

The History of Sovereign Oaks & the Bull Creek Valley



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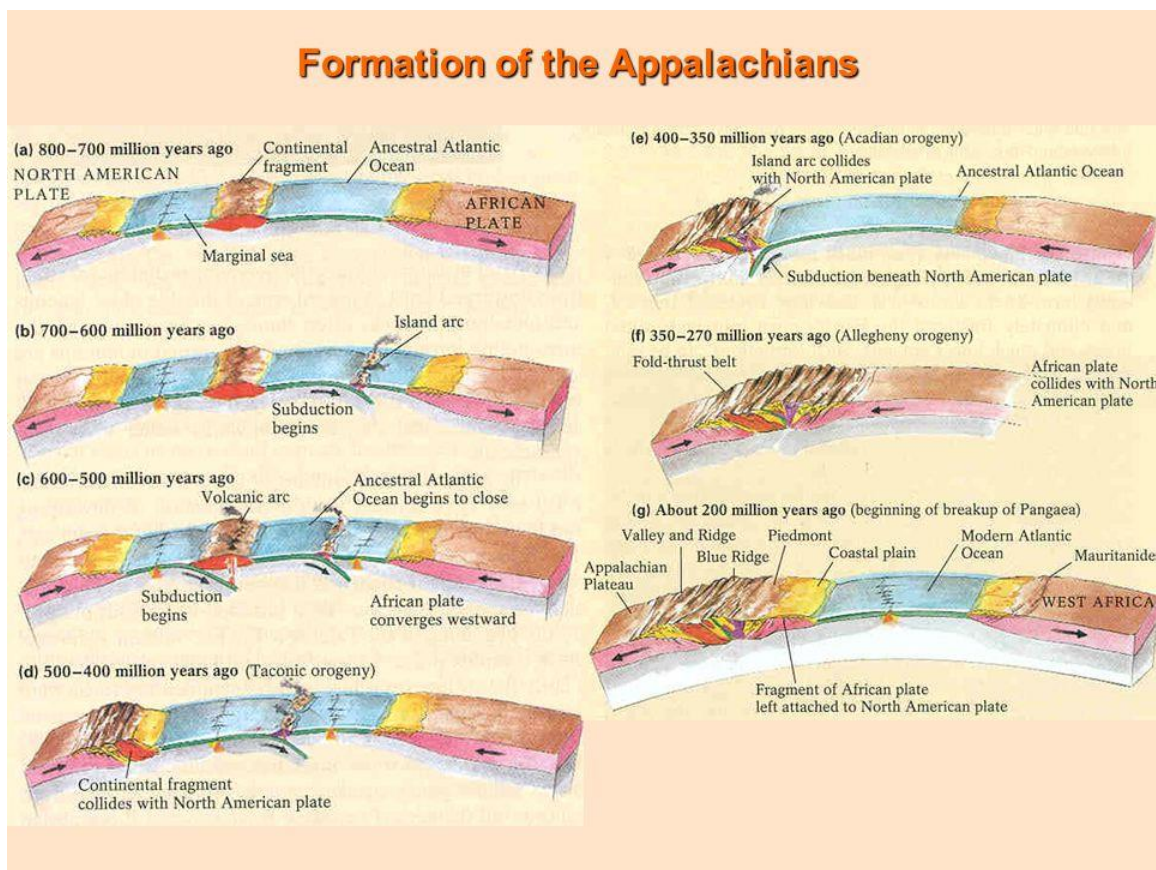
Introduction

Sovereign Oaks and the surrounding hills have a long and rich history. This document shares some of the stories that have shaped this land until now. Many of us have relocated here from other parts of the country and world, so the idea behind this document is to instill a “sense of place” and an appreciation for what has come before. After all, history is now in our hands, and the next stories added will be the ones we write.

Geological History

Sovereign Oaks lies in the midst of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which get their name from the haze which can make the mountain range appear blue from a distance. The Blue Ridge is the name given to the first couple of ranges of the Appalachian Mountains encountered when coming west from the coast, extending from Georgia to Virginia.

The Appalachian mountains are one of the oldest mountain ranges on earth, dating back over 250 million years. The range was formed by a series of collisions between the North American plate, some mid- Atlantic islands, and the African Plate, as illustrated below:



These collisions created not only the Appalachians, but also the mountains of Northern England and Scotland, the mountains surrounding the fjords of Norway, and even the Atlas Mountains of Morocco as can be seen in the following diagram.



Although the highest mountain in the range is now Mount Mitchell at 6,684 feet, these mountains were originally thought to be up to 25,000 feet high. Over hundreds of thousands of years they have eroded away. It is thought that as the rock above eroded away, the reduced weight on the earth's crust caused the land to gradually rise. This helps account for how a small creek like Bull Creek can create such a large valley.

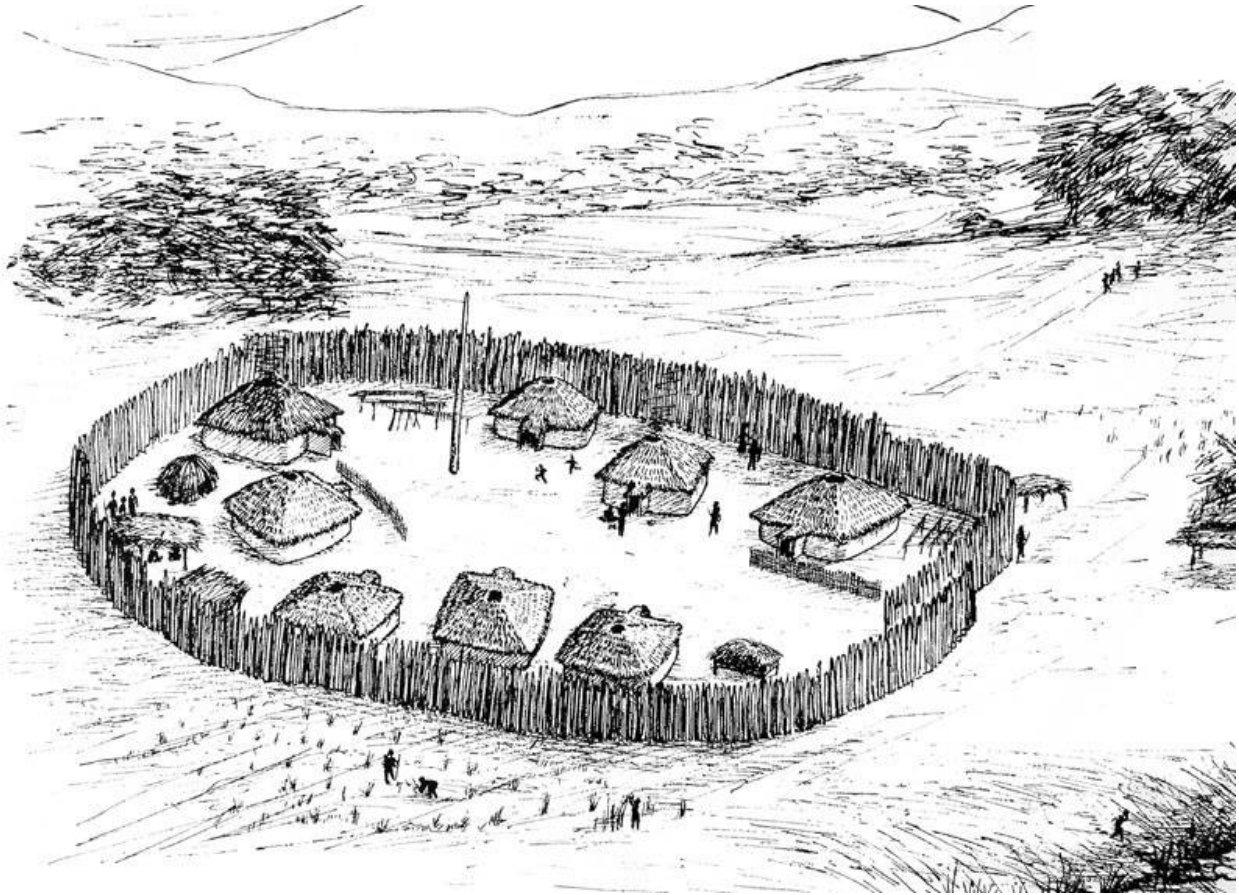
Our underlying bedrock is part of the Asheville Metamorphic Suite and is about 600,000 years old, and was converted to Metamorphic rock by the force of the collisions. Sovereign Oaks is a bit unusual in these mountains for having rather deep soil above the bedrock in most areas. This is thought to be sediment deposited over time by Bull Creek and the Swannanoa River.

The geology of these mountains helps to explain the extraordinary biodiversity of our region. We have 130 species of trees in the area, vs. only 70 in all of Europe. This stems from the facts that:

- These mountains are very old
- In general the region is wet, with lots of moisture supporting plant and animal life
- These mountains were never under water and never glaciated, so life has had a long time to develop
- As the climate cooled during the ice ages, plant and animal species retreated south along the mountains, and as it warmed again, some northern species maintained a foothold at high elevations

Native Americans

The area has been inhabited by humans for over 1800 years based on archaeological finds. A permanent Native American settlement was excavated on Warren Wilson College property a mile or so above the mouth of Bull Creek. A diagram depicting that site is provided below.



These were the Pisgah people, forerunners of the Cherokee and Shawnee tribes that came later. An archeological analysis of trash pits there showed a diet equally split between farmed crops like maize, squash, and beans, and foods from hunting and gathering like nuts, fruits, seeds & greens, and meat. Interestingly, studies have shown that Native Americans adopting this mountain diet were healthier than those in the low lands that ate more corn.

The Cherokee controlled most of the land in the mountains, but by the time the white settlers arrived it is thought that there were no permanent settlements locally, and that they only visited for hunting and gathering. The Shawnee tribe was also in these mountains, but they were a highly nomadic tribe that traveled between Florida and Pennsylvania. When the first white settler arrived there was a small Shawnee settlement on the Swannanoa River just above where it meets the French Broad on what is now the Biltmore Estate. It is thought that the name of the Swannanoa River is actually derived from "Shawnee". (as well as the names of the Savannah and Suwanee Rivers)

In the 1700's the Blue Ridge formed the dividing line between the settlers and Indian territories. The American settlers locally were based at Davidson's Fort in what is now Old Fort. At the start of the Revolutionary War the Cherokee allied with the British against the American settlers as they had a more positive trading relationship with the British. The Cherokee even coordinated on an attack on South

Carolina settlements on the same day that the British attacked Charleston. In retaliation, the American General Rutherford marched with 2400 men in September 1776 from Old Fort down the Swannanoa valley to Asheville and beyond, destroying Native American settlements as they went.

Most of the remaining Cherokee were forced out of the area under Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act in 1830 that led to the infamous "Trail of Tears".

Samuel Davidson – First White Settler in these Mountains

In the spring of 1784, Samuel Davidson and his wife Rachel built a cabin and tilled the land at a point roughly where Exit 55 of I-40 is located. They lived there 4-5 months before an Indian hunting party came by and discovered them. The next morning Samuel Davidson went to take his horse to Old Fort to get supplies and searched for his horse. Rather than keep the horse tied up, he had attached a bell to its neck so that he could find it when needed. On that morning he followed the sound of the bell, but it turned out that the Indians had taken the bell off the horse and were luring him up Jones Mountain, which is the small mountain one sees to the southeast across the river when leaving Sovereign Oaks.

When Samuel reached the sound of the bell, the Indians jumped out and shot him dead. His wife Rachel heard the shot, and then looked up above the door and saw there Samuel's rifle hanging in its place. Realizing what had happened, she ran from their cabin with her child and their slave, Eliza. Avoiding established trails, they hiked about 16 miles across the mountains back to their former home at Davidson's Fort. The next day, a group of kin came across the gap and began searching for Samuel and found his body. They dug a grave and buried him, carving the initials 'SD' in a big oak tree nearby. This marker was replaced with a stone marker a few years back during a family reunion. After the Indians were driven out by General Rutherford, the Davidsons and Alexanders from Old Fort established the first permanent white settlement (Swannanoa Settlement) at mouth of Bee Tree Creek in 1785.

The Bull Creek Valley & Riceville

A sign on the Blue Ridge Parkway at the Bull Creek Overlook hints at the origin of the valley's name.



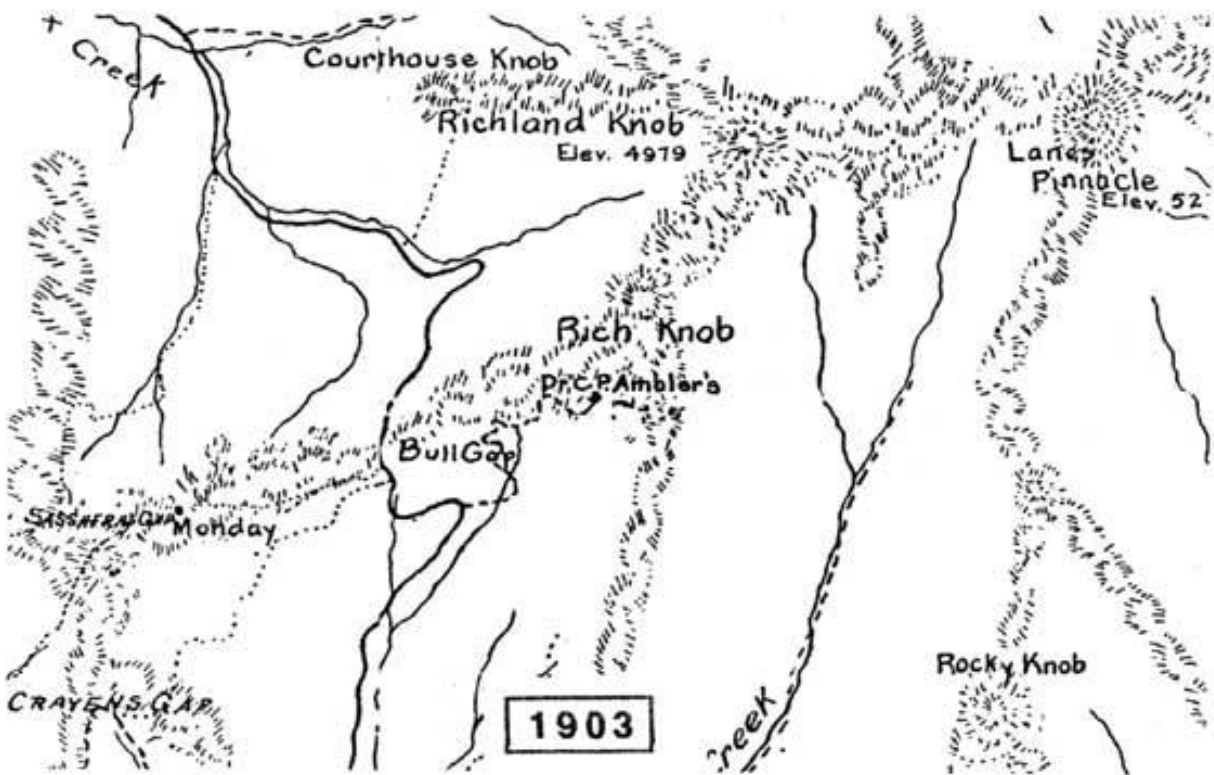
Our creek is named for that last bull Buffalo. Joseph Marion Rice was one of the earliest settlers in what is now Buncombe County and in the Riceville valley. It is known that Joseph Rice served in the Revolutionary War, coming over from Tennessee to fight the British. Coming back as a hunter, he camped with the Shawnee in the Bull Creek Valley near where the town of Riceville stands. Rice was granted by the Indians a sum of land around Bull Creek that he could walk around and stake between sun up and sundown, approximately 200 acres. Unfortunately for Rice the new state government would not honor Indian land grants and he later had to purchase the land.

Settling in this valley, Joseph Rice was a farmer, hunter, trapper, and stock stand operator. The stock stand provided a place for drovers to house their herds as they were traveling from farm to market. As Buncombe County was settled, the road along Bull Creek and over Bull Gap (elevation 3107 ft) was the first public road in the county. It was a major route through the mountains for settlers bringing livestock from Tennessee to markets in South Carolina.

As it turns out, some have speculated that the buffalo had a role in early road engineering:

"It is probable that buffaloes made the first roads over these mountains, and that the Indians, following where they led, made their trading paths by pursuing these highways" - John Preston Arthur in *Western North Carolina: A History from 1730 to 1913*

The road through Bull Gap is shown in this 1903 map.



The Bull Gap Road connected our valley to Weaverville via what is now Ox Creek Road. Old timers from Riceville recount that the road was so busy in those days that children were afraid to cross.

Nonetheless, the connection from Bull Gap into our valley was cut off during the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway from 1949-1952. As a result, the once thriving town of Riceville declined, and stores and gas stations closed. Today only a fire station and a number of churches remain.

Extinct Animals of the Blue Ridge

The last buffalo killed by Joseph Marion Rice was not the only large creature that once roamed these mountains. Per an account by Ivan Hughey, descendant of an early Riceville family:

“In the early 1800’s Grandfather come across through Bull Gap. A panther followed him all the way over the mountain. He was comin’ in a covered wagon and it was dark before he made it over. He struck at it time and again with his bullwhip”

Ultimately, as a threat to people and livestock the Eastern Cougar (or panther) was hunted to extinction, disappearing from this area around 1835. Today, one still hears persistent reports of panther sightings in the mountains. It is thought that these are not surviving Eastern Cougars, but rather mountain lions migrating here from the West Coast. One cat killed on a highway in Virginia had been tagged in South Dakota. There are confirmed sightings of a population in Central Tennessee, so it is only a matter of time until panthers reoccupy the Blue Ridge. Mountain Lions have a 150 mile range, and should thrive here based on our deer population.

The last elk in the area was recorded killed in 1785 near where Long Shoals Road runs now. But the elk have rebounded and are now well established in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. One can see them in the Cataloochee Valley portion of the park located near Maggie Valley.

Go back to 18000 BC and the fossil record shows that we had many more large animals in these mountains, including:

- Mastodon
- Woolly Mammoth
- Saber-toothed Tigers
- Ground Sloth
- Jaguars
- Wolves
- Wild Boar
- Tapirs
- Musk ox
- Stag Moose

Their populations changed dramatically when early man came to North America, and these were hunted to extinction before European settlers reached these shores.

Even our now common black bears were once at risk. Forster Sondley's local history published in 1922 indicated that black bears were “exceedingly scarce”. But Black Bears are extremely adaptable and resourceful, and their numbers have rebounded. They are now often seen in Sovereign Oaks, and are common in all areas of Asheville except downtown.

The Founding of Craigsfield Farm

Sovereign Oaks occupies the former Craigsfield Farm, established in 1789 by John and Hannah Davis Craig who had moved here from Augusta County, Virginia. They cleared the land, built a corn mill on Bull Creek, and a distillery, all while raising eight children. John Craig was one of the founders of Buncombe County in 1791, serving as Trustee, a position comparable to the present County Treasurer. Buncombe County was formed from parts of Burke and Rutherford Counties, which in those days had technically extended west as far as the Mississippi since no settlers lived on those lands.

As a founder, John Craig is mentioned in Forster Sondley's 1922 "A History of Buncombe County" where he is described as follows:

*"He was a most eccentric character of much intelligence and considerable property...
... prided himself on being discourteous in manner and brutal in disposition".*

The Murder of John Craig

Perhaps his personality played a role in his famous murder a few years later. As reported in the Raleigh Minerva newspaper:

"On Tuesday, March 15, 1808, as Mr. Craig worked alone at his Bull Creek mill his dogs began to bark as if they had tracked a deer. Curious, Craig walked towards the mountain laurel thicket the dogs had disappeared into on the opposite bank of Bull Creek. Before he could cover the approximately 60 foot distance to find his dogs, a man crouching behind the laurel pointed a rifle at Craig and fired."

It was reported that the musket ball entered above Craig's stomach and went through so it could be seen poking out of the skin on his back. Despite this, he lived for 3 hours and told those attending that his assailant was Henry West, his daughter's fiancé. Based on this and circumstantial evidence West was sentenced to death at a trial held on April 8th & 9th with his execution scheduled May 6th. (Justice moved fast in those days as there was no penitentiary in the area)

However, after the trial another man, Thomas Rogers, became a suspect. An original juror, Thomas Patton, felt so strongly that he petitioned the governor to pardon West. As reported in the Raleigh Register:

"West is stated to be a poor man who was never possessed of a rifle. The man now suspected has a rifle which carries a ball the exact size of that which shot the deceased. No enmity is said to have subsisted betwixt West and Craig; on the contrary, West lived in the family, and was engaged to be married to one of Mr. Craig's daughters. "There was a quarrel and a long impending law suit betwixt the man now suspected and the deceased."

On May 6th as Henry West was preparing to hang, rider arrived from Raleigh with a pardon from the Governor. The case was publicized widely as an example – per a Raleigh Register editorial in 1808:

"The narrow escape of this innocent man will serve as a caution to jurors against too lightly convicting persons of murder on circumstantial evidence."

Craigsfield Farm's Connection to Abraham Lincoln

As a young widow, Hannah Davis Craig took charge of running the farm, distillery & corn mill. Her daughter Martha married Eldridge Melton and ultimately a good portion of the farm passed to them. Eldridge Melton is notable since according to local lore his uncle was actually Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln's official biography has him born in 1809 in Kentucky to Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, and in this telling Nancy was raised by relatives in Kentucky with little known about her childhood. But local lore has it that Abe was the illegitimate child of Abraham Enloe, and was born in February 1804.

Both versions agree that Lincoln's mother Nancy Hanks was the illegitimate daughter of Lucy Hanks of Virginia. Lucy was very poor and could not afford to raise her children. The North Carolina version of the story has it that instead of being raised in Kentucky, at the age of 8-9 years old Nancy was bound out to the household of Abraham Enloe, a wealthy livestock dealer with daughters of a similar age and homes in Bostic and Oconoluftee, North Carolina. One of Enloe's daughters, Sarah, ultimately married a Melton and it was her son Eldridge that married Martha Craig and ultimately took over Craigsfield Farm.

When Nancy was 20 years old, it is reported that there was trouble in the household when Nancy Hanks became pregnant by Abraham Enloe, and she was sent away to a former home near Bostic where she gave birth to a son Abraham in February 1804. To make peace in the family, she was sent away to Kentucky and promised to Thomas Lincoln. By both accounts Nancy Hanks married Thomas Lincoln in 1806, and later died of milk sickness in 1818.

In the early 1900's a number of books were written with the North Carolina version of events, including two by Dr. James Caswell Coggins containing dozens of affidavits from local people who knew Nancy Hanks growing up and some who had seen her with her child Abraham before she left for Kentucky. To this day there is a small local museum in Bostic with details supporting the contention that Abraham Lincoln was born a North Carolinian.

The Muster Field

Musterfield Creek on the west boundary of Sovereign Oaks is named for the part Craigsfield Farm played in Civil War History. According to George B. Coggins:

"The muster field was part of the Craig Farm and is located about where Henry West owned land on the Old Farm School Road. On the north flank of the Swannanoa River there was a field, the only flat place in these mountains, and it was hidden from view of the valley and passersby, although the first wagon road came right by, so everybody could get there. That's where the soldiers met and were mustered into the Civil War. They came from all over the place. And they would parade there and drill and learn how to carry their rifles properly. It was also a shooting ground for the Civil War Soldiers".

While the exact location is difficult to ascertain, if one assumes that Old Farm School Road continues in the same place as the old wagon road, the relatively flat fields just above the community entrance fit the description better than any other place nearby.

During the Civil War began the men in the Craig and Melton families joined the Confederate Army and one by one were all killed in the war. The only heirs to the Craig-Melton property were the two daughters, Harriett and Mary Jane, whose married name was Mary Jane Coggins.

Harriett and Mary Jane divided the family land holdings. Mary Jane Melton married John Wesley Coggins and had six children who lived to inherit these two estates. Harriett Melton had no children and left her land to her nieces and nephews.

Henry Allen Coggins inherited our portion of Craigsfield Farm. Henry was the Mayor of Bee Tree (a community near where Charles D. Owen Park now stands) and was also a founder of the Bee Tree Liar's Club, a group of men who gathered to tell tall tales. One of his nine sons, George Coggins, later inherited a portion of the farm and purchased the remaining shares of property from his brothers & sisters. Ultimately the land passed to his daughter, Craig Mackenzie (Copper) Coggins, the final member of the family to own this land.

The Asheville Farm School / Warren Wilson College

At the Eastern edge of Sovereign Oaks we neighbor Warren Wilson College, established in the late 19th Century as the Asheville Farm School. In those days, the members of the Women's Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church were concerned that many Americans in isolated areas were not receiving a proper education. So they decided to establish church supported schools in areas where there were no public services. In many cases, the young people who came to these mission schools had no prior formal education. The group bought the land for the school in 1893, and it opened in 1894 with 25 boys and 3 instructors. A photo from around 1900 shows the school in those days.



Initially it was a high school, but it extended into post high-school education in 1936. After the Second World War, state education improved dramatically, so the Farm School held its last high school class in 1957. The school was one of the first southern colleges to desegregate, admitting its first black student in 1952. In 1966, the school was renamed Warren Wilson College as it evolved into a private liberal arts college. Its curriculum is somewhat unique, as it emphasizes learning by doing. In order to graduate, students must contribute via three elements, study, work, and community service.

Dodge Lake Dam

A popular destination on our trails along Bull Creek is the old dam ruin just north on Sovereign Oaks on Warren Wilson College property. The dam was built in 1910 to supply power and light to the Asheville Farm School, creating Dodge Lake. The following photo shows the dam during its construction.



The dam served for only six years before it was destroyed in the famous floods of 1916. Per a contemporary account in the Presbyterian newsletter, the Continent:

“Dodge Lake, which supplies the farm school with power and light, broke through one end of the dam, tore out two lengths of the great steel supply pipe, tossing them aside as though they were straws”

Loggers had clear cut most of the area in the years before, and this made the flood much worse than it would otherwise have been. While the subsequent history is unclear, it appears that the dam was rebuilt and served until electric utility power reached the school. While we don't know when the dam was decommissioned, we know that it would have endured yet another major flood in 1940 when rainfall associated with a tropical system dropped 15" of rain in the upper Bull Creek Valley, washing out a number of bridges along the creek and in the Swannanoa Valley.

Although the creek is relatively small, it drains a large watershed of approximately 10.6 square miles, more than three times the area drained by neighboring Haw Creek. On the Blue Ridge Parkway north of Asheville, one follows the Bull Creek watershed for about 7 miles from the first overlook on the right side of the road past the Tanbark Ridge tunnel, and across the upper reaches of Shope Creek until reaching the sign indicating that you are entering the Asheville watershed.

Rattlesnake Lodge

In the upper reaches of the Bull Creek valley lies the ruin of Rattlesnake Lodge, a popular local hiking destination. The lodge was built in 1903 and 1904 to be a summer home for Dr. Chase P. Ambler and his family.



It is recorded that during the first three years, 41 rattlesnakes were killed on the property. But that number might be inflated; it was understood throughout the area that Dr. Ambler would pay \$5 for any rattler brought to him. Since in those days \$5 was about equivalent to week's wages, many of the rattlers undoubtedly came from very far away!

The lodge was destroyed by fire in 1926. Today, visitors are greeted by an interpretive sign, and can see remains of the house, a spring house, a swimming pool, the tool shed, and a water reservoir. More information can be found at <https://www.rattlesnakelodge.com/>.

Community Cemetery

In the common area to the right of Wandering Oaks Way one can find a small cemetery. And curiously, it houses nobody named Craig or Coggins. In fact this cemetery was established in the year 2000.

The first person buried there was Travis Samuel Waters, who lived from June 20, 1980 to September 20, 2000. Travis was the son of Ellie Waters, who is the sister of Ron Ainspan, a partner of Copper Coggins. Travis died at age 20 from Ewing's Sarcoma, a type of bone cancer. His story is documented in a book published by his mother, called "Kibou: The Travis Waters Story of Hope", available through Amazon.

Travis was raised in the town of Potsdam in far upstate New York. His cancer was diagnosed in 1997 with a dire prognosis. At one point the family decided to adopt a strict macrobiotic diet, based on mostly whole grains and vegetables with no sugars. In 1999 they decided to move to Asheville because his uncle Ron had direct access to organically grown vegetables via this farm and his business. Travis lived in a historic cabin adjacent to the farmhouse, and during his many walks around the farm chose a peaceful spot for his final resting place. Kibou, the Japanese word for hope, was the name of a puppy acquired by Travis during his illness. The other marker in the cemetery marks the resting place for Ron Ainspan and Ellie Waters' parents.

The Genesis of Sovereign Oaks

Over time it became apparent that the Coggins Farm would not be viable over the long run. Some attempts were made to save the farm, including a rock concert in October 2010 and a fundraiser in August of 2011. Nonetheless, the farm was ultimately put up for sale, and was soon under contract to David Case of TFM Carolina development.

The sale was very controversial, both because of the loss of a historic family farm, and due to protests over the developer's original plans for the community. The initial 2013 proposal approved by the County Planning Board was for 382 units on the property, a mix of condominiums, single-family homes and retail space. It included plans for a community school, greenhouses, and housing to help seniors age in place. The houses would be clustered, with little acreage per house, more open space, and some agricultural land retained. A diagram of that initial plan is provided on the following page.



The approval of this plan led to a series of protests, and a petition which drew 302 signatures from area residents. In response, the original proposal was withdrawn in February 2014, and ultimately replaced with the current plan with 99 residential properties. The opposition to the plan continued and was organized into the Coggins Conservation Project, which tried to stop the development of the site. Nonetheless, TFM Carolina ultimately prevailed and the purchase was finalized in July 2015 for \$4.1 million.

Prepared by Randy Richardson
July 2018