

Brief History of Riceville, North Carolina

First reader

Samuel Davidson was the first white man (that we know of) to settle in the Swannanoa Valley. He came through Swannanoa Gap around 1784 after spending time in Old Fort and built a cabin four miles west of Swannanoa on the south west side of Jones Mountain—near where Warren Wilson College is now located. Samuel would turn his horse out to forage for food, tying a cow bell on the horse to make it easier to locate. A group of Cherokee Indians found the horse and removed the cow bell.

One morning, in 1784, Samuel was looking for his horse. Indians used the cow bell to lure Samuel to them. When he came for the horse, the Indians shot him. His wife heard the gunshot and seeing that Davidson's rifle was still in the house, knew that he had been shot. She feared for her life thinking that perhaps the Indians would come to the house and kill them. So she took her daughter Ruth and a slave girl 16 miles to Old Fort to safety.

Joseph Marion Rice was one of the earliest settlers in what is now Buncombe County and in the Riceville valley. It is known that Joseph Rice served in the Revolutionary War, coming over from Tennessee to fight the British. Coming back as a hunter, he camped with the Indians on what is known as "The Dry Pond" on the North side of Parker Road. The Dry Pond (so the story goes) is dry because of earthquakes in the Charleston area in the early 1800's. Joe Rice was granted, by the Indians, a sum of land around Bull Creek that he could walk around and stake between sun up and sundown. Unfortunately for Rice the new state government would not honor Indian land grants and he later had to purchase the land.

Settling here in this valley, Joseph Rice was a farmer, hunter and trapper, and stock stand operator. The stock stand provided a place for drovers to house their flocks and herds as they were traveling from farm to market. You may have noted a historical sign on the Parkway at a lookout over Bull Creek commemorating the point where Joseph Rice killed the last buffalo seen in the area in 1799. Joseph Rice and Margaret Young Rice are buried in the Rice-Hughey cemetery located on land he homesteaded off of Bull Creek Road.

Second reader

The advent of the railroad in 1879 made the Swannanoa Valley a destination, and in some cases, a new home for many different people—tourists, travelers seeking improved health in the higher elevations, and religious groups inspired by the beauty and serenity of the surrounding mountains. In Riceville, toward the end of the 19th century a growing sense of community emerged as churches and schools were founded.

In 1876 the Riceville Presbyterian Church was established as the College Hill Presbyterian church. Before that, the Presbyterians had been worshiping with the Baptists and Methodists in the old Peabody School, also known as the Vaughan Academy, located on the hill at the edge of the present Riceville Cemetery. Then about two years later a combination school house and church was built across the road that eventually came to be called College Hill.

The combined school and church was largely the work of Rev. Alfred Penland, who was deeply interested in education for all ages. The school housed older children downstairs and younger children in the two rooms upstairs. Most of the early preachers lived in Reems Creek, coming by horseback over Bull Creek Gap for Sunday preaching.

Third reader

At the time, many churches served the religious needs of this area:

Berea Baptist Church, College Hill Presbyterian Church (now called Riceville Presbyterian Church), and Davidson's Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church (is this now the Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church?) (located on land above the present farm at Warren Wilson College). and Bethel Methodist.

Bethel Methodist Church was deeded in 1887 by Joseph A. Glass and his wife for the location of a house of worship for Methodists in the valley. They gave two acres of land for a church and cemetery. In 1923 the first Bethel Methodist church building burned. The present building was finished in 1925-26. After the fire and until the new building was completed, church meetings and Sunday School were held in Brush Hill School, on Old Farm School Road.

Berea Baptist Church was constituted in 1853. In the beginning there were 5 charter members. In the years before constitution they had monthly services. The church was strict on discipline. The church property and cemetery property were donated by the Alexander's. Mrs. Pauline Ingle was the church clerk from 1945 to 1998. This information was gleaned from an interview with Pauline Ingle on July 10, 2003 when she was 90 years old

Need a brief history of Berea Baptist Church on the left just past Dillingham Circle. The church has remained very active over the years.

Fourth reader

From 1876 until 1906, (check these dates if possible) Riceville had its own post office. The political climate dictated which home housed the post office. The (Republican) Clark house was the first post office and the first home to have a telephone. It was built circa 1900. This narrow red two story house being engulfed by vines can be found , in a pasture on Parker Road. The (Democratic) Stevenson home at the first big curve on Bull Creek Road is still occupied in 2008. The current owner lived in the old Clark home for awhile. She has the original post master book from the late 1800's.

Here are some excerpts from the 1883-1884 Gazetteer of Buncombe County offering a brief description of Riceville at the time:

"Riceville: A farmers post-office on the waters of Bull Creek, in a fertile valley, 7 miles East by North of Asheville.

Mails semi-weekly by horseback – A L Stevenson, Post Master and E. F. Clark, Post Master

You may recognize some of the names that were listed in the Gazetteer as principal farmers: Clark; Glass; Gragg; Hughey; Reed; Rice; Shope; Stroup; Stevenson.

In the first half of the 20th Century Riceville was home to many small enterprises.

Dooley Clark's workshop and house were located next to the present fire station/community center. (The Riceville Fire Department also used the old garage as their fire station for about four years. The fire department had only one truck at the time. The workshop is currently referred to as the Automotive Volkswagen Hobby Shop.)

Norman Aires operated a little grocery store and gas station that was located between the Volkswagen Hobby Shop and the Community Center. Yet another store was located at the corner of Parker Road and Riceville Road in the 1930's, and was run by the Honeycutt family.

Fifth reader

A Grist Mill was located between the tractor barn and the white house in the cow pasture. Folks would bring their corn to be ground. They would leave a bag of corn on the front porch and then come back in a little while and the corn would still be warm from grinding. The mill was probably powered by water but more recently it was powered by a gas engine. All of the old mill site is gone now.

Just past the white house in the pasture going toward Bull Creek Road, Carter's Grocery was open in the 1950's and 60's. In later years there were 3 apartments in the building, and then it was converted into a tractor barn for farming and a peaked roof was added by Don Cordell who is the current owner.

Riceville was on a bus route running from downtown Asheville by way of the VA Hospital, to Swannanoa. (The VA hospital was built immediately after WWI to care for the many men who were poison gassed and needed long term care. Later it ended up being a big TB hospital.) Bus schedules were timed so that workers could arrive for their shifts at the VA and the Beacon Blanket Factory in Swannanoa. Of course the bus route was also used also by the public.

Sixth reader

For many years social and community life centered around activities sponsored by the churches and the Riceville Men's Club. The Men's Club spearheaded efforts to build a new community center. Fund raising events were held for this purpose. Other community projects included a mailbox improvement campaign (the existing mailboxes were various shapes and colors that were not appealing to the eye); erection of road signs; improvement of roads, and completion of payments on the property for a community center.

Also, active in the community was the Grassy Branch Home Demonstration

Club, working on Christmas parties, bake sales, community picnics, helping needy families in the community, and cooperating with the Riceville Men's Club on fund raising projects.

And here is one last interesting anecdote. In the late 1970's our beautiful valley might have changed for ever when the TVA proposed damming the Swannanoa River and 14 other tributaries of the Upper French Broad as a flood control measure. The lake resulting would have flooded the Warren Wilson valley and reached to the east end of Riceville Road. The Upper French Broad Defense Association worked to block this proposal. Please see copies of the fliers and brochures are on the display tables.