"worthy to be classed"?: Slavery and its Legacy in Grayson County, Virginia

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“worthy to be classed”: Slavery and its Legacy in Grayson County, Virginia

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in History from the College of William and Mary

by

Rebekah Elaine Turnmire

Accepted for ________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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I.

Grayson County and Appalachia

In the town of Independence, the county seat, in Grayson County, Virginia the statue of a Confederate soldier stands sentinel outside the 1908 Courthouse. A local landmark, this building and its monument personify the predominate historical memory of this western county—one of white southern pride. Housing a small collection of local artifacts and photographs, the 1908 Courthouse is currently the sole exhibitor of Grayson’s history. Its collections chronologically detail the county’s people, architecture, and ties to the land as well as its participation in every national conflict since the French and Indian War. Cases display farming implements and Confederate money, arrowheads, and scanned family pictures. Courthouse exhibitions champion white independence, resilience, and success. The tenacity of earlier settlers is further revered in the museum’s short discussion of Cherokee presence through the Legend of Caty Sage.

While these narratives are integral to the understanding of the area, an important piece of the county’s make-up is absent. A perusal of the Courthouse exhibits conveys the impression of a region devoid of human enslavement, reiterating the prevailing

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1 See Appendix, Figure 1a. The United Daughters of the Confederacy added the Confederate Monument, “Parade Rest” to the front of the courthouse around 1911 when it is noted to have been dedicated. On June 1, 2010 the statue was rededicated after the base had been repaired due to heavy truck traffic shifting the stones apart. The rededication ceremony was held at the 1908 Courthouse front lawn, in attendance were several Civil War reenactment groups—particularly that of the 50th Virginia Infantry, Company D, the Wilson Rifles (formed in 1861 by Grayson residents.) http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sons_and_Daughters_of_the_Confederacy/message/1584?var=1.

2 Eva Boyer. “The Ballad of Caty Sage.” Blue Ridge Institute Museum & Online Exhibit. Accessed March 2, 2013. http://www.blueridgeinstitute.org/ballads/catysagesong.html Legend of Caty Sage—On July 6, 1792, five-year-old Caty Sage was abducted from her home in Grayson County by regional Native Americans (most likely Cherokee). The legend goes that a local soothsayer predicted that the girl would be eventually found. In 1848, Caty’s brother Charles was in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas when a Wyandotte Indian told him that he closely resembled a white woman living in his tribe. Seeing the family resemblance, Charles and his brother Samuel confirmed Caty’s identity through specific scars, birthmarks, etc. Having assimilated and married in the tribe three times, she refused to leave with her brothers to see her mother, who died shortly after receiving news her daughter lived. “The Ballad of Caty Sage” was a poem written in the 1930s by Eva Boyer of Carroll County based on this story and has further become a part of regional lore and pride.
presumption that mountain counties were divorced from the deplorable institution that defined the rest of the South.

Only two obscure mentions of its slave past are present. First, a small photograph titled “Melvina Johnson, Born into slavery, Elk Creek” is the sole tangible link to Grayson’s slave past. Her countenance unassuming, the elderly woman’s portrait presents more questions than answers. What was her occupation? Who was her family? How did she live? Though her surname nods to the family who most likely owned her, there is little else to bridge the gap of knowledge.

![Melvina Johnson, Elk Creek, Born into Slavery. Photograph courtesy of the 1908 Courthouse Elk Creek Exhibit, Independence, Virginia.](image)

The second clue to Grayson’s past is buried within a newspaper clipping detailing the history of the Summerfield Farm House: “ […] rest of the house was a wooden structure. Not many details are known about this section except that […] it was dark and

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3 Elk Creek Exhibit, 1908 Courthouse, Independence, Virginia. Though the date of the photograph is unknown, it was most likely taken in the late 1890s early 1900s judging by the age and dress of Melvina Johnson.

4 Remodeled in 1858 by Samuel Fulton as an expansion to the original structure. Newspaper article found in an exhibit in the 1908 Courthouse.
unattractive but functional. The whole house was built by slave labor with hand-hewn logs, which had mortised joints.\textsuperscript{5} Easily looked over in favor of the photographs surrounding it, this sentence alludes to the type of labor Grayson slaves could have performed, yet it, like Melvina’s countenance, are easily overshadowed by the memories of whites and, to some extent, Native Americans. Effectively skating over the county’s slave legacy, the primary recollections in the 1908 Courthouse allude to the overarching race relations throughout the county’s history. Nowhere else in Grayson is slavery, or later race relations, presented. Those in bondage have been forgotten, silent is their role in helping create and maintain the county, its industry, and its pastoral landscape.

Though it remains shrouded in ambiguity, mountain slavery in Grayson County, like many other regions in the Appalachian South, represents a unique outgrowth of the traditional slave society in the southern United States—a binary of what Ira Berlin classifies as a slave society and a society with slaves.\textsuperscript{6} Largely shaped by its rough geographic terrain, the steady growth of slavery in Grayson developed this dual society more closely with that of its western North Carolinian neighbor, Ashe County, than that of its neighbor to the northeast, Wythe County, Virginia. Though slavery did not shape the county’s formative years as drastically as in Virginia’s eastern regions, its continued presence throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries played a central role in Grayson’s social hierarchy and the eventual participation of its residents in the Civil War.

\textsuperscript{5} See Appendix, Figure 2a.

\textsuperscript{6} Ira Berlin, \textit{Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America}. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998. In his work Berlin distinguishes between societies with slaves and slave societies. Societies with slaves “were generally small, and the line between slave and free could be remarkably fluid, with manumission often possible […] What distinguished societies with slaves was the fact that slaves were marginal to the central productive processes […]” p. 8. Whereas in slave societies “slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations […]” p. 8.
Furthermore, the repercussions of regional slavery and the actions of Grayson’s initial residents’ descendants forged a legacy of black subservience that would contribute to the fervent support of ‘benevolent’ segregation during the mid-twentieth century as well as an insular form of racism.\footnote{The term “insular racism” refers to the assertion by Grayson residents that within the county during the mid-twentieth century racism or racists attitudes were non-existent—a correlation between both races “knowing their place.” Following several personal interviews and extrapolating on the lack of race in Grayson County: A History in Pictures and Words (1792-1950) (written in 1976) this proved not to be the case. Instead, the vehement denial of racial tensions by both white and black residents alludes to a belief in the morally superior myth of Appalachia. It should also be recognized that with so few black citizens, Grayson’s black community did not have the demographic strength to step out of their prescribed roles within Grayson County’s system.}

Lacking any readily available firsthand accounts or written records, the story of slavery in Grayson County must be pieced together using a series of government documents, oral memory, vernacular architecture, newspapers, and secondary sources. By placing Grayson’s slave record, population statistics, and geography in comparison with the demographics of both Wythe County, Virginia, and Ashe County, North Carolina, its slave narrative begins to unravel. It is at the point that factual and statistical history meet historical memory that a total picture of Grayson’s murky racial evolution in the past and the present begins to challenge the predominate view of Appalachian communities as ignorant, homogenous societies separate from the rest of the Southern United States.

Nestled in the southwestern corner of Virginia, Grayson County supports a breathtaking countryside of the folding mountains characteristic of the Blue Ridge Highlands of the Appalachian Mountain range. A series of rocky outcrops and deep hollows, the hardscrabble land of Grayson’s western end is home to the highest mountains in Virginia, Mount Rogers at 5,729 feet and Whitetop Mountain at 5,520 feet,
which taper off just before the county seat, Independence. Grayson’s landscape holds a natural beauty scarcely interrupted by human existence. The small towns and farms that dot the undulating hills and valleys are seamlessly integrated into the land. Its current population is comprised predominately of white Protestants whose ancestors are found in family graveyards dating back generations. It is in their agrarian, folk, and musical heritage that these mountain people take pride. Distinct religious, political, and social values color the recollections and memory of Grayson residents—their perceptions of the county’s past mirror the exhibits in the 1908 Courthouse. Slavery is recalled by popular history to have belonged in the Tidewater or in the Deep South, never truly finding purchase within the confines of their beloved mountains. Yet, it permeated the very core of the newly formed county, as its most prominent members were both slaveholders and public officials.

While no personal narratives, from either slave or slaveholder, have yet to be discovered, a compilation of local accounts provides the closest thing. Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures (1792-1950), compiled and edited by Bettye-Lou Fields and Jene Hughes for publication by the Grayson County Historical Society in 1976, is the leading survey of the county. A history of communities and people versus one of boundaries and governments, Grayson County: A History is meant to serve as a source book for historic facts as well as a reflection of the county’s colorful heritage. While this work is, by and large, a survey rather than an exhaustive history, it reflects not only the

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influence of the social history movement of the sixties and seventies in looking at regional studies but also gives ample context in which to situate slavery in Grayson County, through the eyes of its white residents.\textsuperscript{10}

The historic scholarship on Appalachia has expanded extensively since the mid-twentieth century. Spurred by Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty and a shift in societal focus towards local and regional identity, anthropologists, historians, and ethnographers expounded upon existing “studies” of Appalachia and her people solidifying the mythology of “Appalachian exceptionalism.”\textsuperscript{11} Emphasizing the impoverished, uneducated, white, backwoods hillbilly caricature that became synonymous with Appalachian people in the 1960s, scholarship from the era did little to dispel such rhetoric.\textsuperscript{12} Instead, historians exploited the isolation and lack of industrialization in the region to emphasize stilted progress that had captivated national attention rather than the rich regional history and culture. Dwight Billings, Mary Beth Pudup, and Altina Waller define the “mythic system” in their introduction of \textit{Appalachia in the Making}. The “mythic system” is the Appalachian region and people removed the reality of

\textsuperscript{10} A broad branch of history, social history studies the experiences of ordinary people—i.e. slaves, women, Native Americans, lower class, in the past. In its heyday during the 1960s and 1970s, the social history movement completely changed the face of history departments in American universities as well as how historians in the field approached history itself. Originally manifesting itself largely in statistical analysis to flesh out the narratives of common people, social history has increasingly opened to encompass material culture and architectural analysis.

\textsuperscript{11} Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, introduced in his State of the Union address in 1964, was part of his domestic legislation to combat the national poverty rate. Largely falling under the “absolute poverty line,” southern Appalachia became a prime destination for many of the War on Poverty programs like VISTA, Job Corps, and Head Start. The national focus on Appalachian poverty and the region’s residents “backwardness” overshadowed the vivid culture and history. Johnson’s War on Poverty was an added catalyst to the growing notion that Appalachia was an isolated, untouched region without a true history.

\textsuperscript{12} “Appalachian exceptionalism” is the view that Appalachian culture and her people are wholly different from any other culture in the United States.
“Appalachia” from the wider spectrum of themes in American history. Within this system, the people of Appalachia are portrayed as a surviving remnant of the white pioneer culture that first settled the eastern seaboard. Thus, Appalachia’s preindustrial history solidified as an isolated folk culture without a history—a society apart from the nation.

Justifying the region’s contemporary problems rather than objectively studying its place in an overarching national narrative, leading scholars of the 1960s and 1970s reiterate early documentary accounts. One such historian was Harry Caudill whose 1962 work, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, put Appalachian history and social and economic processes in the forefront of academia, thus setting the stage for the next generation of Appalachian scholars. Though not the first to articulate the notion of “internal colonialism” as the root of Appalachian destitution, Caudill’s work used the region’s history of economic exploitation to explain Appalachia’s persisting problems.

Published in 1971, *Appalachian People’s History Book* intends to “teach Appalachian people their own past as well as give them the tools to plan better for the

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14 Ibid., 3. Discussing the growth of Appalachian Studies, Billings, Pudup, and Waller agree with Henry D. Shapiro’s claim that “contemporary assumptions that Appalachia is a coherent region occupied by a homogeneous people who share a unified culture.” They list some such early “documentary” accounts such as John C. Campbell’s *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (1921), Horace Kephart’s *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913, 1922), Samuel Tyndale Wilson’s *The Southern Mountaineers* (1906, 1914), James Watt Raine’s *The Land of the Saddle-bags* (1924), and Muriel Earley Sheppard’s *Cabins in the Laurel* (1935).

15 Ibid., 6. “Internal colonialism” is the model used by 1970s Appalachian scholars to draw attention to the absentee ownership of Appalachia’s land and mineral wealth that drained profits from the region. This model attributes Appalachian poverty to the nature of its integration with, not separation from, the American corporate economy as well as the exploitation of it’s land, resources, and people.

16 Ibid., 6-7.
future.” What follows is a loose timeline of United States history through an Appalachian lens. While the narrative attempts to highlight the experiences of various groups of Appalachian peoples, it falls short of giving an expansive history. Instead, through both generic illustrations and watered down facts, this work falls into the vein of Appalachian scholarship discussed above. Detailing the ingenuity of the region’s settlers, the book reiterates the myth of a homogenous, morally benevolent pre-industrial Appalachian society, claiming that though institutions like slaveholding affected the mountaineers, most were against fighting to save the institution. “A rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” exposes the underlying message that permeates this history lesson. The land and the people of Appalachia, though valiant and morally upright, have, throughout their history, been subjected to the control of outsiders, thus unable to transcend their pre-industrial state.

Challenging the revisionists of the sixties and seventies, a new generation of scholars in the 1980s and 1990s shifted their focus to pre-industrial Appalachia. Refuting the unified, seamless narratives that reinforced the assumption that Appalachian history only began with the history of industrialization, scholars including Wilma Dunaway, John Inscoe, Dwight Billings, and Mary Beth Pudup demonstrated that “historical records existed for a social science history of Appalachian communities” that could augment existing folk and oral history. Though their respective larger works focus on specific aspects of pre-industrial Appalachian history, their jointly edited *Appalachia in the* 

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18 Ibid., 22.

Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century, represented the growing body of scholarship that rejects Appalachia as a homogenous, unchanging, and isolated unit. The essays “challenge the concept of Appalachian exceptionalism and suggest that careful study of economic, social and cultural patterns in the region reveal broad parallels to the development of other American regions and communities.”

John Inscoe’s essay in particular illustrates one of the greatest discrepancies in the field—race in the highland and “lowland” South. Blacks in Appalachia picks apart the notion of an unwaveringly white Appalachia, opening the field of African American Appalachian history. Edited by Edward J. Cabbell and William H. Turner, this 1985 collection of essays was the first major challenge to the myth of Appalachian “whiteness.” The book pushed against what Turner and Cabbell termed “black invisibility” to demonstrate both the presence of blacks in Appalachia as well as their part in forming the distinct Appalachian culture.

Though Turner and Cabbell’s book opened the field, John C. Inscoe remains in the vanguard of mountain slave scholarship. His 1989 work, Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina, effectively deconstructs the “homogeneous generalizations” of the South’s highland areas to point out both the

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20 Ibid. 14.


similarities and the “otherness” of western North Carolina and Southern slavery. Inscoe does this by breaking the region’s “two long-standing, deeply engrained myths regarding Southern Appalachia.” The prevailing assumption of mountaineer ignorance to the institution of slavery, or blacks in general, due to the region’s lack of slaves is the primary myth Inscoe tackles. Concurrently, he challenges the misconception that the region’s poverty and lack of opportunity prevented a normative Southern social hierarchy from developing. His method gives a robust depiction of the regional population’s participation in and views toward slavery leading up to secession. This not only complicates previous scholarship but also dispels theories of the continued isolation and ignorance of “the backwoods civilization of the revolution.” This work also draws on the economic diversity that was common in western North Carolina to illustrate the various tasks performed by mountain slaves.

In 2001, Inscoe edited *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*, a collection of essays summarizing the scholarship of African American Appalachian history. Exploring race relations in nineteenth-century Appalachia, population shifts, and African Americans before and after emancipation, the essays argue that biracial issues and conflicts were a major catalyst in the evolution of Appalachia. These essays delve into the complexities of nineteenth-century race relations in Appalachia, jarring commonly held assumptions on mountain race relations.

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24 Ibid., 2.

25 Ibid., 3.
Wilma Dunaway is another driving force in establishing the history of slavery in Southern Appalachia. Her 2003 *Slavery in the American Mountain South* focuses on slave experiences on small plantations in the Upper South through extensive statistical, sociological, and anthropological research. Analogous to Inscoe’s use of slave narratives, Dunaway utilizes Works Progress Administration interviews of former Appalachian Virginia slaves to discuss slavery in the southwestern Virginia region. By defining the Mountain South in terms of “terrain” and “geological formation,” her work rejects previous scholars’ exclusion of southwestern Virginia. Dunaway deals a crippling blow to the argument that “Virginia’s ridges prevented the expansion of slavery in North America.” Slavery was entrenched in Appalachian Virginia, regardless of the region’s rough terrain. Furthermore, she uses the term plantation to refer to a slaveholding enterprise in order to delineate the economic operations on these agricultural units from those of non-slaveholding farms that characterized the Mountain South. This destruction of previous mythic stereotypes is necessary when one sees the inherent relationship and equitable share of political power and economic resources of planters and smallholders alike.

Analogous to Inscoe’s work in Western North Carolina, Dunaway effectively uses state sub-regions as her primary statistical indicators to construct comparative narratives

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26 Dunaway’s inclusion of slavery in Appalachian Virginia in *Slavery in the American Mountain South* is especially important because scholarship before this largely excluded the mountain region of Virginia due to its low frequency of slaveholding.


28 Ibid., 8.

29 Ibid., 9. This connection underlines the idea of duality within Mountain slavery as Berlin classifies slavery as well as the inherent social order that must come with the power structure of slaveholding farms.
for the Appalachian states in her study. Beyond statistical data, the WPA narratives add yet another layer to complicate the common perceptions. By approaching mountain slavery from heavily statistical and account based scholarship, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* provides the most exhaustive and comprehensive study of Appalachian slavery to date. Dunaway’s work in particular contributed to many of the inferences made about Grayson County slavery and its legacy in the southwestern corner of Virginia.

Slavery’s influence in Grayson County, as with much of the mountain south, predates industrialization. In the case of Grayson County, the early existence of slavery shaped the local economy, politics, and social hierarchy, to some degree, in tandem with the “lowland” south.30 While the unique mountain-valley geography within the county influenced the nature of labor the slaves did, it did not preclude Grayson from falling under Dunaway’s classification of a “plantation” society. Furthermore, the longstanding presence of slavery within the county fostered strong sentiments of “Southern solidarity” that outlasted the American Civil War. The county’s slave past continued to color local race relations long after Grayson’s residents forgot about their participation in the institution.

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30 “Lowland South” is a colloquial expression from the Appalachian south and is defined by mountain folk as anything “off the mountain.” Both Dunaway and Inscoe use this term in their works.
II.
The Establishment and Early History of Grayson County

Not a permanent settlement for local Native Americans by the early 1700s, Grayson County remained largely unsettled until the early 1750s. While a few families had attempted to settle the region, hostilities during the French and Indian War (1754-1763) disturbed these early efforts. Finally, in 1765, true settlement was established with the arrival of William Bourne and his wife Rosamond from Hanover County, Virginia.31

Although both William and Rosamond Bourne moved westward from eastern Virginia, the large majority of Grayson’s early settlers were comprised of Scots-Irish Presbyterians and Pennsylvania Germans. Their settlement of the region followed a slow southwestern migration as much as it was a westward movement from the Tidewater.\(^{32}\) It is from this movement that William Bourne came to settle in Grayson County, establishing his homestead at Knob Fork, in the eastern section of Grayson, on the New River.\(^{33}\) Over the next few years, mentions of Grayson’s most prominent residents show up. Edward Hale came to the territory over the Allegheny Mountains to establish himself along the valley of the eastern New River. His relative, Lewis Hale, was en route to Kentucky when he received news of the death of his brother-in-law in Tennessee. Instead of continuing westward, Lewis Hale decided to settle on Elk Creek near William Bourne’s land.\(^{34}\) Major Minitre Jones, the father of Rosamond Bourne, settled with his two brothers along the mouth of Elk Creek on the eastern stretch of the New River around 1768.\(^{35}\) Enoch Osborne, unlike his early neighbors, settled a little further west on the New River, near the Bridle Creek area; Osborne was later joined by his three brothers, Solomon, Ephraim, and Jonathan.\(^{36}\) These initial settlers quickly monopolized the most fertile and arable tracts of land in the eastern most section of Grayson County, frequently along the many tributaries that flowed into the New River. This early control

\(^{32}\) Fields and Hughes, *Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures*. 18.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 20. William Bourne and his wife Rosamond, twenty and sixteen respectively, arrived in Grayson in 1765 where a total of eight families resided. In Benjamin Nuckolls book, *Pioneer Settlers*, he states the “Rosa Bourne was always kind to their negroes and provided well for them. She was their doctor when sick, their comfort in trouble, a Christian woman […]” 19.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{35}\) Nuckolls, *Pioneer Settlers of Grayson County, Virginia*. 156.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 171.
allowed them to establish and increase their personal capital as the western frontier continued to form into smaller counties. Furthermore, the increasing clout of these early patriarchs further solidified in their participation and leadership in the American Revolution—most, like Enoch Osbourne, becoming captains of western companies.\footnote{Fields and Hughes, 31-34. The rosters for these western companies are listed here.}

Formally separating from Wythe County in 1792, Grayson County broke away from Evansham, now Wytheville, due to a growing population and its extreme distance from the county seat across the Iron Mountains. Figure 2 illustrates the original size and location of Grayson County and its early citizens following its formation. The rugged terrain and long journey to Evansham that Grayson’s freeholders were required to travel in order to vote spurred the proposal to separate from Wythe.\footnote{Fields and Hughes, 47.} With the county seat so far removed, early settlers called for the new county to be created on the south side of Wythe. Met with violent opposition from Wythe County officials, Flower Swift, William Bourne, Lewis Hale, and Minitre Jones lobbied the Virginia legislature with the help of William Grayson of Montgomery County. Following their success, they named the new county after William Grayson for his “help in securing the new county and in recognition of his services.”\footnote{Nuckolls, 2.}

The first court session, held after Grayson’s formation, was convened on May 21, 1793, in a barn belonging to William Bourne. In attendance were Flower Swift, Enoch Osbourne, Minitre Jones, Nathaniel Frisbie, Phillip Gaines, William Bourne, Nathaniel
Pope, Mathew Dickey, Lewis Hale, and Moses Foley, Gent.\(^{40}\) While this marks the start of written records for Grayson County, the extant records of the early courts deal solely with the eastern part of the county. The communities on the western end of the county were isolated by various mountains thus, lacking roads, are strikingly absent from Grayson County’s early written record. Difficult travel conditions and the rocky terrain make it probable that residents of the western communities would have opted not to journey to the courthouse in the eastern half of the county for every court session. It is also possible that due to the sparse population in the western half of the county, the residents set up their own informal court or traveled to a closer court in a neighboring county—the former being more likely. Regrettably, no early court location, deeds, marriages, or transactions commonly recorded in a court of law for these western communities have been found.

\(^{40}\) Grayson County, (Va.) Order book, 1793-1825. Reel 13. County and City Records, Microfilm Collection. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia 23219. Also in Benjamin Nuckolls’ book and *Grayson County: A History* (p. 51). Tax records show that William Bourne owned three slaves in 1810, four in 1820, and sixteen in 1830. Flower Swift is listed as having owned at least one slave in 1800 and 1810. Minitre Jones, three in 1800, four in 1810, and eighteen by 1820. Lewis Hale owned at least one in 1810 and 1820, with a second showing up in 1830. Enoch Osbourne is listed to have held two from 1800 to 1820 then having three in 1830. Mathew Dickey owned 2 in 1820. Phillip Gaines owned six in 1810 and nine in 1820. [http://www.newrivernotes.com/grayson_enumerations_1800_slaveholders.htm](http://www.newrivernotes.com/grayson_enumerations_1800_slaveholders.htm).
Known as the “barn court,” the initial proceedings of the newly formed county solidified the influence and high positions of these early eastern Grayson settlers. The proceedings of the first meeting elected William Bourne clerk of the court; Flower Swift, Minitre Jones, and Nathaniel Frisbie, magistrates; and Phillip Gaines, Sheriff.\(^{41}\) One of the first orders of business for the court was “to fix upon a place of holding Courts […] until publick buildings shall be erected.”\(^{42}\) By July 22, 1794, an official courthouse building was erected within a few miles of the barn court on land given to the county for public use by William Bourne. This log structure was replaced in 1809 when it was “Ordered that the commissioners of the public buildings be authorized to contract for building a courthouse of brick, either of private contract or to the lowest bidder, at their

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid. Also Nuckolls, Pioneer Settlers of Grayson County, Virginia. 5.
discretion.” The next mention of this brick courthouse comes twenty-five years later in 1834 when the “commissioners of the public lots and buildings for Grayson County,” Martin Dickensen, James Anderson, Sr., and Henry Wilcox report

The undersigned […] beg leave to report that they have received from the hands of James Toncray, the new courthouse, built by him in accordance with the contract previously entered into; […] it would be just and fair for the court to make an additional allowance to the said Toncray for the additional work and labor done over and above his contract [...].

While the details of the new building are unknown, it is clear that the Toncray structure presented an odd dilemma for the county. Eight years after the Toncray courthouse in Old Town (now Greenville) was completed, eastern Grayson County divided to create Carroll County in 1842, leaving the county seat once more not centrally located. What sparked was a very heated, public debate regarding the location of the new county seat.

Figure 4. Old Town Brick Courthouse completed in 1834; now a private residence. http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Counties/Grayson/OldGraysonCourthouse_photo.htm.

43 Fields and Hughes, Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures. 78.
44 Ibid., 79.
45 Ibid., 79.
The topic of choosing a new county seat created two distinct camps—those who saw the need for a more centrally located county seat and those who maintained that it should remain in Old Town. Spanning the course of eight years, the issue took two Virginia Legislature appointed committees and several geographical surveys to decide on the Emanuel Long place—a developable tract of land that butted up against the county’s main road, the Furnace Road. Conveniently located to accessible roads and a bountiful supply of water from the New River, the “New Location” was named Independence. The court quickly contracted for a new courthouse and jail from John Dawson with the stipulation that the building should be finished by December 1, 1850.

Since the initial “barn court” through the county seat’s movement to Independence, the placement of the county seat was determined primarily in conjunction with the location of its wealthiest, eastern citizens—like Bourne, Osborne, Swift, and Jones. Though the county’s population extended further west, these eastern residents not only held the greatest sway and public offices but also controlled the largest swaths of developable land. It is important to note that with every movement of the county seat, as well as the progression of courthouse structures, the far-reaching control of Grayson’s most prominent, slaveholding citizens become more apparent.

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46 Ibid., 82. Long gave five acres of land to the county for the construction of the courthouse and other public buildings.

47 Ibid., 82.
III. 
Demographics of Grayson County

Table 1 -- Graph comparing slaveholders and slaves to white population in Grayson County from 1800-1850. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>Slaveholders</th>
<th>Free White Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4800</td>
<td>10000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>4800</td>
<td>10000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4800</td>
<td>10000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>4800</td>
<td>10000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 1793 and 1830, one percent of the free population was slaveholders, but roughly seventy percent of Grayson County’s justices were slaveholders. The graph above illustrates the growth in the number of slaves in relationship to that of the free white population. Despite the increase in slaves from 1800 to 1850, the percentage of slaveholders remained consistent, with only four percent of the free white population listed as owning slaves in 1830. Yet, they retained disproportionate control over the

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48 Historical Census Browser. Retrieved March 10, 2013, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html. 2004. Given the information available, the number of slaveholders may not completely reflect the true number within the county; this is the closest estimation. Furthermore the Free Population represented in Table 1 is taken from Census data available and includes the total number of free whites of all ages whereas slaveholders would have been male heads of households. This graph is meant to further illustrate the fact that though the majority of Graysonites did not own slaves themselves, there was a fair amount of slaves for a small population as well as those who did remained the upper class of the region. It should be noted that as the number of enslaved blacks rose, so did the number of slaveholders.

49 This estimate given is rough due to lack of data for the western half of the county.
county’s courts since the county’s founding. Furthermore, this select group dominated the county’s militia and sheriff’s office, among other elected governmental positions.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Free White Males</th>
<th>Free White Females</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
<th>Free Colored People</th>
<th>All Persons Except for Indians, not taxed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>1808</td>
<td>170</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>4941*</td>
<td></td>
<td>270</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>2772</td>
<td>2492</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>7675*</td>
<td></td>
<td>462*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>9087*</td>
<td></td>
<td>492</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850*</td>
<td>3066</td>
<td>3076</td>
<td>499*</td>
<td>36*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>8252*</td>
<td></td>
<td>547</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>8833*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>754*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2—U.S. Bureau of the Census. Grayson County, Virginia, Census, 1800-1860.  

Proportionally half the Southern average, black slaves in Appalachia played a key role in forming the political strata of Southern Appalachia as seventeen percent of the region’s population were enslaved. Observing overarching trends, it would seem that the Appalachian counties of Virginia exhibited the most erratic pattern of enslavement—between the years 1810 and 1820 there was a seven percent decline, next a seven percent increase between 1820 and 1840, followed by another small decline between 1840 and

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51 Historical Census Browser. Retrieved March 10, 2013, from the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html. 2004. The numbers with asterisks represent years in which census information was not divided by gender, instead given as a total figure. The 1850 census is also marked as the first census taken after the formation of Carroll County from eastern Grayson County.

52 Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South*. 17.
1860. The first census of Grayson County was held in 1800, eight years after the county’s inception. The total population of the county that year was 3,911—170, or 4.3 percent, were black slaves. Grayson County’s black population fell well under that of its neighboring Appalachian Virginian counties. Both Wythe County and Patrick County’s enslaved residents made up roughly fifteen percent of their total population while Washington County’s fell around 9.5 percent. Ashe County, North Carolina, on the other hand, shows analogous population trends to Grayson County with 4.5 percent of its population being comprised of enslaved blacks. When compared to its neighboring Virginia counties, Grayson’s relatively small proportion of enslaved blacks could be misconstrued as a pocket of the Appalachians in which slavery did not have a firm hold. However, a closer look at demographic trends, terrain, and local economy of Grayson County against that of both Ashe County, North Carolina, and Wythe County, Virginia, illustrates the far-reaching control of local slaveholders.

As Grayson’s first census shows, slaveholders made up roughly one percent of the white population of the county. A miniscule fraction of the residents, this small group wielded a great deal of influence. The first court of Grayson County had ten justices of the peace named by the governor with three, William Bourne, Flower Swift, and Enoch Osbourne, having already held a position in the Wythe County court, thus retaining their position after the formation of Grayson. Seven of the ten justices were slaveholders and, as previously discussed, were influential in the formation of the county itself. While these

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53 Ibid., 18. Dunaway compares the erratic pattern of Southwestern Virginia with patterns in its neighboring states of North Carolina, Maryland, South Carolina, Kentucky, and West Virginia.


55 Ibid.
few individuals made up a very small portion of Grayson County residents, their influence over the county’s government was unparalleled through the 1860s, even with an increase in the number of elected officials. As Grayson’s slave population rose, the number of slaveholders grew slowly, rising only to about four percent of the total white population in 1850. Characteristic of a slave society, these propertied elite maintained such control that they reflect the ruling class of the “lowland” South.
IV. Overview of Agricultural Pursuits or “What they do instead of tobacco”

Unlike the larger plantations of the “lowland” south, mountainous communities did not develop agricultural specialization.56 While Grayson’s residents made attempts at cash crop production, like tobacco and cotton, the rough terrain made it nearly impossible to produce traditionally exportable crops on a large scale at the same level of profit as in the “lowland” south and Tidewater. The assumption that the absence of commercial agriculture gave way to small, subsistence farming created one of the many myths of an insular economy based on survival. The myth in turn perpetuated the popular view that slavery was of little concern to most of the mountainous counties without the large bodies of fertile land that sustained market crops.57 When looking at the demographic trends of Grayson County, the mountain and ridge-and-valley terrain did not prevent the growth of slavery.58

The majority of the citizens of early Grayson County were first and foremost farmers, with the bulk of slaves in the county being owned by people involved in agricultural pursuits. Holding, on average, one to three slaves apiece, many of these small

56 Lack of agricultural specialization in this instance refers to the lack of a specific crop production or an economy based solely on livestock production. Instead, agriculture in Grayson County varied to the degree that it developed a composite economy.

57 Dunaway, Slavery in the American Mountain South. 33.

58 When compared to the population trends of Wythe and Ashe County one finds closer similarities between Grayson County and Ashe County. Furthermore, the terrain of Wythe County, being more suited for large scale farming and iron-ore production saw twice the number of slaves throughout the nineteenth century. Ashe County’s geography, on the other hand, more closely resembles that of Grayson County. With a large portion of the county following the New River, the pockets of valley land were held by wealthier farmers whereas the surrounding mountains were more conducive to livestock. Possible causes for the divergence in population trends between Grayson County and Ashe County could lie in the discovery of gold in Ashe County that caused a small influx of people as well as the promising lead industry that grew up in the region. Grayson County, though profitable in the iron-ore industry, seems to not have had the same influx in people.
slaveowners did not rely solely on unpaid labor to sustain their agrarian pursuits. Instead, they either hired smaller farmers, similar to tenant farming and sharecropping, or they opted to toil alongside their slaves.\textsuperscript{59} Though subsistence production was integral to the lives of local residents, many of Grayson’s freeholders, both slaveholding and non-slaveholding, also grew surplus grains, raised livestock, produced wool, textiles, minerals, and timber to export further south.\textsuperscript{60} Grayson’s mountainous terrain was particularly conducive to raising livestock. Granny Beck, one of William Bourne’s slaves, “took charge of the cattle and stock out on the range; slated and watched after them. […] She would describe its colour or its size, etc., and would [frequently] hunt until she found it [if one went missing.]”\textsuperscript{61} Like Bourne, Joseph Fields used livestock to garner income. Quite successful, Fields kept hogs, sheep, and cattle in the mountainous portion of his property.\textsuperscript{62} Owning two slaves in 1810, Fields’ profits allowed him to purchase four more slaves by 1830. These slaves, like Granny Beck, were most likely employed in branding and gathering livestock out of the mountains, as well as driving them to market. This diversification of labor in the county is not explicitly stated but inferred through early court records regarding public works projects and family narratives.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{59} Dunaway, \textit{Slavery in the American Mountain South}. 31.
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 26-27, 66-68. Dunaway illustrates the profitability of diversifying local economies by acting as a periphery of the world economy through livestock production and cultivating natural resources for export over cash crops. She states that ten percent of adult male slaves identified themselves as tending, training, and transporting livestock across Appalachia as well as working in a variety of production industries.
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{61} Nuckolls, \textit{Pioneer Settlers of Grayson County, Virginia}. 24. Nuckolls says that Granny Beck and a little girl by the name of Aimy were purchased from a block in Richmond when William Bourne was there on county business. The date of their purchase is unknown though it was probably between the dates of 1790 and 1810 while William Bourne was still making trips to Richmond.
\end{flushright}
\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{62} Fields and Hughes, \textit{Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures}. 87.
\end{flushright}
Many early court proceedings in Grayson County focused on the development and improvement of “wagon roads.” Meant to systematically open the countryside, the court frequently ordered surveys to be taken of properties that appear to have been owned, more often than not, by established slaveholders. Furthermore, road overseers like Major Jones and Matthew Dickey, Gents., were ordered to “divide the hands between them [the overseers] to keep the road in repair.” The identity of “the hands” is never given but the probability of the workers being slaves is high. It may also be inferred that while appointed road overseers were largely prominent farmers, poor whites also working on the roads would have functioned as the true overseers of any slaves working as “hands.”

Restrained by its mountainous terrain, Grayson County was unable to evolve from a society with slaves to a slave society. Though farms were established on extensive land holdings, the landscape prohibited the establishment of large, cash crop plantations in turn barring slavery from becoming the foundation for Grayson’s economy. Nevertheless, slave laborers were present and an integral part in building and sustaining both agricultural and non-agricultural pursuits. This can be observed by surveying two properties west of Independence.

Benjamin Phipps settled in Grayson County in the 1790s on land drained by Saddle, Bridle, and Fox Creeks, approximately eight to ten miles west of Independence.

63 Some of the property mentioned is that of William Bourne’s homelot, Flower Swift, Lewis Hale, Dickey’s Forge, and Robert Parsons’—all of whom owned slaves.

64 Fields and Hughes, *Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures.* 58.

65 Noting the names of appointed overseers, surveyors, and property owners, it is likely that each contributed a few of their slaves to aid in the work as well as maintain the existing roads. This inference, in conjunction with Wilma Dunaway’s discussion on slave employment makes sense, as intimate familiarity with the local terrain would be preferable to clearing and traversing land.
His sons and “able colored men cleared the fertile valley land.” Owning one taxable slave until 1810, Phipps and his sons erected two large log dwellings, two stories high with basements. One building, the “Big House,” was the family’s residency. As Benjamin Phipps’ family and profit grew, the house was remodeled to its present state. Upon his death in 1838, Benjamin’s son, Captain Joseph Phipps, inherited the “Big House” as well as his father’s nine slaves. The original structure of the “Big House,” while primarily made of wood, was a noticeable structure nestled in the valley. Not the grandest house in the county at the time, its size reiterates the social and economic prominence of Benjamin Phipps.

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66 Nuckolls, Pioneer Settlers of Grayson County, Virginia. 174.

67 The basement of the “Big House” is said to still have manacles attached to the wall where slaves were kept for punishment. Based on personal correspondence with Bob Cheeks and Wanda Smith, who are connected with the property, it is unclear whether or not these restraints still exist or were ever present. I was unable to access the basement for myself at the time.

68 See Appendix, Figure 3a.

69 In 1830 Benjamin Phipps was listed as owning nine taxable slaves, the same year his son Joseph was also listed with the same number. His brother “Little Ben” was not listed as owning slaves until 1850—when he was listed as owning eight slaves.
The second structure, referred to as the “Old Kitchen,” was where the slaves prepared meals. While the ground floor of the “Old Kitchen” was a spacious room holding a large fireplace made of rock, the upper story was used as a sleeping space for some of the house slaves.\textsuperscript{70} In addition to the dwelling houses for whites and for domestic slaves, the Phipps property included several log barns, cribs, granaries, a blacksmith shop, spring house, smoke house, “meal room,” wood shed, dry house, ash hopper, slave cabins, and two family cemeteries—one for the white family and the other for black.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} Bob Cheeks and Wanda Smith, “Phipps—Saddle Creek,” email to author, 10 Oct. 2012. The fireplace has since been replaced with brick. See Appendix, Figure 4a.

\textsuperscript{71} Inventory of Captain Joseph Phipps supplemented by personal correspondence with Bob Cheeks and Wanda Smith, October 10, 2012. Of these structures, the blacksmith shop, barns, smoke house, and dry house are still standing. It should be noted that while the family graveyard is fenced in roughly a quarter mile from the “Big House,” the slave graveyard is not clearly demarcated. The latter was rediscovered while Bob Cheeks and Wanda Smith’s grandfather, who was working as a field hand at the time, was plowing a field in preparation for planting when the ground gave way under the horses onto the unmarked graves. One of Captain Joseph Phipps’ descendants, the owner at the time, told him that it was the slave cemetery. The bones were then reinterred without a marker. The site of this incident was interestingly directly across from the “Big House,” in closer proximity than the family graveyard. Wanda Smith also mentioned another slave graveyard in the woods that line the property. See Appendix, Figures 5a-7a.
Though the raising, selling, and butchering of livestock, particularly cattle and hogs, was
the main production for the Phipps family, Captain Joseph Phipps established an early
corn mill run by water power on Saddle Creek.\textsuperscript{72} A larger slaveholder, Phipps used his
enslaved laborers both on the farm and at the mill. Upon surveying the property and the
surrounding countryside, it is probable that the Benjamin Phipps estate served as both an
employer to poor whites in the Saddle Creek community as well as their supplier of
general, non-agricultural goods. Possibly serving as a central hub for the immediate
community interactions between Phipps’ slaves and non-slaveholding whites would have
been likely.

Robert Parsons, like Benjamin Phipps, moved into the Mouth of Wilson
community of Grayson County, roughly twenty miles west of Independence, from North
Carolina after receiving a grant of sixteen hundred acres following his service in the
Revolutionary War.\textsuperscript{73} Correspondence with his descendants, Lane and Zane Phipps,
asserts that Parsons, one of the first settlers in the area, held the largest tract of land in the
western half of the county.\textsuperscript{74} It is here that the oldest brick structure in Grayson County
still stands. Built by Parsons’ slaves, the two-bay structure was completed in 1800
replacing the original two-story log house the growing Parsons brood had initially
occupied. The original walls of the structure are seven bricks deep at the foundation and
five deep as the wall continues upward.

\textsuperscript{72} Bob Cheeks and Wanda Smith, “Phipps—Saddle Creek,” email to author, 10 Oct. 2012.

\textsuperscript{73} Lane and Zane Phipps, conversation with author, 9 March 2013.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., While court records cannot corroborate this particular piece of information, Parsons and his
descendants, in large part, populated and owned the Mouth of Wilson area for the majority of the
nineteenth-century. Today, his descendants still own the old home place and much of the original property.
The hand-hewn ceiling beams are the last remnants of the wooden portion of the house. Though Parsons’ brick home served as the main house on his small plantation, evidence of his slaves remained on the old back wall where their various marks and “signatures” were carved into the wooden beams.\(^{75}\) The existence and completion of the Robert Parsons house by his slaves presents an interesting question on the skills and general employment of his slaves. It was not uncommon during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for poor, unskilled workers, and slaves to practice the brickmaking trade.\(^{76}\) Wealthy landowners, like Thomas Jefferson, may have assigned a number of their slaves to make bricks when building a plantation home, often under eye of a hired brick maker who could oversee the work and fire the kilns.\(^{77}\) A closer look at the competent

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\(^{75}\) After a renovation during the early 2000s, the Lane and Zane Phipps gave the marked beams from the back wall to a friend for lumber. Having no pictures of the engravings it is impossible to tell what Robert Parsons’ slaves actually left. Unable to remember the specific marks, the Phipps brothers called the markings “signatures” for lack of a better term.

brickwork and knowledge of fashionable English bond suggests that Parsons’ slaves likely had, at the very least, prior experience in brickmaking and a proficiency in the construction of brick buildings. While Parsons’ wealth is evident, it is unlikely that he would have been able to hire a master brick maker to oversee this endeavor due to the remote location of his property and the lack of other contemporary brick buildings in the county. The quality of the structure also points to the possibility of Parsons being able to hire his slaves out to neighbors or the county for construction purposes, concurrently gaining more money and increasing his influence in Grayson County and the community of Mouth of Wilson.

Furthermore, Robert Parsons’ brick dwelling presents an interesting expression of wealth. The sole brick structure in the entirety of early Grayson County, it is unclear why Parsons chose to replace his original log home with a brick dwelling instead of simply

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77 Ibid. It is unclear whether or not Robert Parsons employed a trained brick maker to oversee the work though it is doubtful given the remote location and lack of a brick maker in known lists of Grayson tradesmen.

78 The quality, uniform size, and grandness of the structure further indicate the strong economic status Robert Parsons maintained by the evident disposable income to build and maintain the structure.
expanding the original building. One explanation may be that given Parsons’ western location within the county, as well as being one of five families settled in the Mouth of Wilson community, he felt the need to express tangibly his economic status to gain respect or eventual inclusion in the running of the county. A statement in itself, the structure is striking against the surrounding landscape and could have served as a beacon to those traveling through the western half of the county. It is interesting to note that though Parsons was relatively late in settling in Grayson County compared to his fellow slaveholders, he, not William Bourne or Flower Swift, saw the need to physically remind people of his high status in the local hierarchy.

Falling under Dunaway’s classification of small plantation, Parsons’ expansive farm produced a range of goods from grain crops, livestock, to small amounts of tobacco. Utilizing the most fertile portions of land along the New River for agriculture and the more treacherous terrain for livestock, Parsons allowed his slaves to live in small cabins throughout his property. Though the exact number of slaves Robert Parsons owned is unclear, it is said that he had enough to divide amongst his nine sons when he died in 1848. Furthermore, there are stone markers in the family graveyard behind the brick house that are said to be those of a few of Parsons’ slaves. The uncommon presence of slave graves within the white family’s plot indicates a possible deviance from the common slaveholding mentality in the tidewater and “lowland” south. Their location may

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79 Lane and Zane Phipps, conversation with author, 9 March 2013. Both pointed out to me various locations around the farm where small portions of surrounding hills had been cut into to create plateaus for slave cabins. Though no longer visible, both Lane and Zane Phipps attested to having come across foundations on the locations as children and again as adults when expanding their dairy farm. See Appendix for photographs of slave dwelling locations.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid. See Appendix, Figures 8a-12a.
also reflect specific slaves’ relationships with the family or occupation on the farm—without any records it is impossible to assert any one explanation.

Figure 8: “Black” Johnny Parsons, Courtesy of Lane and Zane Phipps, Mouth of Wilson, Virginia.

Expanding the plantation’s production and wealth, Robert Parsons’ son, “Black” Johnny Parsons, built the first mill on Wilson Creek. The mill and dam were both built from logs and served to grind corn as was the adjoining sawmill. Elected to the Virginia General Assembly for one term and overseer of the South Fork and New River Turnpike, “Black” Johnny most likely used his slaves to operate the mill as well as to cut and transport lumber. Other gristmills along Grayson’s waterways sprung up as well. William Long Sr. was the first to erect a mill on his Peach Bottom Creek estate shortly after settling in the area on a land grant in 1790. Though the tax lists do not show William Long Sr. owning slaves, his grandson, Lewis Long, appears to have owned two taxable slaves in 1830.

82 “Black” Johnny was the only one of Robert Parsons’ nine sons to remain in Grayson County. The Parsons’ mill on Wilson Creek was located on their property roughly a mile from the home place. The original mill was replaced in the early 1900s when the machinery needed to be updated.

83 Fields and Hughes, Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures. 338.
Tax lists further substantiate the presence of slaves in non-agricultural pursuits. In 1793, William Bourne was granted a license to run an ordinary at his house.\(^4\) Listed as owning three taxable slaves at the time, Bourne would have likely used at least one slave to help with the ordinary when the county court was in session and met at his home.\(^5\) Though there is no mention of a general store in Grayson County during this time period, it is possible that William Bourne or one of his neighbors used their ordinary for a general store. In 1805 or 1806, Capt. Robert G. Nuckolls and his wife, Margaret Swift, the daughter of Flower Swift, applied for and opened the first ordinary at the new courthouse.\(^6\) Ten years later, Capt. Nuckolls is listed as owning two taxable slaves.\(^7\) It is possible that similar business ventures went on in the western half of the county but at this time the records indicating such have yet to be found.

William Bourne and Thomas Blair, a neighbor, further extended their economic pursuits when they invested in Matthew Dickey’s iron works, the Point Hope Furnace, in 1797.\(^8\) Their one-third interest included the furnace and forge, gristmill, sawmill and yards. While it is unclear how many slaves Blair owned, William Bourne was the more

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\(^4\) An “ordinary” is an seventeenth and eighteenth century term to refer to a tavern or eating house serving regular meals.

\(^5\) It is possible such a slave could have been Aimy, who was purchased with one of William Bourne’s other slaves—Granny Beck, a house girl. Robert Nuckolls, in *Pioneer Settlers*, remarks that Aimy “waited on her master and mistress as long as they lived, and was very much attached to all the family.” Furthermore, Nuckolls asserts that “William Bourne, in his last will stated that ‘Aimy has been a faithful, good servant, and has raised for me 18 children. She is not to be sold or taken in, in the divide.’” This implies that, with his children, she was free to go where she pleased. Yet, when looking at William Bourne’s probate record, there is no such stipulation for Aimy’s freedom. Instead she is listed in the inventory and, most likely, given to one of the children. 24.

\(^6\) Nuckolls, *Pioneer Settlers of Grayson County, Virginia*.100.


\(^8\) Fields and Hughes, *Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures*.153.
successful of the two. His slave holdings increased dramatically from 1820 to 1830 when the number of his taxable slaves jumped from four to sixteen. This increase in slaveholding reflects a definitive increase in Bourne’s wealth.

As Grayson’s slave population increased to six percent in 1810 and seven percent in 1820 of the county’s population, the slaveholders remained around one percent of the free population. Grayson’s “free,” egalitarian society was not reflected. Instead the county’s society remained in the grasp of slaveholding elite. While the average slaveholding consistently stayed around three or four slaves, those landed gentry continued to expand the size and economy of their plantations. Richard Phillips surfaced as the leading slaveholder, owning twenty-one slaves in 1820. Shadrach Greer, William and Stephen Bourne, Minitree Jones, and William Johnson also expanded their slaveholding significantly during 1820s and 1830s, each fluctuating between sixteen and nineteen slaves during that period. Though the various pursuits for these men are largely unknown, it is probable that the expansion of their slaveholding stemmed from increased involvement in non-agricultural industry. These men were able to add to their slaveholdings by exporting the goods they produced further south to larger plantations. It is possible that they also sold a portion of what they produced to other residents of Grayson though it was more profitable to export the bulk of their yield southward towards larger urban markets.

Common throughout Appalachia in the nineteenth century, the use of slaves in mining and timbering was, as Wilma Dunaway has shown in her book, a significant part

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89 Though there is rumored to be a slave block in Grayson County, no substantial evidence has been found to prove such. It is more likely that these slaves were purchased in Abingdon, Virginia, an established slave market and stop for slave coffles moving towards Natchez. John Inscoe, “Race and Racism in Appalachia,” Appalachea in the Making, 118.
of many mountain slaves’ lives. Slaves in Wythe County made up a large portion of iron and salt mining labor.\textsuperscript{90} To the south, Ashe County masters hired out their slaves to mine gold deposits on family lands and regularly hired out several slaves each year to work for other mine owners in adjoining counties.\textsuperscript{91} Though there are no records of gold mining in Grayson County, its large deposit of iron ore gave rise to several iron foundries, copper, lead, and soapstone mines. The owners of the county’s foundries and mines would suggest the participation of slaves in these industries—the majority of them were either partially or fully controlled by slaveholders.

\textsuperscript{90} Dunaway, \textit{Slavery in the American Mountain South}. 113.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 120.
V.

Poor Whites: Enforcing and Supporting Slavery

Largely supported by the free residents of Grayson County, slaveholders were elected to positions of local and state power. In many ways, their continued election by their non-slaveholding peers solidified the elite of Grayson County as gentry analogous to their “lowland” Southern brethren. Men like William Bourne, Flower Swift, Robert Parsons, and Benjamin Phipps expressed their wealth not only in the large tracts of fertile land, houses, outbuildings, and material goods, but also in their slaves.\(^92\) By investing in slaves, these prominent patriarchs supported and sustained the Southern institution. Consequently, the continued political endorsement of these slaveholders by their electorare implicates the free population at large in perpetuating the institution of slavery and reiterating Grayson County’s perpetuation of overarching “Southern ideology.”\(^93\)

Such concentration of power in the hands of Grayson’s propertied, slaveholding elite created the distinct ruling class that was characteristic of slave societies.

Unlike their propertied, affluent leaders, the majority of the free population in Grayson County was poor whites. These landless residents, without the capital or connections to obtain fertile property, lived in the roughest, untamable sections of the region. Some sought employment as tenant farmers, clearing land, tending to crops and livestock for plantation owners—often alongside slaves. Though relegated to the fringes

\(^92\) Several probate records list the worth of various male slaves anywhere from $500 to $1000 and female slaves averaging around $900 or more.

\(^93\) “Southern ideology” here is defined as the top down support of slavery as an institution and a way of life that insured the higher standing of the southern white population. Furthermore, “Southern ideology,” in this context, is used to reiterate the fact that both slaveholders and non-slaveholders in Grayson County were reinforcing slavery on a smaller but comparable scale though they were far removed from traditionally large seats of slaveholding as well as major slave markets.
of Grayson’s social hierarchy, poor whites benefited from and sustained slavery in the community.\textsuperscript{94} Often these poor whites served as enforcers of enslavement. Frequently acting as local patrollers, poor whites harassed slaves and repeatedly served as witnesses in court cases involving slaves.\textsuperscript{95} County court records are peppered with petty criminal cases involving stolen goods. A few sources studied discuss retaliation to inter-racial violence within the county—especially when instigated by free white residents. When “five white men undertook to take five negroes” with no just cause and the free blacks resisted, “two white men and two or three negroes were killed.”\textsuperscript{96} While the identities of the five white men are unknown, it is suggested that at least a portion of these men were poor whites. Coined “black-birding” by regional newspapers, these outbursts of violence grew more common as poorer free whites attempted to break into the human export business. These incidences do not show up in the local court records at the same rate as petty larceny committed by slaves. It would seem that the practice of “black-birding,” unless it involved an already enslaved black, was largely ignored in Grayson County. The following court cases serve as examples of the legal reinforcement of slavery’s in Grayson County as well as evidence for poor whites’ roles its preservation.

One of the first cases in which a patroller was asked to give testimony was on June 10, 1793 in the case of Natt. The clerk noted

\textsuperscript{94} Dunaway, \textit{Slavery in the American Mountain South}. 147-152.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. Dunaway observes that common sentiment of regional slave narratives mentions more frequently brutality from patrollers than from overseers. While poor whites, service on community patrols may not have been voluntary, mistreatment from patrollers caused racial tension across the Appalachians to fester.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 151. Dunaway uses this example to discuss poorer Appalachians dabbling directly in the human export business by kidnapping blacks. She states that nearly four percent of the Appalachian slave narratives describe incidents in which individuals were captured and sold illegally.
Continued for the Examination of a Negro man named Natt, the property of James Cox, on Suspicion of his Feloniously taking from Thomas Blair one Duck Blanket to the value of fifteen Shillings. [...] Natt was led to the Bar, and upon Examination, denieth the Fact, Wherewith he stands charged, upon which several Witnesses were Sworn and examined, and the prisoner heard in his own Defence; On Consideration of which of the Circumstances relating to the Crime, the Court are of Opinion that he is guilty of the fact wherewith he stands charged, but the things being of Small Value, and the prisoner praying Corporal punishment, it is ordered that he Receive fifteen Lashes at the publick whippin post of the County of his bare back, well laid on, and it is said to the Sheriff that Execution thereof be immediately done. 

While it is unclear what happened to Natt after his whipping, it is probable that he remained in the ownership of James Cox, who is listed as owning three slaves on both the 1800 and 1810 Virginia personal property tax lists. Natt’s case highlights not only the testimony of poor white witnesses but, more importantly, the use of corporal punishment in a county that was perceived to be devoid of the cruelties that were normative in “lowland” areas.

Another case, in 1808, involved Hagar, a slave, the former county sheriff, Philip Gaines, and Fredrick Idle, whose status as slaveholder or poor white is unknown. The plaintiff in two civil suits, the details surrounding Hagar’s cases are murky. The county clerk recorded


99 This case is one in a slew against Phillip Gaines who was consequently jailed for contempt. A long-standing issue with Frederick Idle in regards to an outstanding five hundred dollar bond. The suit Hagar filed against Gaines compounded existing tensions between Idle and the sheriff. Philip Gaines was removed from his duties in 1807 and was succeeded by Joshua Hanks. Though Frederick Idle’s relationship to Hagar is unclear it is possible he was her master.
On February 23, 1808, Hagar, a Negro woman, sought to bring suit against Philip Gaines on the grounds that he was illegally retaining her as a slave while she was legally free. [...] The court appointed William Kelly her counsel.\footnote{Fields and Hughes, \textit{Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures.} 65-68. Transcription and timeline of Philip Gaines’ court proceedings and misfortunes.}

When the suit of Hagar came to court, Frederick Idle was called as a witness. Failing to show up for the first hearing, Idle was fined by the court and placed under bond. The trial continued on February 27, 1810:

Frederick Idle, defendant for Hagar, a slave, in an action of trespass, assault and battery, and false implications brought by Hagar against Philip Gaines in this court [...] in 1809. Frederick Idle against Philip Gaines for detaining the said slave should be determined in favor of the said Idle.\footnote{Ibid.}

While the initial ruling was in favor of Idle, a witness for Hagar, officials once more deferred the conclusion of the trial until the next term in the Superior Court. Several months later, on October 23, 1810, the court dismissed Hagar’s charges against Philip Gaines. The following year, on March 27, 1811, the case of Hagar vs. Fredrick Idle culminated after the “jury heard the evidence and ruled that the plaintiff [was] a slave, and that the writ of the plaintiff be banished.”\footnote{Ibid., 68.} Over the span of three years, Hagar used the Grayson Court system to challenge the actions of two white men—one, an elected, slaveholding official; the other, a white freeholder. By following established legal procedure common in suits between free whites, Hagar’s use of the very system that enabled her legal oppression illustrated small measures mountain slaves could exploit as forms of resistance. The decision to uphold Gaines’ claim that Hagar was indeed a slave and not a free black does not give definitive answers to her fate after 1811. Like Natt, it is
possible she was sold out of Grayson but it is more likely that she was sold back into the local slave system. It is possible in Hagar’s case that she was set up or promised something that could not be proven without viable witnesses—none of the witnesses called would have been inclined to speak in her favor as they appear to have been free, non-slaveholding white men.

Of the many cases detailed in the records of the county court, few cases involving slaves are more serious than the trial of Peter, a slave of John Blair. Owning five taxable slaves in 1830, John Blair was a prominent slaveholder in Grayson, serving several terms as a representative in the Virginia legislature. As a well-known, influential politician, the trial against Peter was a public and publicized event. Charged with the rape of a local white woman, Eve Haga, on May 26, 1834, Peter was taken into custody and held until “judgment [could be] made” at the next court session in July. Haga testified that “she was walking along a road and Peter came up behind her. He seized and dragged her into the woods and after he had ravished her she promised not to tell on him if he would spare her life.” The details of her testimony are shaky at best as several of the witnesses called gave evidence that contradicted several of her points. What followed was a series of white witnesses whose testimonies do no more than speculate at the finer details and, more importantly, reaffirm the “honest and true” character of Eve Haga. Those who testified, with the exception of one or two, are not listed in any tax lists as having owned

103 Commonwealth v. Peter. Grayson County, (Va.) Minutes of the County Court, May 1834. transcribed, New River Notes, http://www.newrivernotes.com/grayson_crime_early_grayson_county_criminals.htm, (accessed 12 Feb. 2013). Eve Haga, in the court case transcription, is stated to have been “forty-five next Christmas” and “not very healthy but able to walk to the courthouse.” At the time of the case she is not listed as having been married and, though the testimonies of her neighbors, appears to have been part of the poor white class.

104 Ibid. Eve’s testimony also accuses Peter of robbery.
slaves or substantial land holdings, leading to the assumption that the majority of witnesses, like Eve Haga, could be characterized as poor white. No one called to the stand presented statements in regards to Peter’s character. The evidence presented was largely circumstantial, with many of the facts possibly drawn through assumptions. Even acknowledging the act or the possibility of Peter’s guilt, the proceedings of the trial illustrate the willingness of Grayson’s officials to forego cross-examination in cases of free whites versus enslaved blacks. The testimonies ultimately condemned Peter to “be hanged by the neck until he be dead.”

The case of The Commonwealth v. Peter, like so many throughout the South, illustrate instances in which rape, murder, and assault charges were often brought against slaves fueling underlying racial tensions and fears. Peter’s case underlined the existence of these issues in Grayson County—unspoken fears of slave uprising and attacks continued to fester as the nineteenth century progressed.

Throughout Grayson’s county court records incidences of slave imprisonment and capital punishment for major crimes, similar to those previously discussed, document the surprising rate of slave resistance and attacks on whites. Though not all forms of resistance were reported or convicted, the punishment Grayson slaves received seems to have followed a similar trajectory to what Wilma Dunaway found in other counties in Virginia. As Dunaway discusses, poor whites in Grayson County served as an effective and cheap means of reinforcing legal slavery. By pitting poor whites against

105 Ibid. Peter’s master, John Blair was also called to the stand as a witness.

106 Dunaway, Slavery in the American Mountain South. 178-186. Dunaway breaks down various forms of inter-racial violence to illustrate various forms of slave resistance and protest. Sarah Burke, a former Grayson County slave in a WPA interview, talked about slaves working in small groups to steal meat when they had difficulty getting food, waiting till the dead of night to butcher livestock in the woods. Other instances of supplementation most likely occurred as mountain slaves were often left unprovided for and had to rely on their own ingenuity for food.
slaves, the miniscule population of slaveholders could hope to keep any possible slave retaliation at bay.
VI. Abolition and the Southern Cause

In Grayson County, as in any slave society, fears of mass slave insurrection were ever present. Though the slave population was small, hovering around six percent of the population in Grayson during the 1830s and 1840s, the community was not immune to gossip about possible black rebellions throughout the South. Prior to 1848, Grayson slaveholders appear to have held no public or militant grudges against abolitionists or their cause. The majority of white residents, regardless of situation and employment, had no qualms supporting slavery throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Resistance to the institution up until that point was minimal in Grayson County. While the nationwide unease in regards to slave unrest was felt in Grayson, local slaveholders and free whites appear to have welcomed Jarvis C. Bacon to the community in the fall of 1848.

A Wesleyan Methodist minister from Ohio, Bacon had been traveling throughout the Appalachian region for the abolitionist cause, establishing Methodist outposts, and hosting informal gatherings. Shortly after his arrival in Grayson, Bacon started holding camp meetings throughout the community. On the Sunday before Christmas 1848, Bacon preached, “If I was to go to my neighbour’s crib and steal his corn, you would call me a thief, but that it was worse to take a human being and keep him all his life, and give him nothing for his labour, except once in a while a whipping or a few stripes.”107 In attendance were mine owner and attorney Samuel McCamant as well as attorney and turnpike director William H. Cook, both of whom brought a case to the circuit court against Bacon. The Methodist minister was convicted of violating a state law that barred

anyone from claiming that slave owners did not have the right to own their bond people and sentenced to two years of hard labor.\textsuperscript{108} Although the Virginia Supreme Court overturned the conviction, locals drove Bacon from the county, primarily for distributing the \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave}, which they saw as inspiring slaves to rebel against their masters. Furthermore, Bacon distributed tracts printed by the Presbyterian Church of Cincinnati, Ohio with instructions for slaves to escape to freedom.\textsuperscript{109}

It would seem that Grayson residents did not silence Bacon soon enough. On August 11, 1851, John Clements gathered his neighbors, Samuel Bartlett, Cyrus Wilcock, and a few others, to confront four unfamiliar slaves he had observed near the New River. The four slaves were local—Simon, Lewis, and Jack belonged to Grayson County farmers while Henry was the property of a farmer who lived across the state line in Ashe County, North Carolina. Having been “promised glowing rewards if successful [running away],” the slaves resisted being taken into custody.\textsuperscript{110} The three Grayson slaves fought back; one struck down Samuel Bartlett and seriously wounded Clements and Alfred Bartlett with a scythe blade. Another stabbed Cyrus Wilcox in the neck with a knife. The third threw rocks at William B. Hale, knocking him cold. Henry, the runaway from Ashe County, fled into the New River where he surrendered.\textsuperscript{111} The trial of Simon, Lewis, and Jack was the first held in the newly erected courthouse in Independence. Convicted for

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. 77.

\textsuperscript{109} Fields and Hughes, \textit{Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures}. 83.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{111} Hall, \textit{Mountains on the Market: Industry, the Environment, and the South}. 77.
the murder of Samuel Bartlett, the three runaways were hung on October 31, 1851 on Hardin Cox’s farm, where they were buried.\footnote{Fields and Hughes, \textit{Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures}. 83.} Furthermore, Grayson residents blamed Jarvis Bacon for inciting a “rebellion” and damned him as a murderer. Though $1,000 was offered for his apprehension, Bacon had left the region safely by the time the mob gathered.\footnote{Hall, \textit{Mountains on the Market: Industry, the Environment, and the South}. 78.} Bacon’s disappearance did little to quail the mob’s thirst for justice. Instead, it instilled a rabid need to rout out all abolitionists from the community.

Coming from a family of slaveholders in the Elk Creek Valley, John Cornutt acquired his first slave in 1820, an eighteen year-old female named Rebecca.\footnote{Grayson County Deed Book 10, 1849-1855, Page 216, John Cornute for Deed Emancipation.} Three years later, Rebecca gave birth to her first child, George Washington, and continued to grow John Cornutt’s slave holdings through her fourth child, Clark, in 1845.\footnote{Tate Cornute. “My Grayson Heritage: Tracy & George Simmons,” \textit{Our Grayson Heritage}, 2010, vol. 4, 1-5.} There is no record of John Cornutt owning a male slave or Rebecca having a husband on another farm. Rebecca’s children, described as mulatto, were most likely fathered by John Cornutt himself. A supporter of slavery through the 1840s, Cornutt met Jarvis Bacon at one of his camp meetings. After attending several gatherings, Cornutt became active in spreading abolitionist propaganda, speaking out against the institution of slavery even after his neighbors began to retaliate against Bacon’s sermons.\footnote{Ibid.}

Following the aforementioned slave revolt and their inability to catch Bacon, a mob of John Cornutt’s neighbors turned against him for supporting Bacon and abolition. On September 13, 1851, the rabble, around 200 people largely comprised of poor whites,
descended on the John Cornutt’s farm, lashed him to a tree and whipped him until he agreed to sell his land and slaves and leave the state.\textsuperscript{117} Whites in Wythe, Carroll, and Ashe counties convened, offering their praise for the actions of the Grayson vigilantes.

The \textit{Salem People’s Press} in North Carolina ran an article lauding the mob and warning

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[...] \text{the citizens of this and other counties to be vigilant lest others, equally obnoxious as the Ohio incendiaries, whom we have frequently felt bound to notice, may intrude themselves amongst us, and spread desolation and death in our midst. We hope that experience has taught us that a summary process is the only effective remedy to be resorted to in such cases.}\textsuperscript{118}
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This display of popular violence against abolitionists personifies the growing militancy and discontent towards threats to slavery the rest of the South was witnessing leading up to the Civil War, concurrently tying these sentiments to Grayson County.

Feelings of militancy remained high in Grayson, Cornutt, rather than leaving the county as demanded, attempted to file a lawsuit, which he was denied, in response to his torture.\textsuperscript{119} On March 22, 1852, Grayson residents met at the courthouse resolving

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[t]\text{hat the committees of Vigilance heretofore formed be recognized by the Chairman of this meeting, and their number increased to two hundred each, and the said Committees report to a general meeting to be held at the Court House, on the 4th Monday in June next, the number and names of all Abolitionists yet remaining in the count.}\textsuperscript{120}
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Furthermore, it was decided that John Cornutt, along with other local abolitionists,

“unless they give positive assurance to live with us as becomes citizens of a slaveholding

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Hall, \textit{Mountains on the Market: Industry, the Environment, and the South}. 78.
\textsuperscript{119} While John Cornute did leave Grayson County after the events of 1848-49, he returned to settle in the Comer’s Rock community in Grayson a year later. On November 24, 1851, Cornute emancipated Rebecca and her children. He died eight years later at his home in Comer’s Rock in 1859.
\textsuperscript{120} Hall, \textit{Mountains on the Market: Industry, the Environment, and the South}. 78.
community,” should be forced to sell their property and businesses and be driven out of the community. Nor would they be able to bring civil suits against citizens who stemmed the spread of abolition.\textsuperscript{121} These extra-legal measures illustrate the sentiments of a large segment of the free white population in Grayson leading up to the Civil War and may explain the residents’ immediate response days after Virginia joined the Confederacy.

The Civil War came to Grayson County nine days after Virginia seceded from the Union, when Grayson residents raised “what were to be the first of her Confederate heroes,” the Grayson Dare Devils.\textsuperscript{122} The company left Grayson for the seat of war around April 24, 1861 and was, shortly after, engaged in the battle of Manassas on July 21, 1861. Capt. P.N. Hale, C.P. Hale, and J. Wynne were killed in the Dare Devils’ first battle at Manassas. At the outbreak of the war, both Capt. P.N. Hale and C.P. Hale were slave owners, listed as owning seven and two enslaved individuals respectively. While the Hales had evident cause to support the Confederacy, slaveholders in Grayson only made up 1.3 percent of the county’s free whites in 1860. While there was a select group of locals who supported abolition and, after secession, the Union, the majority of Grayson residents saw the southern coalition as the true cause. Given the small frequency of slaveholding, the support of non-slaveholding whites was integral to Grayson’s participation in the Civil War. It is in their seemingly unquestioned support of the Confederacy that the true extent of support for local slaveholders and their rule, poor whites provided.

\textsuperscript{121} Hall, \textit{Mountains on the Market: Industry, the Environment, and the South}. 78-79.

\textsuperscript{122} Fields and Hughes, \textit{Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures}. 97.
VII.
Mid-twentieth Century Race Relations and Memory in Grayson County

Though black families married and had children in these mountain communities following the Civil War, racial demographics indicate that the region drifted closer towards the homogeneous white society most associate with the southern Appalachians today. While it is possible whole counties may have eventually lost their entire black population following mass migration to cities, the majority of the region’s counties retained at least a small population of original slave descendants. In both Grayson County and Ashe County, North Carolina, these black families congregated in small, all black sections of towns, noticeably separate from the white areas. Many mountaineers colloquially referred to these places as “darky town” and “colored town”. In Grayson, three black communities are noted primarily in the eastern half of the county—in proximity to old slaveholding farms. To the east lies Newtown along the old Fries Road. The western-most black community is known as Klondike and a smaller settlement lies to the south of Independence on Bald Hill. Two of these settlements were a result of land given to freed slaves by the Freedman Friends Association around 1900. For certain residents of Grayson, their contact and intimacy with members of the black community were extensive from a tender age. This inter-racial experience in the county relied heavily on several factors: family occupation and affluence, residence, and proximity to town center.

123 Rex Halsey, conversation with author, 6 March 2013.
125 Fields and Hughes, Grayson County: A History in Words and Pictures. 321.
Born in 1926, Joe W. Phipps grew up in the Fox Creek section of Grayson County. The Phipps clan, one of the original families in the area, had been affluent farmers during and after the American Civil War. Recalling a family legend, Joe W. Phipps spoke of several incidents when his great-grandmother’s reliance on a few of the family’s slaves kept their farm running while her husband was fighting for the Confederacy. Common during the Civil War, raids on nearby farms and homesteads by various Union and Confederate regiments frequently left families without food, supplies, and other goods needed to survive during harsh times. Often near Union encampments, the Phipps homestead and other neighboring farms fell victim to several small raids by Union soldiers. One such incident would have devastated the Phipps’ winter food supply had it not been for the aid of the Phipps family slaves. With the matriarch of the family gone to Dublin, Virginia to deliver knitted socks and gloves to a Confederate regiment, the young children and farm were left in the care of their slaves. Hearing of a Union raid up the road, several of the Phipps’ slaves hid the cured hog meat under the floorboards of the abandoned blacksmith’s shop down the road from the big house. As Mr. Phipps explained, his great-grandmother’s trust of her slaves increased dramatically. While her dependence on enslaved laborers to keep the farm functioning throughout the war was great, following that specific raid she became fiercely protective of these individuals. One of the more prominent slaveholding families in the western half of the county, the Phipps family continued to employ their black laborers long after slavery had ended. As a child, Joe Phipps would hoe corn alongside the black workers his father and grandfather paid to work the fields. Waking in the early hours of the morning, Mr. Phipps recalls having to spend long hours in the fields with men “whose daddies were owned by my
granddaddy.” Furthermore, his mother also employed a maid to help do household chores and keep the children. Living “down in the holler” from the Phipps homestead, the members of the black community in the Fox Creek area were all, in some way, connected with the Phipps farm, walking and working there every day. Though their ties were strong, the lives of those black workers and the Phipps family remained distinctly separate.

Although he worked the fields alongside his black neighbors, Joe Phipps never worshiped or attended school with their children. On a 300-acre piece of land given to former slave, Uncle Reed Cox, Joe Phipps’ father and grandfather cleared a small portion to build Uncle Reed a church and school. This multi-functional building served as a ‘colored-school’ for the black community in Fox Creek. Instead of attending Bridle Creek, the local school Joe Phipps went to as a child, the “little black boys had to walk down to his [Uncle Reed’s] school” instead. This institutionalized separation and distinction of black and white children who otherwise played together psychologically enforced a social precedent for “knowing one’s place.”

Similarly, Rex Halsey, another Grayson County native, grew up in a family that employed black workers. Mr. Halsey’s ancestors settled in the Mouth of Wilson community after “his Great Grandfather’s Grandfather, [who] was Washington’s body

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126 Joe W. Phipps, conversation with author, 5 November. 2011.
127 Ibid.
128 Mr. Phipps and others used the term “Uncle” in the community though Reed Cox appears to be of no relation.
129 Joe W. Phipps, conversation with author, 5 November. 2011.
guard during the American Revolution, fell in love with the land.” Though he had no recollection of hearing about his family having held slaves, Mr. Halsey’s parents hired local African Americans to work on their farm. Like Joe Phipps’ mother, Rex Halsey’s mother employed a black woman, Miss Lenny Grimes, who lived in another small “black village” down the road. Miss Lenny helped his mother do house work and care for the children. Remembered as a fine lady, they “thought the world of [her]. She was so kind and good to [us], just anything [we] wanted she would try to make it happen [for us].”

In this innocent comment there are possessive undertones as if Miss Lenny was something he, as a child, was entitled to have. Unintentionally, Mr. Halsey’s recollections of Miss Lenny were reminiscent of a grandchild speaking of a beloved grandmother yet his depiction of her brings to mind the black mammys of Southern literature and cinema. Her memory begins to resemble white stereotypes of black housemaids. Such stereotypical descriptions are not singular to Appalachian regions and can be found throughout white Southern memory, literature, and music.

Paternalistic responsibility towards hired hands is also apparent in a trip Rex Halsey took later in life with his father’s black truck driver, Clarence Valentine. Living in the “black village” down the road, Mr. Valentine worked for Mr. Halsey’s father for roughly twenty-two years. In December of 1957, Mr. Halsey’s father’s cousin, who owned an apartment complex in Florida, needed a shipment of lump coal to be brought down from Virginia. At the height of Southern segregation, it was unsafe for Mr. Halsey’s father to send Clarence to Florida unaccompanied; Mr. Halsey, being young and unmarried at the time, volunteered to accompany the convoy of coal southward. Detailing

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130 Rex Halsey, conversation with author, 6 March 2013.

131 Ibid.
the atmosphere of their journey to Florida, Mr. Halsey described the overt racism they combated. “Most restaurants and gas stations supported little white signs reading ‘White Patrons Only,’ or racially designated entrances.”

Unused to such treatment, Mr. Valentine frequently chose to remain in the car hungry instead of having to be turned away at the door. It appears that Mr. Halsey and his cousin made it quite clear at each restaurant they stopped at that “there was a black man in [the] station wagon and the owner was to take him a tray to the car. Otherwise, their business would go elsewhere.” Mr. Halsey makes it apparent that this particular incident was not isolated as both his family and Clarence continued to face the harsh segregation of the lower South on other delivery trips. While Mr. Halsey’s description of this trip was meant to describe the times as well as the differences between the way blacks in Grayson were treated in comparison to the “lowland” south, he reiterated a commonly held belief that, “they knew their place, and we knew ours so there wasn’t any problems. There wasn’t a lot of prejudice because black people stayed to themselves some and were always reverent and kind.”

As Mr. Halsey stressed, “having grown up with blacks, [he] saw no reason for there to be any bad blood.”

Unlike Joe Phipps and Rex Halsey, Mildred Anderson, born in Grant, Virginia, in 1924, spent the formative years of her life without encountering an African American. Perhaps a result of the distance of Grant community from any major township in Grayson or due to its rugged geography, her first racial interaction came as a teenager while her

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132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
family still lived in Grant. Having only heard stories of “mulattos” as a child, she and her sisters were bewildered when two black men visited her family’s farm. Driving their white employers’ cattle to market, these men had stopped to enlist the services of her father and his cattle scales. Due to the remote location of their home and the lateness of the day, her father invited the two men to stay the night. An anomaly in her secluded way of life, the men’s dark complexions peaked the curiosity of Mrs. Anderson and her sisters. She described their “fascination [to be] so great that [they] could not wait to check and see if the sheets were still white the next morning.” What seems to be a peculiar inquisition illustrates a far tamer racial ‘innocence’ than the gruesome affair Faulkner describes in his work “Mountain Victory.” Having had no previous contact with the individuals of another race, the differences in skin tone confused Mrs. Anderson’s understanding of the world in which she lived. Yet, this racial naïveté does not accurately reflect the normative relationship or encounters between white and black Graysonites, especially as integration and the Civil Rights movement gained momentum.

The population of Grayson County in the 1950 census was 21,379 with black residents representing four percent, or 932, of the total number of residents. By 1960, the

137 William Faulkner, “Mountain Victory,” (1932), http://literaturesave2.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/william-faulkner-mountain-victory.pdf (accessed 5 March 2013). In his piece “Mountain Victory,” William Faulkner illustrates mountaineer wariness of outsiders and the macabre results of the sudden “exposure to members of a second race”. Set in the backwoods of Tennessee in the years immediately following the Civil War, Faulkner details a white Appalachian family’s first encounter with a black man. Skeptically welcoming in a Confederate major and his African American body servant who are journeying back to the major’s Mississippi plantation, this frontier family is taken aback by the stark difference in the pair’s respective skin tones. Fascination turns into distrust, fear, and hatred as one of the daughters becomes attracted to the Confederate major. Faulkner’s tale comes to a bitter end with the slaying of the major, his black companion, and, accidently, the youngest son.
population dropped to 17,390, with blacks making up 681 of the total, or three percent. In an interview conducted by Vera Young, Thelma Johnson, a Grayson resident, discusses her life and experiences growing up black in Appalachia during this time. Having spent her childhood in Ashe County, North Carolina, Mrs. Johnson moved to Grayson County after meeting her husband, Rex Johnson, at an Association of the Baptist Churches meeting through a friend. Her husband was one of twelve children to Wise and Eula Johnson of Elk Creek. “[Rex Johnson] was the first black person to be the dry cleaner in Independence, working at B.A. Rudy’s cleaners.” Though her interview does not elaborate much in regards to race relations in Grayson, her experiences with the Grayson County Public School system right before and after the Civil Rights Movement and integration complicate the persisting narrative of extraordinary racial harmony.

As the Civil Rights Movement began to take hold of the nation and mandatory integration was instituted, mountain regions like Grayson County are remembered to have experienced little overt backlash from the white community. As told, and believed by many white residents of the county, integration of the Grayson public schools happened almost flawlessly. Perhaps this image of a smooth transition resulted from a relatively small number of black children who were required to attend the white schools.


139 Thelma Johnson to Vera Young. Grayson County Heritage Society. 103.

140 Ibid. 103.

141 Ibid. 104.
or the “lack of ill will” Mr. Halsey described.\(^{142}\) The experience of Julia Valentine and her husband reiterates Mr. Halsey’s assertion.

Julia Valentine came to Grayson County shortly before desegregation hit the western portion of Virginia. A teacher, Mrs. Valentine had been commuting from her home in Bristol, Virginia to work in Knoxville, Tennessee. When a job opening at the colored school in Bridle Creek as an elementary school teacher became available, she quickly accepted the position as a way to be closer to her family and save money.\(^{143}\) A gifted teacher, Mrs. Valentine’s tenure at the colored school was quite successful, even catching the eye of the county superintendent. When Grayson County had to integrate, he offered her a position at the elementary school in Independence as the first African American teacher in the county. Wary at first, Mrs. Valentine discussed the possible consequences of teaching white students in a predominately white institution with her husband Oscar. Accepting the job for a probationary period of a year, Mrs. Valentine made it clear that “there was never any opposition, or none that [my husband] or I heard, to my being black and teaching mostly white students.”\(^{144}\) Both Mrs. Valentine and her husband, a Grayson County native, explicitly commented on the “friendly relations

\(^{142}\) Wharam, Jr., Wharam’s article refutes the remembered easiness of integrating schools in Grayson County. He argues that the existence of the Christiansburg Institute, a successful and well-supported black school in Montgomery County, prolonged the fight against integration in Southwestern Virginia. The incidents from Grayson County that he uses to support his argument stand in direct opposition to residents claims of moderate stances towards integration.

\(^{143}\) Julia Valentine, conversation with author, 4 November 2011. At this point, Mrs. Valentine was unmarried and was having to live apart from her family during the week, barely making enough to cover travel expenses to and from Knoxville. By accepting a position in Grayson, Mrs. Valentine was able to use the travel money for other bills as well as see her family more often.

\(^{144}\) Ibid.
between races” and, what they perceived, as a “lack of racial distinction” in general. Mr. Valentine passionately avowed his assurance that had there been any problems, they would have been taken care of by many of the white community leaders with whom he had grown up. “If [he] had heard of an issue [he] could have spoken to one of [his] friends and they would have thoroughly taken care of it.” A hint of confrontation in his tone, Mr. Valentine’s lecture on wonderful race relations in the county became a dogged need to reaffirm his lifelong association with and, almost, familial ties to the white families he grew up around. The Valentines’ reaction to the suggestion of inequality or racial tension within the county harkens back to the observations of Rex Halsey, further highlighting the underlying paternalistic racism in Grayson.

Contrary to Mr. and Mrs. Valentine’s fond experiences, Brenda Horton of Ashe County, North Carolina had a very different integration experience. Born in 1950, Brenda Horton lived in a small all-black village fifteen minutes outside of Jefferson, North Carolina for a large portion of her life. Having first attended the colored school in Jefferson, she was sixteen when North Carolina schools were integrated. Made to attend Ashe Central High School in Jefferson, Brenda was one of six black students from her ‘village’ that went to Ashe Central. Having never ridden a desegregated bus before, she was quite nervous about her first experience. No stranger to overt racism, riding the integrated school bus with her white peers for the first time was a small introduction to the harsh realities of Ashe Central. Her recollection of that first bus ride is one of teenage degradation. She remembered “if [she] tried to sit with a white student they would jump into the aisle before [she] could get into the seat, as if [she] had lice or some sort of

145 Ibid.
146 Oscar Valentine, conversation with author, 4 November. 2011.
disease.”147 On her first day, “[we] pulled up in front of the school and they had ‘big shots’ to take each one of us around.”148 As she was led around the facilities, white students and other community members were “lined all up and down on both sides of the hall. We would hear them say that ‘N’ word as we walked by. We would be sitting in the classroom and they would call us that ‘N’ word.”149 It appears to have been the poor white students who were the worst, moving away from black students in the classroom, throwing spitballs at them, and making racist comments. The lack of administrative action against blatant incidents of harassment, daily debasement and humiliation, and feelings of hopelessness caused Mrs. Horton to drop out of Ashe Central four months later. The lack of protective alliance in the Jefferson section of Ashe County is more reminiscent of similar experiences of black students in urban centers in Appalachia.

In the Mouth of Wilson region of Grayson County, Oak Hill Academy, a small, private, Baptist boarding school had to navigate the waters of integration in a much different fashion. A transplant into the community, Ed Patton started working at Oak Hill Academy in 1967. After the mandatory integration of Southern public schools, the still-segregated Oak Hill received a surge of white students from areas further south whose parents were attempting to flee from the integrated institutions in their areas. Patton recalled

Just as integration of public schools started, we saw the most rapid increase of enrollment in the school’s history. [...] had 200 plus students and the same in summer school from both North Carolina and Virginia—

147 Brenda Horton, conversation with author, 5 November. 2011.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
some who wanted to graduate early in order to not graduate in an integrated school.\textsuperscript{150}

Fearing African American influence, parents sought out the private school as a perceived haven for white supremacy.\textsuperscript{151}

Oak Hill’s integration, unlike many public institutions, was carefully thought out and planned with the utmost sensitivity. Mr. Patton, who was Dean of Students at that time, worked with much of the faculty to talk to and counsel current students about how they were to behave and interact prior to admitting Oak Hill’s first black student. Mr. Patton stated

Prior to integration—as it swept through the south, [Oak Hill] had no black students, international but no black. When the Civil Rights movement took root some wanted to integrate the school. After the decision was made, myself and the principal met several times with the student body to prepare for the change. The student body was warned that [the first student] was to be treated equally by the entirety of the student body. The young lady, who was the first, was very popular.\textsuperscript{152}

The backlash of Oak Hill’s integration was most noticeable in the immediate drop in enrollment of white students, which leveled out to its normal enrollment rate, around 110 students, and loss of certain financial backers. The surrounding community’s reaction mirrored that of some of the school’s students.

Traditionally a Baptist institution, Oak Hill’s students were required to attend church services with the nearby congregation at Young’s Chapel Baptist Church. Under the same obligations as white students, newly admitted black students began to attend church services as well. As a result, certain local members of Young’s Chapel left the

\textsuperscript{150} Ed Patton, conversation with author, 6 March 2013.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
church, refusing to worship alongside African Americans.\(^{153}\) Though the majority of members continued to attend, the initial drop in membership challenges the assumption that every white resident in Grayson County was racially accepting. Outside of Young’s Chapel, the community of Mouth of Wilson at large met the integration of Oak Hill with mixed reactions. Mr. Patton said, “We had some people that were highly intelligent and wanted a certain progression, who were perfectly okay with it; had others who took a real issue with it.”\(^{154}\) Mr. Patton recalled a particular incident in which he was confronted by three well-liked, respected men in the community who “took [him] to task” because they had seen black and white couples on campus “and that bothered them greatly.”\(^{155}\) While Oak Hill had an open admission policy, no one from the local black community ever sought admission. Whether due to the proximity of the Christiansburg Institute or the small number of black families in the area, it is hard to say why.

\(^{153}\) Ibid.

\(^{154}\) Ibid.

\(^{155}\) Ibid.
Conclusion

Mountain slavery in Grayson County, like many other regions in the Appalachian South, represented both a “slave society” and a “society with slaves.” Whereas Ira Berlin’s argument only allows for a society to move from one or the other, slavery in Grayson remains firmly in between the two. While slavery did not shape Grayson’s formative years as drastically as it did in the Tidewater or the “lowland” south, this institution played a major role in the development of the county’s economy, social structure, and overall maturation. Reflecting the geographical constraints on the institution, the power of the slaveholding elite was largely limited to the eastern half of Grayson County where river bottoms and arable land naturally allowed industry and agriculture to flourish. Though the county seat and population gradually moved west, the folding mountains and rocky hollows prevented the majority of residents in western Grayson County from gaining enough wealth to purchase slaves, acquire usable land, or hold office. This distribution of power secured the position of slaveholders through the culmination of the American Civil War. By encouraging the participation of poor whites in the legal reinforcement of slavery, Grayson slaveholders bolstered support of the institution analogous to that seen in the “lowland” south.

Following the Civil War, many slaves and their descendants remained in the area—working for their former masters thus perpetuating a legacy of subservience that would later contribute to the fervent support of separate but equal during the mid-twentieth-century. The legacy and memory of Grayson’s slave past greatly informed its future race relations and historical memory not so much from its immediate presence but rather from its lack of recognition and importance in the county’s history.
Appendix

To tease out the history of slavery in Grayson County I supplemented written primary sources with architectural structures, landscape, and oral history. I did this through a series of site visits to the 1908 Courthouse, the Phipps and Sons Dairy Farm, and the Benjamin Phipps homesite in Saddle Creek. The photographs that follow were, for the most part, taken by myself during these field visits. Two are courtesy of the 1908 Courthouse foundation. It is my hope that the photographs included in the appendix will provide a visual context for the geography of Grayson County. I have included short descriptions and brief discussions with the majority of the images.

Figure 1a: Street view of the 1908 Courthouse and the Statue of the Confederate soldier. Courtesy of the 1908 Courthouse Foundation. [http://www.historic1908courthouse.org/pages/show_image/1/1/1](http://www.historic1908courthouse.org/pages/show_image/1/1/1), accessed 15 March 2013.
Figure 2a: Photograph of “Summerfield” built by Samuel Fulton, taken March 7, 2013 courtesy of 1908 Courthouse Foundation. This shows the home after its remodeling. The first home built in 1800 was incorporated into this structure.

Figure 3a: Photograph of the Benjamin Phipps “Big House” in Saddle Creek, Virginia taken on October 10, 2012. While the wrap around porch and tin roof were added at a later date, the main structure of the original “Big House” still stands.
Figure 4a: Photograph of the interior of the Benjamin Phipps “Old Kitchen” in Saddle Creek, Virginia taken on October 10, 2012. The fireplace had been replaced and floorboards added. This is the first floor of the original structure.

Figure 5a: View of the Benjamin Phipps “Old Kitchen” from the “Big House” yard in Saddle Creek, Virginia taken on October 10, 2012.
Figure 6a: Photograph of the one of the Benjamin Phipps outbuildings in Saddle Creek, Virginia taken on October 10, 2012. When talking with Bob Cheeks and Wanda Smith, I was told this building was originally used in conjunction with the Phipps’ blacksmithing and soap making businesses. The brick structure was added later.

Figure 7a: Photograph of the Benjamin Phipps farm taken from an adjoining hill taken on October 10, 2012. View of the valley illustrates the some of the arable land monopolized by slaveholders like Benjamin Phipps.
Figure 8a: Photograph of Robert Parsons’ 1800 brick house taken on March 11, 2013. Besides the doors, windows, and added overhang, the structure has remained intact. Note the double doors, used to separate men and women (said to have been an effort of Parsons to keep the virtue of his household pristine) as well as the dual chimneys.

Figure 9a: Photograph of the Robert Parsons farm taken on March 11, 2013. The leveled off area that now is home to a milking barn was the original site for some of the Parsons’ slave cabins. Lane and Zane Phipps who now own the farm said they remember the architectural footprints that were covered by the existing structure.
Figure 10a: Photograph of the Robert Parsons farm taken on March 11, 2013. The plateau on the central ridge is another site for Parsons’ slave cabins. His extensive land holdings prompted him to build cabins in various locations throughout his 1700 acres.

Figure 11a: Photograph of the Parsons’ family cemetery taken on March 11, 2013. The grave markers pictured are upturned stones nestled on the far right hand corner of the cemetery, apart from the graves of the white family. As the Phipps brothers told me, they are slave graves.
Figure 12a: Photograph of the Parsons Family Cemetery taken on March 11, 2013. A view of the cemetery from the corner containing possible slave graves.
Bibliography

A wide variety of primary and secondary sources as well as oral narratives went into the research of slavery and race relations in Grayson County. Primary sources from tax records, federal census data, family genealogies and personal correspondence provided historical evidence of Grayson County’s slave past and its memory. The exhibits of the 1908 Courthouse in Independence, Virginia provided an avenue to draw connections to the collective memory of Grayson’s residents. Existing architecture and personal correspondence with current residents helped to understand the way slavery shaped the landscape, both physical and social. Various secondary sources were utilized to further understand Appalachia in the context of the South and Grayson County in general. Included in the following bibliography are books on slavery in the Appalachians during the nineteenth century and the history of Grayson County.

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