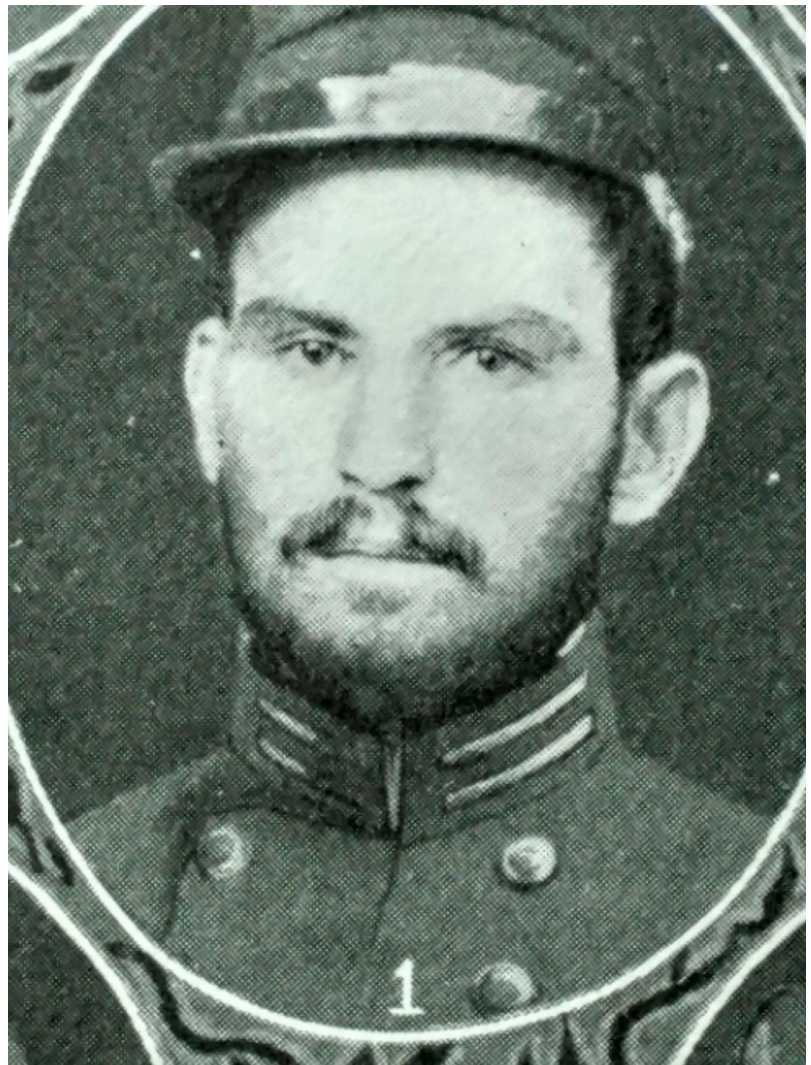


Backstory: Uncle Joe Clark and Becoming a Town

There are few individuals who are as notable in Blowing Rock's history as that of Joseph B. "Uncle Joe" Clarke. The first mayor of Blowing Rock, and instrumental in the town's early policies and transition into a resort town, Joseph Clarke has left a lasting impression on this Land of Sky. Joseph Bogle Clarke moved from Lenoir, North Carolina to Blowing Rock in 1871. Clarke, like many other men from Watauga and Caldwell County, Clarke was conscripted into the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Clarke served as a 3rd lieutenant during his time in the Confederacy in Company A. 22nd NC Regiment and was affectionately referred to as "Commodore Clarke." He led his men in numerous battles and was wounded in the



Battle of Gettysburg but later rejoined the war after a brief reprieve. Following the war, Joe Clarke married Louisa Council and became a farmer once settling down in Blowing Rock. (Above image: A young Joe Clarke during his time in the Confederate Army. Image circa 1861 - 1865).

Joe Clarke was well known in the village and even took the first census in 1886 for the Blowing Rock Township (at the time only a county administrative district). Three years later in 1889 the General Assembly incorporated the town of Blowing Rock and Clarke was elected the town's first mayor soon thereafter.

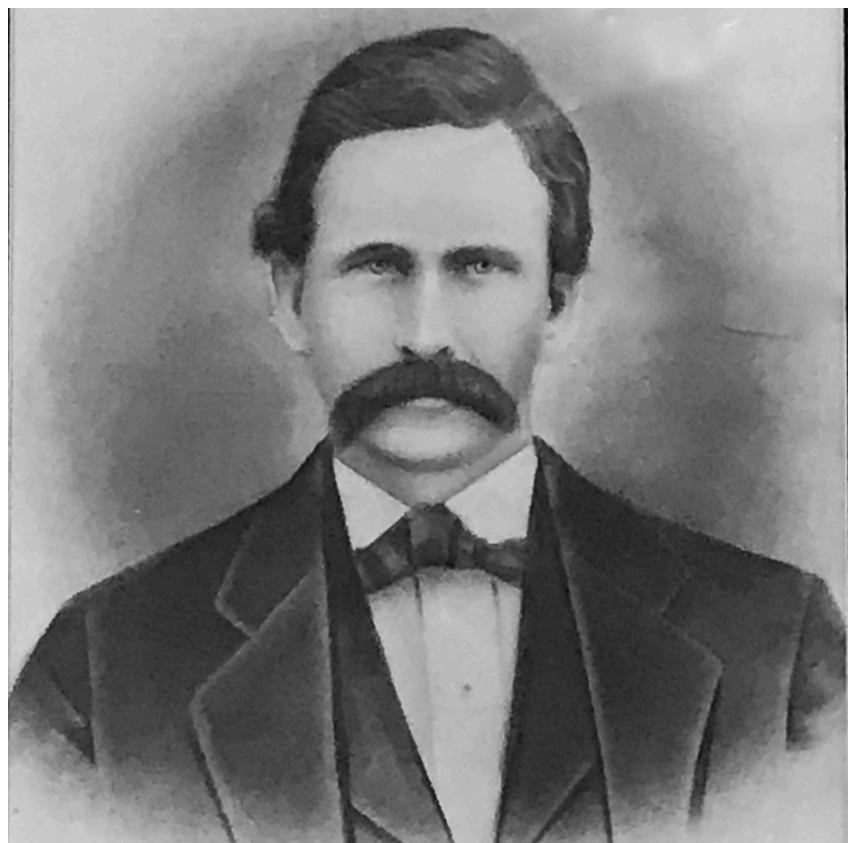
Joe Clarke was no run of the mill politician. He was an incredibly eccentric man and is said to have a tendency to dress in a black frock coat during the busy tourist-heavy



summer months but would only wear short sleeves during the winter. Clarke was also said to be of the New Church or Swedenborgian faith. This Christian denomination stems from the writings of mystic and scientist, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 - 1772). Elements of occultism and mysticism were popular with many who practiced the Swedenborgian faith. Uncle Joe was also a

particularly big fan of a stiff drink. After waking up one morning and starting the day with a drink (or two or even three) Clarke believed the village was just a bit too quiet and decided to lead a stampede of cattle down Main Street. In Joe Clarke style, he fined himself one dollar the following day for being drunk and disorderly in a mayor's court session he called himself. (Above image: A view of downtown Blowing Rock circa 1890s. Right image: A portrait of Mayor Joe Clarke).

The topic of alcohol would be one of the biggest concerns facing Uncle Joe's first mayoral term. The town's charter had allowed for its commissioners to regulate beer and wine sales and the township had even voted against prohibition in 1886. Clarke was unsurprisingly a



pro-alcohol mayor. In contrast, Filmore Coffey, an ardent fan of prohibition, was elected mayor in 1892. Coffey moved from Blowing Rock before his term came to an end and appointed W.H. Weedon to take his place in the interim. Another staunch fan of prohibition, Weedon pointed out that the charter for the Skyland Institute for Girls prohibited any alcohol sales within two miles of the school. Weedon contended that the alcohol sales allowed during Clarke's tenure as mayor went against the Skyland charter and thus invalidated Blowing Rock's legal standing as a corporate body. Upon seeing



what was happening to the village Joe Clarke and his supporters requested that Watauga County Sheriff Hayes hold a special election for a new mayor. In 1893 Joe Clarke was once again elected mayor of Blowing Rock and was able to successfully restore the village's standing as a town. This of course was not the end of Blowing Rock's back and forth nature with alcohol laws. The town became dry again

following a law in 1896, briefly became wet again in 1899 only to be overturned in the same year, and in 1908 all of North Carolina went dry following a strong state-wide temperance movement which deemed alcohol immoral. (Above image: A view of downtown Blowing Rock circa 1890s).

Another important issue facing Joe Clarke was that of stock laws. Clarke was a pro-tourist mayor, seeing the potential growth that such visitation could result in and was thus in favor of enforcing a stock law to fence in farmer's livestock. It had been commonplace for farmers to let their livestock roam freely during the spring and summer months which often resulted in pigs, chickens, and oxen making their way down Main Street. This of course was not too popular with summer cottagers and tourists who were put off by the unhygienic streets, smell, and noise. Much to the chagrin of local farmers, stock laws were passed in 1900 and reinforced in 1901, forever changing Blowing Rock's main thoroughfare.

When the town was young, Blowing Rock would hold mayoral elections yearly. According to newspaper records Clarke was mayor in 1889, 1890, 1892, 1894, 1900, 1903, and 1910.

Further changing the town, Joe Clarke, Dr. Calvin Parlier, and George M. Sudderth founded the Blowing Rock Bank in the early 1900s. Joe Clarke was also instrumental in Blowing Rock's transition to a beloved resort town. He supported the town's growth in the hotel and boarding house industry and encouraged tourists to visit the "Crown of the Blue Ridge." Clarke was the secretary-treasurer of the Caldwell & Watauga Turnpike Company in 1901 and constantly advocated for a railroad between Lenoir and Blowing Rock.

A member of the Masonic Lodge, Clarke was given a Masonic funeral after his passing



in 1910. Minister William Savage wrote of Clarke, "He attended Lodge regularly, no matter what the weather might be, in storm of rain or snow, whether cold or warm, if one would climb the steps of the Lodge Room he would find "dear Uncle Joe" as he is yet affectionately spoken of sitting by the stove, pipe in mouth, clouds of smoke issuing from beneath the broad-brimmed hat, a welcoming smile lighting up the rounded face, while a hearty grip sealed the welcome to the late comer who was needed, perhaps, to complete the mystic number required for communication." (Above image: Portraits of former elected officials of Blowing Rock adorn Town Hall with Joe Clarke pictured in the center).

Without Uncle Joe Clarke's guidance and advocacy, Blowing Rock may very well have been a much different town. It is with thanks to his vision for the town and his leadership that our village is the one we know and love today.