

APPALACHIA AS THE PROMISED LAND:

A Freedmen's Commune in Henderson County, North Carolina, 1870-1920

Samuel Gray
Mountain Heritage Center
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, N.C. 28723

Theda Perdue
Department of History
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

This paper was written for presentation at the 1979 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. No part may be used without permission of the authors.

Appalachia as the Promised Land:
A Freedmen's Commune in Henderson, N. C., 1870-1920

On a hillside overlooking the Green River valley in western North Carolina are tumbling chimneys, scattered stones, decomposing logs, and earth-filled root cellars. In some places, only periwinkle and a lone cherry tree mark homesites. The forest has reclaimed the fields which once lay nearby, and the road into the area had long been closed to all except youngsters on horseback from the summer camp whose boundaries now encompass the site. Abandoned homesteads in the coves and hollows of the Blue Ridge are not uncommon, but this particular community is unique. The people who lived in these cabins, cooked their food in the fireplaces, tilled the fields, and stored their crops in the cellars, these people were former slaves and their descendants who came to this ridge shortly after the Civil War and established a commune which they called the Kingdom of the Happy Land. The remains of the Kingdom of the Happy Land pose a number of questions whose answers can be found in oral traditions and county records. From where had these black freedmen come? How had they lived? And why had they chosen the southern Appalachians for their communal society? A consideration of these questions must first focus on conditions in the South following the Civil War.

When the Confederacy surrendered, the black population of the United States was concentrated, of course, in the South, but within that region, some areas contained more freedmen than others--in particular, tidewater Virginia where corn largely had replaced tobacco as the chief agricultural commodity, South Carolina where slaves had cultivated rice and long staple cotton in the Sea Islands, Louisiana where they had grown and processed sugar cane, and Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and parts of Texas where cotton had been king. In many of these areas, blacks overwhelmingly outnumbered whites. The 1860 Mississippi census, for example, listed 350,000 whites and 440,000 blacks of whom only 773 were free.

In some counties, blacks comprised well over ninety percent of the population. Similar figures exist for the South Carolina Sea Islands.

During slavery, the high proportion of blacks led to fear of rebellion and repression of the slave population. Fear did not cease along with slavery. White planters became concerned not only about the safety of person and property, but also about their socio-economic status and political position. Fear became more generalized, and since the fundamental institution of control--slavery--had been abolished, fear became more acute. Consequently, whites began to devise means to subjugate the slaves.

In the year immediately following Appomattox, President Andrew Johnson began the Reconstruction of the South by giving the old elite almost full rein to deal with what he considered to be an explosive situation. Legislatures composed of pardoned ex-Confederates passed black codes which severely restricted the freedom of former slaves. For example, in South Carolina any white could arrest a black for a misdemeanor, black children could be taken from their parents and "apprenticed" to planters until they were twenty-one, and the hours which blacks could travel were limited. In Mississippi, the legislature simply restored the state's slave code by applying its provisions to "freedmen, free negroes, and mulattoes." In addition to legislative repression, violence against blacks functioned as a means of control. Sometimes public officials actively participated in the violence. In New Orleans and Memphis, police led riots which claimed almost one hundred lives. More often, the Ku Klux Klan or less formally organized vigilante groups terrorized blacks with cross burnings, floggings, and killings.

When Congress took charge of Reconstruction, the overt oppression of blacks abated temporarily. Federal troops returned to the South to protect blacks, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Civil Rights Acts, and the Freedmen's Bureau sought to establish social and political equality, an objective which proved elusive because Congress stopped short of providing an economic basis for equality.

"Radicals" such as Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner maintained that unless Congress confiscated the large plantations, divided them into small tracts, and granted or sold them to former slaves, the planter elite would reassert its domination of the work force and ultimately of southern politics.

Indeed, this is exactly what happened. Large landowners developed a system known as sharecropping under which a planter furnished freedmen land, a local merchant advanced supplies, and the three shared the crop. Unable to produce enough to cover the inflated cost of supplies, black sharecroppers often became trapped by debt, and peonage, which bound sharecroppers to the land, resulted. The infamous southern chain gang awaited those who tried to escape or who suffered eviction before debts were paid, and so the sharecropper became the political pawn of the planter during Congressional Reconstruction and did not object to Conservative moves to disfranchise and segregate him when Reconstruction ended.

Black freedmen had two alternatives to sharecropping. One was to become a tenant farmer, that is, to rent land for a predetermined amount of money. The second was to purchase land. Both alternatives were fraught with difficulties. Rent usually had to be paid in cash in advance. The few blacks who worked as day laborers could rarely save enough for a year's rent because wages averaged only \$10.00 per month, and not many sharecroppers ever saw even this much cash. Furthermore, whites generally opposed tenancy because it made freedmen more independent, and in some states, such as Mississippi, whites were unwilling to permit freedmen to tenant farm.

Similarly, whites usually refused to sell land to blacks. In Mississippi, a law passed just after the War prohibited the sale of property outside city limits, that is, agricultural land, to blacks. These proscriptions angered, frustrated, and disillusioned freedmen who believed that their years in bondage entitled them to land. When Congress opened public land in the South and West to homesteading, freedmen rushed to take advantage of this opportunity, and others pooled their resources to purchase plantations confiscated for nonpayment of taxes.

The desire to own was almost universal. Only relatively few freedmen succeeded, and among them were the members of the Kingdom of the Happy Land.

During Presidential Reconstruction, a group of freedmen in Mississippi decided to leave that state in search for a place where they could buy property and establish a communal society. The model for this society is unknown. Perhaps the Kingdom was based on a blend of fundamentalist Christianity and a subsequently forgotten oral tradition of the African past. Perhaps the idea filtered through the slave grape vine from people like Frances Wright who founded Nashoba or other American utopians. Whatever the inspiration, the organizers of the Kingdom of the Happy Land supposedly left Mississippi and travelled east through Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Along the way, they recruited additional members, including a number from South Carolina who probably directed the group to the turnpike which ran north from Charleston, S. C. to Asheville, N. C. Antebellum planters from the lowlands often spent summers in the mountains of western North Carolina, and their former slaves no doubt were familiar with the route.

By the time the freedmen reached the North Carolina state line, they numbered about fifty. Foremost in their minds was the purchase of land where they could establish a stationary society based on communal principles. They believed that the chances for accomplishing their aim were somewhat greater in North Carolina than they had been in Mississippi or South Carolina. While a few large plantations existed in North Carolina, they did not dominate the economy, and during Presidential Reconstruction, the state legislature passed no black codes and did little to prevent or discourage blacks from acquiring land. In fact, in 1868, a group of freedmen in Lenoir County in the eastern part of the state organized, without opposition, a joint stock company to raise funds to purchase land.

The political climate in western North Carolina was reputed to be more favorable to a freedmen's cooperative than in the eastern part of the state. The white inhabitants of the southern Appalachians owned few slaves, and during the Civil War, unionist sympathies ran high in the mountains.

Although support for the Union cause was not as strong in western North Carolina as in West Virginia or eastern Tennessee, many young men crossed the mountains and enlisted in the United States army. Following the War, the Republican party enjoyed considerable success in western North Carolina, success which could not be attributed to emancipated slaves since so few lived in the mountains. To the freedmen from the Deep South, Appalachia seemed to be the promised land.

When members of the Kingdom of the Happy Land reached North Carolina, they did not have the capital to finance their scheme, and so they settled on property belonging to Serepta Davis, the widow of a large landowner in Henderson County. The arrangement worked out with Mrs. Davis is unclear, but her descendants insist that the members of the Kingdom were not among the several sharecropping families of freedmen who lived on the Davis plantation, and that Mrs. Davis agreed to their ultimate purchase of the land because the family desperately needed servants to work at an inn they owned on the turnpike. The land obtained from Mrs. Davis was isolated from both the plantation house and the cabins of sharecroppers with whom members of the Kingdom had little interaction.

In the early 1870's, new arrivals from piedmont South Carolina swelled the ranks of the Kingdom to about two hundred. Some of these people probably came into the area to work on the railroad which was being built between Spartanburg, South Carolina and Asheville, North Carolina. However, the oral tradition is that an itinerant evangelist, remembered only as Reverend Ezel, exhorted his congregations throughout rural South Carolina to leave their homes and join the Kingdom of the Happy Land. Many complied, and every additional worker who came to the Kingdom increased the likelihood that someday the members would have the financial resources to purchase the tract of land on which they lived.

When a person moved to the Kingdom, he surrendered his material possessions to the common treasury which was controlled by the King. Each family then received a cabin site and garden plot. All surplus produce was sold in the markets of Hendersonville, Columbia, or Spartanburg, and the proceeds deposited in the treasury.

This income was augmented by wages of ten cents per day earned by members of the Kingdom who took positions as servants with nearby white families. Others worked for Ben Posey, a son-in-law of Mrs. Davis, at the inn he operated for travellers along the turnpike. At least one member of the Kingdom went ten miles to Hendersonville for employment in a grist mill.

Probably the most lucrative enterprise undertaken by members of the Kingdom was the production and sale of Happy Land Liniment, a remedy for rheumatism and muscular aches and pains. The chief ingredient was probably catnip which grows abundantly in the vicinity of the Kingdom's ruins, but the formula for Happy Land Liniment was as closely guarded as that for Coca-Cola. Renowned for its herbalists, the Kingdom also provided potions for other ailments.

The members of the Kingdom of the Happy Land worked diligently and lived frugally, and finally their joint effort reached fruition. In 1882, the husband of one of Mrs. Davis' daughters sold the tract of land on which the freedmen had settled to the King of the Happy Land, Robert Montgomery, and his sister-in-law, Louella Montgomery, who was recognized as Queen. When Robert Montgomery died in 1889, his interest in the property passed to Wiley Bennett, Louella's brother, who apparently succeeded Montgomery as king.

According to the oral tradition, Robert Montgomery was not the first King of the Happy Land. Rather, the unidentified founder who led the original group out of Mississippi seems to have established the position and adopted the title. How Robert Montgomery came to the throne is unclear, but he probably was not related to the founder since Montgomery was a native of South Carolina. Perhaps Montgomery merely became king through consensus as seems to have been the case with his successor Wiley Bennett. The king seems to have controlled the land on Green River and to have handled the finances of the Kingdom. In 1886, for example, Robert Montgomery mortgaged part of the land for a \$500 loan which was paid to the time of his death.

The method by which the Kingdom chose its Queen is also unknown, and Louella Montgomery's name is the only one which survives. After Wiley Bennett became King, she continued her position, and she was living in his household on Green River with her children when the 1900 census was taken. The Queen supervised the education of the children and directed the spiritual life of the Kingdom. On Sundays, she preached to the members and conducted the choir. Interestingly, one woman who descended from a member of the Kingdom is currently a highly regarded preacher and faith healer in western North Carolina.

The Kingdom reserved one building for instruction, and lessons centered on the learning of Bible verses and hymns. The children in the Kingdom also attended a public school in Possum Hollow some distance away.

Members of the Kingdom limited their contact with other blacks to school, work, and occasional appearances of the HappyLand choir at local churches. They wanted little to do with either the whites for whom they worked or the blacks in the surrounding communities. Outsiders remembered them as "recluse" and "uncommunicative," and described them as dressing in a distinctive way with "head swathed in such turban as might have come from Dark Africa."

The religious beliefs and practices of members of the Kingdom of the Happy Land may have rendered them suspect to neighboring blacks who preferred a more conventional version of Christianity, and the Kingdom apparently made no effort to proselytize after the demise of Reverend Ezel in the early 1870's. People in the Kingdom may have feared that an influx of new converts would jeopardize their communal society. Furthermore, members may have felt somewhat superior to other blacks since, unlike most freedmen in Henderson County, they had realized the dream of owning land. Whatever the reason, some antagonism existed between the blacks who belonged to the Kingdom and those who did not. After the Kingdom broke up and the few surviving members went to live in black communities throughout western North Carolina, many tried to hide their previous affiliation with the venture. Even today, one elderly woman who is known to have lived in the Kingdom as a child denies any knowledge of the commune.

The reluctance of members of the Kingdom to interact with whites is more understandable. They had come to western North Carolina to obtain land and live unmolested in a region which they believed was relatively free of the hatred, violence, oppression, and discrimination that characterized lowland South Carolina and the Deep South. They did in fact find land to buy, but the whites who sold them property did so because they needed laborers for their non-agricultural enterprise without which they would have lost the land anyway. No whites welcomed the members of the Kingdom as equals. In fact, in neighboring Rutherford County, the Klan burned the office of a Republican newspaper and raped the wife of a prominent party official in 1871. Furthermore, the Republican party gradually lost out politically except in a few counties where officials disassociated the local party from the egalitarian policies of the national organization.

Although few mountaineers had owned slaves and many had sided with the Union in the Civil War, they shared the racism of the planter as well as that of the exclusionists in the mid-west, the rioters in New York in 1863, and the overwhelming majority of the American public. During the Civil War, economic self-interest had dictated a course which made Appalachia an anomaly in the South, but many of the attitudes and values which its people held were not anomalous in the least.

As in the rest of America, the railroad came to dominate the economic life of the people of western North Carolina. In 1876, the railroad line from Spartanburg to Hendersonville was completed and a few years later the tracks were extended to Asheville. For awhile the railroad brought prosperity to the Kingdom, but when the line reached Asheville, few people tarried in Henderson County. Furthermore, most travellers preferred the railroad to the turnpike and so Ben Posey closed his inn. He moved to Hendersonville along with other white families in the vicinity. Sales of Happy Land liniment declined, and the Kingdom began to sink into debt. The mortgage secured in 1886 for \$500 was paid off, but members of the Kingdom so depleted their resources that they fell behind on taxes and the county auctioned an acre at a time.

Finally in 1909 one of Louella's sons was indicted for murder and what was left of the Kingdom's land passed into the hands of lawyers hired to defend him. The last King, Jerry Casey, continued to live on the property until his death in 1918, but his status was that of tenant. For a small group of freedmen, Appalachia had been the promised land where they could own property, establish a communal society, and avoid sharecropping or tenant farming. But like the rest of Reconstruction, the promise proved empty, and the Kingdom of the Happy Land is no more than overgrown ruins.