farmhouses that dot the fertile land. The community has been revived in recent years with new businesses occupying **Tom Rickman's** store and the **C.N. West** General Merchandise. Recognizing the important legacy left by free persons of color and ex-slaves who once lived here, a group in the community has worked to stabilize and preserve **Pleasant Hill Church**. The former **Cowee School**, once a fading monument to early education in West's Mill, stands restored and functioning as an inn. Members of the community hope that the nomination of Cowee-West's Mill to the National Register will document its importance in the history of a variety of cultures, a history that makes it a unique and important place in North Carolina and the Southern Appalachians.

³¹ *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 17, 1949.

³² 1946 Farm Census for North Carolina (Macon County): Information Secured Through Tax Supervisors and Compiled by the North Carolina and United States Departments of Agriculture and County Commissioners.

³³ *Franklin Press*, February 2, 1954.