

Backstory: Religious Heritage

As is true for most small towns in the Old North State, Blowing Rock has a rich religious heritage, stretching back centuries and deeply influencing its culture and its people. Historian Dr. Barry M. Buxton notes that the first sign of religion in the area can be traced back to a tombstone with the inscription, "EES 1794." Anthropological studies tell us that the earliest evidence for religious thought can be traced back to graves and we find that here in Blowing Rock as well. The tombstone belonged to Revolutionary War veteran Ed Sullivan. Sullivan was Richard Greene's father-in-law - Richard being the oldest of the Greene family, who are notable in Blowing Rock history for being the first permanent settlers to the area in the 1790s. Sullivan and the Greene's were journeying from the Jersey Settlement in Rowan County, North Carolina to the Green Park area of Blowing Rock. Sullivan, however, was ill and knew what fate had in store for him sooner or later and thus brought his own tombstone with him to Blowing Rock. Sullivan passed in 1794 not long after arriving in Blowing Rock and was buried in the area's first graveyard for settlers (this site can still be found at the Mount Bethel Reformed Church). The landscape, the weather, temporary



versus permanent residents, and the mixture of backgrounds amongst Blowing Rock's residents would go on to shape the village's religious practices throughout history. (Above image: Folks lifting a cross circa 1970s. Left Image: An unknown church in Blowing Rock circa 1910)

Mountaineers of Appalachia were (and by majority still are) largely Protestant with some of the first settlers to the Blue Ridge being Presbyterian followed by Baptists and Methodists. Due to the rough

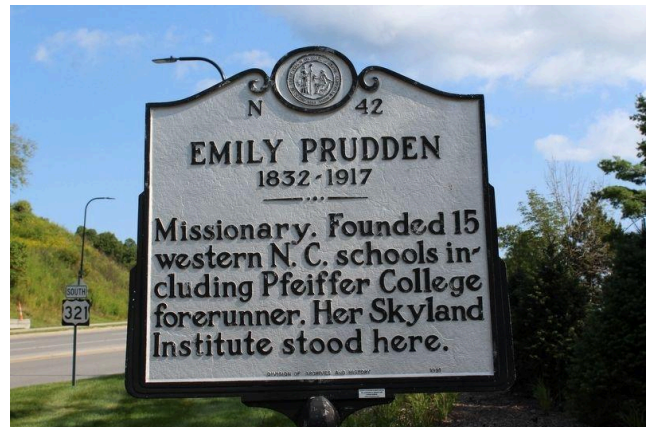
terrain of the area some early Methodist churches and many Baptist churches employed circuit-riding preachers. These preachers would stay in a community days or weeks at a time offering sermon, prayers, revival, performing baptisms, conducting marriage ceremonies, and overseeing burial services for townsfolk.

A distinction between religious beliefs was never more evident than that between the summer residents versus the permanent Blowing Rock residents. Summer cottage goers were typically Presbyterian or Episcopalian while the year-round citizens were mainly of Baptist faith. Thankfully, differences in beliefs did not stop mountaineers and summer residents from peacefully living amongst one another. In fact, in Blowing Rock's early days the four main churches which serviced Blowing Rock during the summer (many churches in the area were closed in the Winter months due to both smaller population size and winterization issues) had a special arrangement with their congregations. On the first Sunday of the month everyone would attend Episcopalian services, the second Sunday would be Methodist services, services on the third Sunday of the month would be Baptist, the fourth Sunday would be Presbyterian, and if there was a fifth Sunday a special sermon would be prepared for the congregation.



Many endeavors to spread religious understanding as well as education in Watauga County were largely mission-oriented from several notable summer residents. Emily C. Prudden of New England opened the Skyland Institute in 1887 as a boarding school for girls. Prudden deeded Skyland to the American Missionary Movement in 1890 when she left to found other schools in North and South Carolina. Prudden would return in 1910 to teach at Skyland for an additional two years. Skyland introduced a nine month school term to the Blowing Rock area, taught many

children how to read, and provided religious lessons and domestic training to girls. Similarly, the Blowing Rock Episcopal Church also set out to help the community by aiding in the establishment of the town's first public library.



(Left Image: Emily Prudden. Right Image: A historical marker noting Emily Prudden and Skyland Institute)

One interesting distinction between the mountaineer baptists and the summer cottagers was the mountaineer insistence that church attendance was sporadic rather than regular. Dr. Buxton notes that this irregular attendance by the year-round residents were often upturned during revivals, which would bring the community together with newfound religious zeal. Revivals were so important to Baptists in Blowing Rock that schools regularly let students out early to attend revival until the late 1920s. (Image Below: St. Mary's in the snow circa 2000s)



Several notable historic churches in Blowing Rock include: the Blowing Rock Negro Community Church/Community Center, Rumble Memorial

Presbyterian Church, the Sandy Flat Baptist Church, Blowing Rock Methodist Church, St. Mary's of the Hills Episcopal Church, the First Baptist Church, and Mount Bethel Reformed Church. Each of these churches have their own unique and interesting backstories. The Blowing Rock Community Center can trace its origins to the small year-round population of black Blowing Rock residents that consisted of farmers and town workers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the summer season several hundred black service workers would make the village their home as they worked in hotels and shops during the busy tourist season. Black town members held church services at Skyland Institute on Sunday nights in the early 20th century. These services moved to a Sunday school room at Rumble Memorial Presbyterian Church by the 1930s but by 1948 a fund for "The Blowing Rock Colored Church Project" was begun to give these residents a church they could call their own. The Blowing Rock Community Center/Negro Community Church was officially incorporated on September 6, 1949 and was located on Possum Hollow Road. The church was commonly used for community and social events for Blowing Rock's black population. However, in 1980 the church closed due to an ever dwindling congregation. The First Independent Baptist Church can now be found at the Community Center's original Possum Hollow Road location. (Above Image: The First Independent Baptist Church on Possum Hollow Road. Originally the Blowing Rock Community Center. Photo by Jeff Eason via the Watauga Democrat)



Rumble Memorial Presbyterian Church sprang into being due to an 1882 fundraising campaign led by Reverend Dr. Jethro Rumble, Colonel William J. Martin, Sr. and Jr. (both professors at Davidson College), and Emma Stewart (operator of a boarding house in Davidson and another in Blowing Rock during the summer). The church was officially dedicated on July 26, 1886. Unfortunately the church building was struck by lightning in May of 1888 and

although the congregation was still able to use the damaged building for services it was decided that a sturdier stone building would be constructed. Construction on the stone church began in 1905 and was completed in 1912. Dr. Rumble passed away one year into the construction of the stone



church and in 1940 the church was thus called the Rumble Memorial Presbyterian Church. Today it is a beautiful landmark along Blowing Rock's historic Main Street. (Above Images: Rumble Memorial Presbyterian Church. Black & white image: The young adult choir of Rumble circa 1980s)



Before it was a church, the Sandy Flat Baptist Church was actually a schoolhouse. Located on the Cone Estate, the Sandy Flats School was established by Moses and Bertha Cone to accommodate the children of their many employees who worked on the vast estate grounds. At times, the Cones employed upwards of 20% of Blowing Rock's population making the creation of a school a necessity. The school was ultimately consolidated into the town's school system in the 1920s and with Bertha Cone's permission, the schoolhouse transformed into a church. The Sandy Flat Baptist Church held its first services in June 1928 under the leadership of Pastor Ed

Robbins (who was once mayor of Blowing Rock). After Bertha Cone's death ownership of the land and church was eventually transferred to the National Park Service, under whose stewardship it still remains. Services are still held regularly at the church. (Above Image: Sandy Flat Baptist Church circa 1964)

The Blowing Rock Methodist Church (pictured to the right circa 1964) has a long history in Blowing Rock stretching all the way back to July 11, 1900 when Marie Dell Waller and her husband Charles D. Waller deeded the land to trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church-South for the construction of a church. The church, which is still standing today, was constructed between 1901 - 1902. The church was frequented with services from circuit-riding preachers throughout its early years and often struggled to grow its small congregation. The Blowing Rock Methodist Church closed its doors in 1932 and leased the building for five years to a group of Christian Scientists in the 1940s. Dr. John G. Barden tried his hand at reviving the Methodist



church in 1947 with sporadic summer sermons but was ultimately unsuccessful in his attempt to build up a significant congregation. Undeterred by past failings, supporters of the church proposed building living quarters for a full-time minister. Dr. Hersey Everett Spence, a retired theology professor at Duke University alongside his wife, Bessie, was approached to minister the church and in June of 1948 the first service led by Dr. Spence commenced at the Blowing Rock Methodist Church. The first service consisted of only 8 people but word spread of Dr. Spence's sermons and by August 1949 services were extended through September and would be held every Sunday of the summer season. By the time the 1950s rolled around the church found itself full on most Sundays. Dr. Spence would go on to serve



the church for sixteen years (1948 - 1963) with the local paper referring to him as "The Shepherd of the Mountains." While Dr. Spence and Bessie Spence passed away in 1973, their generosity and love is still felt by those that attend the Blowing Rock Methodist Church. (Above Image: The Blowing Rock Methodist Church circa 2020s)

Another church with solidly rooted in Blowing Rock's history is that of St. Mary's of the Hills Episcopal Church. Originally envisioned as a "thank you" to Blowing Rock for her husband William Stringfellow's improved health upon moving to the area, Susie Stringfellow dreamed of



having an Episcopal church constructed in town. Susie sadly passed in 1920, one year before construction was completed on the church prompting William to name the church the Susie P. Stringfellow Memorial Church in her honor. The church took on its present name, St. Mary's of the Hills, after the donation of the painting "Madonna of the Hills" by renowned artist, Elliott Daingerfield. (Above Image: St. Mary's of the Hills Episcopal Church)



If you have not had the pleasure to see the Blowing Rock First Baptist Church (pictured left) it is recommended that you do so on your next visit as this lovely building is not only gorgeous to look at but is also beautifully rich with local history. The church traces its organizational formation all the way back to the 1700s when the South Carolina Baptist Association requested that the Philadelphia Baptist Association send a preacher to

settlements along the Yadkin River. The church itself had its charter meeting in 1903 and the First Baptist Church of Blowing Rock was formed. The first building was erected in 1905 with a larger building constructed in 1923 and dedicated in 1924. Over the years the church continued to grow and in 1968 a yet larger building was constructed for First Baptist. While the original church was located off of Main Street, the newest rendition was constructed on Sunset Drive, which allowed for the greater size necessary to house the church's growing congregation. First Baptist holds the unique position of being the first church in Blowing Rock to stay open year-round in the early 20th century when many

were only open during the summer months. First Baptist has played an active role in the Blowing Rock community throughout its many years and continues to be an important source of religious teachings for many in the area. (Above Image: A Christmas congregation inside Blowing Rock First Baptist. Photo via Facebook)



Mount Bethel Reformed Church (pictured left circa 2000s) is one of the oldest buildings found in Blowing Rock and is the oldest church in town. It was built in 1882 and dedicated as a German Reformed Church in 1886 by Jacob Klutz. From 1886 to 1921, Mount Bethel held regular summer services. As is the case with many historic churches in town, Mount Bethel closed due to its small congregation and a decline in membership. Summer services were briefly revived at Mount Bethel in the

1940s but it was forced once again to close its doors shortly thereafter. The great-great grandson of Jacob Klutz, Andrew Critcher, has in recent years begun restoring Mount Bethel to its former glory with the help of his family and the community. After changing hands several times throughout the years the church and its cemetery are now owned by descendants of Klutz. In 2018 some 104 unmarked graves were found in the cemetery dating back to 1750 leading one to wonder what other histories have yet to be uncovered in our fascinating



mountain town. (Above Image: Preservation work being conducted on Mount Bethel circa 2000s)