

Highlands Historical Society

Summer 2009

To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands

Highlands, N. C.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY MORTGAGE IS “HISTORY”!

Ten years ago, on August 1, 1999, the Highlands Historical Society bit off a very big bite. This fledgling organization in its first year of existence bought the Prince House, Highlands’ oldest remaining residence, and gave a \$250,000 mortgage to finance the purchase. Today, that mortgage has been paid in full. It is “history.”

This was made possible by the support of the Highlands community, and we appreciate it. So,

**MARK YOUR CALENDAR,
WE’RE HAVING A PARTY!**

In celebration of our tenth year and the retirement



of our mortgage, the Historical Society is hosting a 10th Anniversary and Mortgage Burning Party from 1-3 p.m. Sunday, August 2, at the Historic Village, 524 N. Fourth Street. Please plan to join us for a wonderful old-fashioned cake and ice cream social complete with local Appalachian music. The event will serve as a true celebration for HHS’s recent accomplishment.

The burning of our mortgage serves as the perfect completion of a successful premier 10-year chapter, and it opens the door to a very bright HHS future. We would like to thank the community for making this accomplishment possible. Please join in our excitement, and celebrate with us.

KELSEY AND HUTCHINSON - PART II

In January of 1875, Samuel Truman Kelsey and Clinton Carter Hutchinson left Reno, Kansas, on a venture to establish a community in the southern Appalachians. Reaching Clayton, Georgia, on February 15, they bought a pair of mules and began to explore the mountains to the north. They rode for some six hundred miles making a careful examination of the country from Rabun Gap to approximately one hundred miles north. Eventually they returned southward to the Highlands Plateau, attracted by the very favorable description which Silas McDowell, the nationally recognized botanist, had given the area. They approached Highlands from the northwest guided by Charlie Jenks, a young man who with his father had opened a corundum mine near the Cullasaja River

below the Highlands Plateau.

On March 6, 1875, Kelsey, Hutchinson, and Jenks stood on the summit of Satulah Mountain. Using a pocket compass owned by Jenks, they performed a crude survey of the area and identified the location for the town that would become Highlands. The compass which they used remains on display at the museum of the Highlands Historical Society.

The two town founders immediately began negotiations with William Dobson whose father had acquired hundreds of acres through state grants. On March 26, 1875, Mr. Hutchinson, who had the money, purchased 839 acres of this land, about one and one-third square miles. The tract extended from the

See **KELSEY AND HUTCHINSON**, Page 4

President's Letter

Who could possibly have foreseen, ten years ago when the Highlands Historical Society was organized, that by the summer of 2009 we would not only have survived, but thrived, with ownership of three of the most historic buildings in town: the Prince House, ca. 1877, the original Hudson Library building, ca. 1915, and one of Dr. Lapham's "Bug Hill" cottages, ca. 1908! Not only have the buildings been purchased and paid for, but restored and furnished by donations of time, labor, and, of course, money. And now it is time to celebrate by burning the \$250,000 mortgage that enabled the purchase of the Prince House.

None of these accomplishments would have come to fruition without the love of This Town that made people open their wallets and give: some to the point of sacrifice. Some may think that, with no debt to pay, our need for financial support will decline. But most of us know the truth of the statement that "The trouble with old buildings is that they are old!" They are in constant need of maintenance and repair, and we have big dreams about not only refurbishing our three buildings but improving their furnishings. We must also continue to maintain and improve our museum and archives, and we intend to provide additional programs, especially for the children of the community.

To that end, we recently applied for and received a grant from the Eckerd Family Foundation for the purpose of starting what we plan to call the "Kelsey Kids" program. We will report on this program in the next newsletter. Suffice to say, the children, their parents, and our volunteer leaders are excited about sharing the wonderful history of Highlands.

Every person who receives this newsletter has contributed in some way to the success of the Highlands Historical Society. Thank you so much for your continued support. Do come join us on August 2 to celebrate and to look to the future! And don't be surprised a few weeks later to receive one of those familiar donation envelopes!

Elaine Whitehurst

2009 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Memorial Day – Oct. 31	Museum and Archives (Fridays and Saturdays)
August 2	Mortgage Burning Party
August 8	Tour of Historic Homes
December 5-6	Christmas Show House

OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS

Elaine W. Whitehurst, President
 Eric NeSmith, Vice President
 Carolyn Patton, Secretary
 Leila Chapman, Treasurer

Martha Betz, Jeannie S. Chambers, Jim Green,
 Susie DeVille Schiffli, Wiley Sloan, Allen L.
 "Buck" Trott, Ronnie Waller, Walter Wingfield
 Jim Green, Newsletter Editor
 Archivist and Ex Officio Director, Ran Shaffner

VOLUNTEERS

Your good work is most appreciated, and we want to get credit for what you do.

PLEASE

be sure to ENTER THE HOURS that you work in the Volunteers Log at the Museum.

TOUR OF HOMES, from Page 3

Place. A surprise docent will be attending the final site, the Kelsey chimney. The chimney is all that remains of Highlands' first house, built by the town's cofounder, Samuel Kelsey, in 1875.

A general admission ticket of \$40 will include a tour of all homes and sites as well as refreshments. The tour will run from 10:00 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, August 8. Shuttles will leave from the Recreation Park with the last leaving at 2:45. Tickets for the event may be purchased at The Highlander, Cyrano's Bookshop, and Macon Bank or at the Recreation Park on the day of the tour.

Would you like to receive the NEWSLETTER BY E-MAIL?

Please let us know at highlandshistory@nctv.com.

TOUR OF HISTORIC HOMES – AUGUST 8

Highlands Historical Society will again host Highlands’ Annual Tour of Historic Homes and Sites on Saturday, August 8. This year’s event will be a short walking tour featuring four homes and three historical sites, all within a quarter of a mile distance on East Main Street.

The first home on the tour will be the home of Dr. and Mrs. Earnest Franklin. This house was built in 1881 and was the first Highlands residence of Henry Bascom. The next stop features the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ian Dickson. Their home was built ca. 1918 by Rebecca Harris. Dr. and Mrs. John Nickerson are the owners of the third home. It was built in ca. 1930 by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hager, Jr. The



final home will be the Valentine House, presently a dormitory for college interns at the Highlands Biological Station. E. E. Ewing, editor of Highlands’ first newspaper, built this house in 1881.

The first site on the tour will be the Hudson Library’s famous 70 books donated by the Lend a Hand Society of Boston. They were given in memory of Ella Hudson in 1880 and are displayed in two sectional bookcases donated from the library of Dr. Alexander P. Anderson. The next site will be the chapel of The Episcopal Church of the Incarnation built in 1896. The daughter of one of the church’s founding members, Isabel Chambers, will be a docent at this National Registered Historic Site. See **TOUR OF HOMES**, Page 2

WALK IN THE PARK

Highlands Memorial Park Cemetery once again came alive with this year’s Walk in the Park. Performances were held at the cemetery on June 26 and 27, and a third performance was held at the Martin-Lipscomb Performing Arts Center on the 28th.

This year’s performance celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Historical Society and of the Walk in the Park event. It highlighted six outstanding characters from past Walk in the Park performances, and one new character, Baxter White, was added. Seven local actors staged in different locations throughout the cemetery told the stories of these early influential citizens of Highlands.

Patrons of the event heard the stories of our town’s founder, Samuel Kelsey, played by Dean Zuch; Highlands’ first citizen, Baxter White, played by Nick Bazan; our dedicated librarian and

early organizer of the Highlands Improvement Society, Mary Chapin Smith, played by Wendi Diamond; writer, botanist and early Highlands educator, Professor Thomas Harbison, played by Thomas Craig; one of Highlands’ first conservationists, Margaretta Ravenel, played by Jeannie Chambers; Henry Bascom, the “merchant prince of Highlands,” played by Colin Long; and early Highlands doctor and founder of the tuberculosis sanatorium, Dr. Mary Lapham, played by Becky Schilling.



Dean Zuch playing Samuel Kelsey

The \$15 ticket provided entry to a great educational experience, and the cemetery served as a “living history” classroom. Performances were well attended, and the proceeds will be used to support the museum and archives as well as the other programs of the Historical Society.

KELSEY AND HUTCHINSON, from page 1

lower northern slopes of Satulah Mountain on the south to Little Bear Pen Mountain on the north, and from First Street on the west to the eastern side of Big Bear Pen Mountain on the east. The price paid for the 839 acres was \$1,678, or \$2 an acre.

Most of the Highlands Plateau lay beneath a heavy growth of forest. A dense laurel thicket covered much of the area where the town is located today, and the only cleared land within the original town limits was fifteen acres planted with long-abandoned apple trees. The closest road was the Franklin-Webster Road that came no nearer than two miles from Main Street. While there were four other homes within a few miles, the only residents living within the original town limits were Hugh and Mary Ann Gibson, caretakers for William Dobson's sheep and cattle. When Mr. Dobson sold the property to Mr. Kelsey and Mr. Hutchinson, the Gibsons moved out of the cabin, leaving only the two town founders.

The two men lived in the unoccupied Gibson cabin and spent the first few months fencing 100 acres for pasture and planting twenty acres of crops. They did not begin laying out Main Street until the spring of 1876. Streets were marked by stakes but were not cleared of trees. Richard Harding Davis, a nationally acclaimed journalist, arrived in the fall of 1876 and wondered about the future of the venture. He wrote that there was something comic as well as pathetic in the gravity with which Mr. Kelsey threaded his way "through the dense woods, frightening the squirrels as he pointed out 'Main Street,' 'Laurel Avenue,' and the sites for the town hall and churches."

Mr. Kelsey's family arrived in Highlands in May of 1875 and boarded in Horse Cove while Mr. Kelsey constructed a home on forty acres that he had selected on the south side of East Main Street across from the present site of the Hudson Library. The Kelsey house was the oldest in Highlands until it burned to the ground in 1976. Only the chimney remains standing behind the shops at Falls on Main.

Mr. Hutchinson also chose forty acres on East Main Street across from the Kelsey residence. However, he left Highlands after only a few months and

did not return for three years. When he returned in 1878, he began construction of a house which he did not complete. He remained in Highlands for only another six months.

The burden of developing and promoting the town fell to Mr. Kelsey, who was diligent in these efforts for over 15 years. He worked with energy and imagination to bring commercial amenities, hotels, roads, and railroads as well as residents to the town. While not always successful, his efforts are evident throughout the early history of the town.

Promotion of the town was not modest. Mr. Kelsey wrote a promotional pamphlet that was distributed throughout the country in 1876. He declared there is "no better place in the world for health, comfort, and enjoyment" and "no climate or country that brings surer returns to the farmer, fruit grower or stock raiser". A pamphlet published in 1887 described Highlands as being "The Greatest HEALTH and PLEASURE RESORT in the United States." Another contained a contribution by Dr. H. P. Gatchell, who wrote "Highlands is distinguished for giving tone to the digestive apparatus and for the natural concomitant—a vigorous appetite." At least the part about the appetite continues to be true. The pamphlet made another statement that also continues to apply: "nobody should come here without money."

Mr. Kelsey remained in Highlands and worked diligently until 1890 when he left to found the new town of Linville at Grandfather Mountain. He may have been frightened by a threatening letter that purportedly was written by the Ku Klux Klan, but it seems more likely that he was discouraged by the slow growth of Highlands and that Linville appeared to offer a greater opportunity. History tells us that he left too soon. Within ten years a significant inflow of summer residents had begun, and this would provide the impetus for growth that has produced the community that we know today.

Samuel Kelsey and Clinton Hutchinson were the fathers of Highlands. The special character of this town enjoyed by so many today was shaped to a large degree by the initiative and foresight that they demonstrated so many years ago.