

Civilization in early Buncombe existed on two le

Pioneer life in Buncombe County featured a high degree of civilization, but there were two classes.

On the one hand, there were the mountain farm families who looked to local churches for edification. On the other, there were those who gravitated toward the courthouse.



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Community disruptions were resolved — or punished — by the county's all-powerful justices of the peace or by the vestries or councils of churches in outlying areas. The best record of human affairs in pioneer Western North Carolina is found in church minutes and court records. On more than one occasion, for example, a man came into court to have it recorded the bite taken out of his ear had been the result of a fight rather than an official punishment for a misdemeanor. In the early 1800s, branding and marking were methods of discipline.

Also, branding and ear-clipping were ways in which industrious farmers in Buncombe County registered their cattle and pigs. Livestock-raising was big business. Capt. John Davidson of Swannanoa

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may have had his unique tartan, connecting him to his ancient Scottish clan, but he also had his unique stamp of ownership: "a crop off the left ear, & a slit in the right ear," entered in court, April term, 1794.

The livestock business depended on roads, and roads were one of the primary concerns of the people at the courthouse. The leading merchants of pioneer Buncombe County, Zebulon and Bedent Baird, donated the land for the county courthouse. Zebulon's grandson, Zebulon Vance, became governor of North Carolina, and from schooling with Nicholas Woodfin, Asheville's leading attorney.

James McConnell Smith eventually outdid the Bairds in enterprise. He built a mansion (now the Smith-McDowell House and Museum) with grounds along the French Broad River, and he kept hogs in the basement of the county courthouse. Smith became both a victim and a defender of social boundaries. Col. John Patton, the chief of boundaries (having been appointed the county's first surveyor) opposed Smith's marriage to his

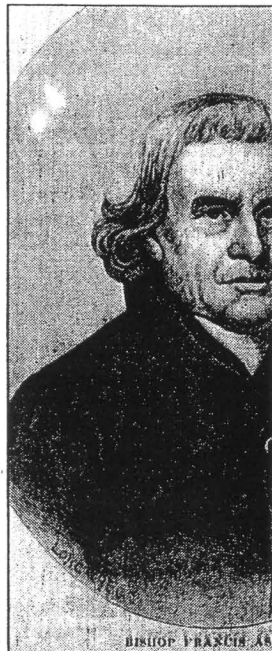
daughter, Polly. Smith, on his part, boycotted the wedding of his daughter, Ruth, to William Ripley, a stagecoach conductor.

Smith, Woodfin and David Vance (Zebulon's father), along with James Patton and George Swain, were the biggest slave owners in Buncombe County in the first half of the 19th century. They and their wives were expected to maintain moral standards in their communities.

Caroline Lowry Swain, mother of future Gov. David Swain, engaged her slaves to prepare Sunday dinners for the members of her husband George's Presbyterian congregation.

One day around 1807, Caroline Swain had Bishop Francis Asbury, the circuit-riding, revivalist Methodist minister to a gathering at her house. Asbury interrupted dinner by refusing to eat anything prepared on the Sabbath. George, who was no religious slouch and could recite the entire book of Genesis, protested. But his wife, a Methodist, whom he admired for her unimpeachability, deferred to the religious leader and swayed her guests to vote accordingly.

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