

"Buck Hotel Was Old Half A Century Ago"

Editor of the *Gazette-News*:



I have been "reminisicencing" as Samantha would say, brought into this mood by reading that the old hostelry was 50 years old. Fifty years indeed! It was old enough 50 years ago to have had great grand children. Had the writer only doubled his figures, he would have been nearer the mark. Mr. James M. Smith, familiarly know by his friends and neighbors as "I Dod," from a

common expression of his to denote disgust or disapprobation, was the father of nine children who lived to the age of maturity. All married except one son, who died a bachelor. His home was the present Connally and Garrett place. This was where the old home of "Grandpa and Grandma Smith" once stood. The old house had port holes where the owners would fire at the Indians as they came down the French Broad River in their canoes. Old Mr. and Mrs. Smith were the parents of Mr. J. M. Smith, the owner, builder and proprietor of the "Old Buck." If his eldest child was living she would be about 90 years of age. His youngest child is living in our midst. If I thought she would not be offended I would say she is nearing the age limit three-score and ten. The "Buck" was the only home Mr. Smith ever had after leaving his father's home -- the Connally and Garrett place. Can't say that he carried his bride immediately from his father's house, Col. John Patton's (whose home place is now owned by G. W. Vanderbilt) or built the Buck after marriage. Knowing his habits of life in after years, I believe he had the house ready for his bride and they went in housekeeping in the old Buck.

During all the years of his life he showed himself to be one of the most provident of men, a model of strict business habits. Have heard the first dollar he earned for himself was by selling coon skins. Not the kind of this present day, for in that time they were too valuable to be killed for their hides. This dollar I have heard descended to his oldest child who died and bequeathed it to her grand nephew, who lives in our city. To prove what a strict business man the old gentleman was, I will only say he died a very wealthy man, the possessor of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The estate was left in such condition that not a penny had to be settled-up after his death. He left each one of his children quite wealthy for that day, the time previous to the country being owned by millionaires. Mr. Smith was the first white child born west of the Blue Ridge.

The south end of the hotel was the only part built for several years. It has been enlarged twice, adding each time to the north end. Fronting on the only street in existence at that time, now known as North Main, a veranda extending the entire length of the house on both lower and upper floors was a fine place for the young folks to promenade. You see some of the old customs still exist. Pity that more do not. The modesty of the maidens and gallantry of the gentleman. Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins, exhibited in the old Buck hotel dining room at least 68 years ago. The sign of the Buck in my childhood was a masterpiece of art. 'Twas an immense stag with his head erect, bearing aloft the finest pair of antlers I have ever seen. He was posing as if listening and scenting danger, ready to plunge into the forest which he would have found nearby (where Dr. Burroughs now resides). The sign hung very high between two immense posts. Many times have I listened to its creaking as it was set in motion by the winds which blew then as now around our grand old mountain houses. The old posts and fixtures for hanging the sign never had to be renewed. They were placed there to stay, as Smith's bridge, the old Buck, the Garrett house, the villa built for one of his sons, and numerous other things.

Fifty years old, indeed!

A CITIZEN

Source: *Asheville Gazette-News*, (Asheville, North Carolina), Letter to the Editor, 8 March 1906.

This article was transcribed 4 October 2011 by Richmond Stanfield (Rick) Frederick, Jr., who can be reached at: rick@ncccha.org. James McConnell Smith (1787-1856) is the transcriber's third-great grandfather. The photograph of the Buck Hotel, the only one know to exist was added by the transcriber to the above 1906 letter to the editor.

Notes

1. The parents of James McConnell Smith (1787-1856) are Colonel Daniel Smith (1757-1824) and Mary Davidson Smith (1760-1842).
2. The Buck Hotel was built in 1825 on what today is Broadway Street, in Asheville, North Carolina. There was no College Street at the time, but the Buck Hotel stood at the corner of Broadway Street and what today is College Street (the northeast corner). It was thought to have been demolished in 1907 to make way for the Langren Hotel. However, the tenor of this letter to the editor suggests that the Buck Hotel came down before the letter was written, 8 March 1906. Eventually, the Langren Hotel also was demolished, and a parking structure occupies the site today. The Langren Hotel did not open until 1912 because the property upon which it eventually was erected was the subject of extensive litigation involving the will of James McConnell Smith.

3. The children of James McConnell Smith (1787-1856) and Mary (Polly) Patton Smith (1794-1853) are:

- a. Harriet Eliza Smith (1815-1867)
- b. Mary Emeline Smith (1817-1844)
- c. Ann Catherine Smith (1817-1896)
- d. Ruth Williams Smith (1819-1858)
- e. Jesse Siler Smith (1821-1870)
- f. John Patton Smith (1823-1857)
- g. Sarah Lucinda Smith (1826-1905)
- h. Elizabeth Adaline Smith (1829-1912)
- i. Serena Hannah Smith (1831-1832)
- j. James McConnell Smith, Jr. (1833-1834)
- k. Jane Cordelia Smith (1837-1924)

The son who died a bachelor is John Patton Smith (1823-1857).

The eldest child is Harriet Eliza Smith (1815-1867), who would indeed have been almost ninety years old in 1906 (born 24 July 1815). She was married three times and lived a large part of her life in Texas (and died there).

The youngest child is Jane Cordelia Smith (1837-1924), around sixty-nine years old in 1906 (this approaching four score and ten, which is seventy). She married George Thomas Spears and is the grandmother of former United States Senator Robert Rice Reynolds (1884-1963).

4. The reference to the Connally and Garrett place is a bit confusing, because they are two separate houses. The Connally house is *Fernihurst*. The Garrett house is Victoria (the Smith-McDowell House). However, the author is correct in that all the land on which these houses sit today (and much more) was owned by Colonel Daniel Smith and subsequently by James McConnell Smith, who greatly expanded the acreage. Connally is Colonel John Kerr Connally (1839-1904), who built *Fernihurst* around 1875. Garrett is Alexander Garrett, who purchased *Victoria* (Smith-McDowell House) in 1881.

5. Colonel John Patton (1765-1831) is the father-in-law of James McConnell Smith, being the father of Mary (Polly) Patton Smith. It was he who formally opened on April 16, 1792, the first Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions. On the minutes of that court, immediately after the justices were sworn and took their seats, appears this entry: "Silence being commanded and proclamation being made the court was opened in due and solemn form of law by John Patton specialy (sic) appointed for that purpose."

6. The Dr. Burroughs mentioned probably is Dr. James Anthony Burroughs (1858-1909).

7. Smith's Bridge is the bridge James McConnell Smith built in 1834 over the French Broad River, replacing a ferry he also owned. The bridge stood just south of the present-day Smokey Mountain Parkway Bridge on Patton Avenue. Smith eventually sold the bridge to Buncombe County, which replaced it with a concrete bridge.

8. The Garrett house and "the villa built for one of his sons" probably are the same structure: what today is the Smith-McDowell House Museum (owned and operated by the Western North Carolina Historical Association. The house was named *Victoria*.

James McConnell Smith (1787-1856)



James McConnell Smith was born on June 14, 1787, in a log cabin near the confluence of the Swannanoa and French Broad Rivers, very near what was to become the City of Asheville. He was the son of Daniel Smith (1757-1824) and Mary McConnell Davidson (1760-1842). James McConnell Smith purportedly was the first white child (or at least among the first white children) born west of the Blue Ridge mountains. In 1825, he built the Buck Hotel, which he operated for many years (also called the Smith Hotel). Located at the northeast corner of what is today Broadway Street and College Street, this was a working-man's hotel that catered to drovers and provided for livestock to be corralled in the back. The Buck Hotel operated as the Confederate Asheville post office during the Civil War. It eventually was demolished and replaced by the Langren Hotel. Today, a parking structure

(BB&T) occupies the site (with respect which there was extensive litigation).

Smith operated a store across the street from the Buck Hotel, maintained a tannery and several farms, built and for several years managed Smith's Bridge, the first bridge in what is now Buncombe County across the French Broad River, afterwards selling the bridge to Buncombe County. Smith's Bridge, initially a toll ferry, was a toll bridge and may have been the beginning of his fortune. See: *A History of Buncombe County North Carolina*, F. A. Sondley, LL.D. (1930) at 735.

Daniel Smith (father of James McConnell Smith) fought in the Revolutionary War and hunted this country with his close friend Samuel Davidson prior to the Bee Tree Creek

settlement. Tradition holds that James M. Smith was born in his parents' log cabin just south of present-day Aston Park in 1787. The young Smith attended the log school house operated by Rev. George Newton just east of his home place around 1800. Among his classmates was David Lowry Swain, who would become governor of North Carolina and President of the University of North Carolina. With the rest of the townspeople Smith probably marveled when James Patton raised his three-story Eagle Hotel with framed lumber in 1814.



That same year he married James's niece, Polly Patton. By 1827 Smith had known two log courthouses at the top of South Main Street (now Biltmore Avenue) and no doubt was closely following progress on the brick one begun in 1825. Brick was still very much a novelty in Buncombe in those days and, with rare exception, men only dreamed of building brick houses. If Smith owned such a dream himself, as a holder of good farm land close to town along the route of the new Turnpike he was certainly in a position to fulfill that dream, for the new road presented local farmers with both immediate and distant markets for their products. But Smith realized better than most how dependent his community was on its byways: around 1834 he built the first bridge across the French Broad. The tolls he collected from those who used "Smith's Bridge" made him wealthy. Source: *Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, Douglas Swaim (1981) at 63.

James McConnell Smith was heavily invested in the stock of the Buncombe Turnpike Company, and he owned a gold mine. He was a large landowner in Asheville and other parts of Buncombe County and in nearby Georgia (owning at one time some 30,000 acres in Buncombe County). He was a judge, served as Mayor of Asheville in 1849 (Chairman of the Asheville Board of Commissioners, which position eventually became mayor), and his picture for some time was displayed in the hallway outside the Asheville City Council Chambers. By the time of his death on May 18, 1856, Smith was one of the city's wealthiest and most prominent citizens. While possibly apocryphal it is said that he needed armed guards to accompany him to Charleston so he could do his banking. James

McConnell Smith is remembered as a man of untiring industry, economy, and perseverance. In 1814, he married Mary "Polly" Patton of Swannanoa, and they had eleven children. Seven daughters and two sons lived to maturity.

On 24 July 1849 James M. Smith, James W. Patton, N. W. Woodfin, William D. Rankin, and Montraville Patton were elected Asheville Commissioners. James M. Smith was elected Chairman of the Board. At this meeting by-laws and regulations governing the City of Asheville were adopted.



James McConnell Smith is buried with his parents and along side his wife, Mary (Polly) Patton (1794-1853), in the Newton Academy Cemetery in Asheville, North Carolina with the following inscription on his gravestone:

Smith, James M.
6/14/1787
5/18/1856
Husband of Polly Smith
"In memory of"

"He was the first child of white parentage born west of the Alleghany in the present state of North Carolina and his course of life exhibited many qualities worthy of imitation by all who come after him. He was a pattern of industry frugality energy and enterprise a useful citizen, a warm friend, and an honest man"

Source: Newton Academy Cemetery, Unadilla Avenue (just off Biltmore Avenue), Asheville, North Carolina. This is an old cemetery (established 1818) with much wear on the gravestones. James McConnell Smith (along with many of his family) originally was buried where Fernihurst mansion now stands on the campus of Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College. His body was removed to the Newton Academy cemetery around 1875.

James Smith's Empire

Because his family had originally settled on the fertile bottomlands along the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers, James Smith was well positioned to capitalize on the drover-based economy. He gradually purchased more than 30,000 acres along the French Broad River, ranging from the area around Smith-McDowell House and present day Biltmore Estate, across northwest Buncombe County, and into what is today Madison County. His two farms provided corn that he could sell to the drovers. This provided income to purchase the ferry along the French Broad River, as discussed previously, and his strategically placed acreage along the river protected him from competition. By

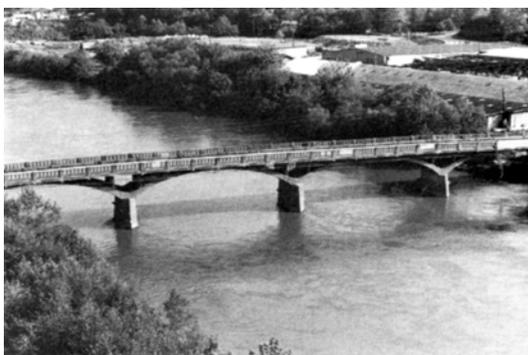
reinvesting his ferry income into the only bridge on the French Broad River, he created a literal “gold mine.”

Smith used the money generated by his bridge to build the Buck Hotel and tavern that catered to drovers. Their animals could stay at his barn and swine-yard (located at what is today Pritchard Park) where, of course, the feed was supplied from his plantations. If paid in animals, Smith’s tannery on South Main Street could cure the hides. Wagons could be repaired by his waggoner or his blacksmith shop. His sawmill could provide planks for the road or lumber for construction in the expanding city of Asheville. Smith also opened a general mercantile store in the center of Asheville. Records indicated that the store was in operation by 1840. He sold, or bartered skins, “seasonable goods,” clothing, beeswax, tools, shoes, jewelry, food stuffs, medicines, hardware, glass and crockery, cigars, chewing tobacco, books, hats, umbrellas, glass, and more.

In 1851, Smith formed a partnership with his son-in-law, William Wallace McDowell, and renamed the store the Smith & McDowell Mercantile. The Mercantile sold fine clothing and other luxurious items, but seemed to do best on staple goods. According to the 1850 census, Smith owned forty-four slaves in town. Other records indicate that he also had slaves working on his two plantations, making him one of the largest slave owners in Western North Carolina at the time.

According to records and oral tradition, Smith’s slaves were highly skilled and worked at his many businesses. The money accumulated from these numerous ventures made Smith one of the wealthiest men in the area, wealthy enough to buy a gold mine in Georgia and to build a brick mansion south of town as a second residence (now known as Smith-McDowell House). Smith was elected to serve as both judge and mayor of Asheville. He also was a Director of the Greenville & Columbia Railroad Company, supporting the expansion of the railroad system into Western North Carolina (this expansion was stopped by the Civil War). When Smith died in 1859, to say that he had been one of the most influential businessmen in North Carolina-as his obituary claimed-was not an understatement.

Smith's Bridge



One of the most interesting phases of early transportation is the method of crossing large rivers and creeks. For many years after white occupancy commenced not a bridge was built over French Broad River in North Carolina. For some years the only way of passing that stream was by fording or swimming. Then Captain Edmund Sams established where Smith's Bridge [was located] at Asheville the first ferry on the French Broad in North

Carolina. After a while he sold this ferry to John Jarrett and then John Jarrett sold it to James M. Smith who, later, built there Smith's Bridge which, after some while, he sold to

Buncombe County. Source: *A History of Buncombe County North Carolina*, F. A. Sondley, LL.D. (1930) at 602.

On August 28-30, 1852, a freshet had done considerable damage in the valleys of these rivers and washed away on the French Broad the bridge at Captain Wiley Jones's near the mouth of Hominy Creek, Smith's Bridge at Asheville, Garmon's Bridge at what is now Craggy, Alexander's Bridge at French Broad (now Alexander) and Chunn's Bridge and the Warm Springs Bridge in Madison County, and on the Swannanoa Patton's Bridge about half a mile above the mouth of that stream.

Source: *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley (1922) at 183.

On August 28-30, 1852, a freshet had done much injury in the valleys of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. It washed away on the French Broad, among others, Smith Bridge at Asheville. Source: *A History of Buncombe County North Carolina*, F. A. Sondley, LL.D. (1930) at 736. The bridge, rebuilt of course, was destroyed by the 1916 flood:

The old Smith Bridge was the first principle bridge to fold under. The immeasurable strength of the water crushed the middle span of irons, shortly followed by the remaining spans. Ultimately, all were swept down the river and sank to the bottom.

Source: *Asheville: A Postcard History, Volume I*, Sue Greenberg and Jan Kahn (1997) at 119. The Smith Bridge was near what today is the Craven Street Bridge over the French Broad River. Note that Craven Street becomes Haywood Street east of the river.

At one time Smith's Bridge was Henderson's Ford. See: *A History of Buncombe County North Carolina*, F. A. Sondley, LL.D. (1930) at 491.

Smith's Bridge (ca. 1917), W. Haywood Street at Riverside Drive, Asheville: Reinforced concrete bridge built after the 1916 flood to replace an iron bridge erected at about the same place in 1881. Captain Edmund Sams operated the first commercial ferry across the French Broad at the site during the early years of the 19th century. Later John Jarrett operated the ferry. He sold it with the adjoining land to James M. Smith who built a wooden bridge at the site. Thus the name, Smith's Bridge. The present concrete bridge, which spans the river on four arches supported by three mid-river piers, has been closed to traffic and is scheduled for demolition.

Source: *Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, Douglas Swaim (1981) at 170.

When John Jarrett bought the Sams ferry he kept it for many years as a toll ferry, and it became known as Jarrett's Ferry. Subsequently he sold it with the adjoining land to the late James M. Smith, who built a bridge at the place, which was known for many years, and up till a very late period, as Smith's Bridge. This he continued to keep up as a toll bridge until the latter part of his life, when he sold the bridge to the county, by which it

was made a public or county bridge. The eastern end of the bridge was somewhat higher up the river than the eastern end of the iron bridge which succeeded it, but the western ends of the two were at the same place. In 1881 this bridge was removed to make room for an iron structure, which was destroyed by a flood in 1916, but its old foundations were yet plainly to be seen for many years.

Source: *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley (1922) at 98.

The Western North Carolina Railroad was the first to reach Asheville. This was in 1881. Its first depot in the place was a frame building erected for the purpose where West Haywood Street crosses that railroad in the vicinity of the old Smith's Bridge place.

Source: *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley (1922) at 170.

Smith-McDowell House



Around 1840, James McConnell Smith built what today is known as the Smith-McDowell House located at 283 Victoria Road in Asheville, North Carolina, for his young son John Patton Smith who never married and died in 1857. The house stands on property that was one of the land grants opening Western North Carolina to permanent settlement after the Revolutionary War. The plans for the house were brought from

England. The brick walls are 18 inches thick, and some of the bricks were made in England, brought over as ballast on ships coming to Charleston, South Carolina. The bricks were then transported to Asheville by oxen teams. In all probability the house was built by slaves owned by James McConnell Smith. It is an outstanding house and is opened as a museum today. This house and all of the adjoining land was willed to his son John Patton Smith (1823-1857) and his heirs, however, John Patton Smith died without heirs nineteen months after the death of his father. In 1858 the house was purchased at auction by a daughter of James McConnell Smith, Sarah Lucinda Smith (1826-1905), and her husband, William Wallace McDowell. They and their family lived in the house until 1881. Economic difficulties arising after the Civil War forced them to sell the house and many more assets.

The following is from *Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, Douglas Swaim (1981) at 67-68:

Two important brick structures from the 1840s survive in the city of Asheville. The Smith-McDowell House and Ravenscroft School (Downtown Historic District) are probably the oldest buildings in Asheville and definitely the oldest brick buildings in the

county. The Smith-McDowell House is an impressive two-story, double-pile plan, five-bay mansion which features a double-tier porch semi-engaged beneath an extension of its gable roof. Its brick walls are laid in Flemish bond. Paired chimneys are interior to its three-bay gable ends. Much of the dwelling's original Greek Revival interior woodwork was replaced early in this century during a thorough Neo-Classical style remodeling. In the delicacy of the porch, however, supported by twelve slender, fluted columns, the retardataire Federal character that dominated the building's exterior remains strong. This fine dwelling was built, appropriately enough, for first native-born western North Carolinian James McConnell Smith. Smith, you will recall, bought prime farmland surrounding the confluence of the Swannanoa and French Broad rivers about the time the Buncombe Turnpike opened through that land. He also operated a ferry and, later, the first bridge across the French Broad, built and operated Asheville's third hotel, the Buck Hotel, and engaged in several mercantile enterprises. In 1850 he owned sixty-six slaves, more than anyone else in the county.

Smith built the house around 1848 when he was sixty-one, but there is no conclusive evidence that he ever lived in it himself. He had another residence in town and this brick mansion was probably considered his "farm house." A two-story brick structure which survives several hundred yards to the southwest is thought to have quartered some of his slaves.

James M. Smith died in 1856, leaving the brick house to his son Joseph P. Smith. William Wallis McDowell, grandson of Revolutionary hero Major Joseph McDowell and son-in-law of James M. Smith, bought the property in 1858 and occupied the house until 1881.

"His [Daniel Smith's] son, James McConnell Smith, built the Smith-McDowell House, . . . located on the A-B Tech campus. This tract remained in the Smith family until sold . . . in 1875. (1989. McDowell, Frances. A History of Fernihurst, p. 1)

"The Smith-McDowell House was built by James McConnell Smith about 1840 for his younger son John Patton Smith. . . . James never lived in this house."

The Buck Hotel



In 1825 James M. Smith built and managed the Buck Hotel, a log and frame structure located just north of the Public Square [now Pack Square] on what is now the site of the parking garage at Broadway and College Street. . . . By 1842 the hamlet was acquiring the look of a town. . . . On North Main Street [Broadway Street] the visitor would find the Buck Hotel, which was partly logs and frame, a livery stable, a blacksmith shop, a tanyard, and a "few old houses." . . . Other major hotels completed in the teens

[1910s] were the Langren, which occupied the Broadway site of James Smith's old Buck Hotel.

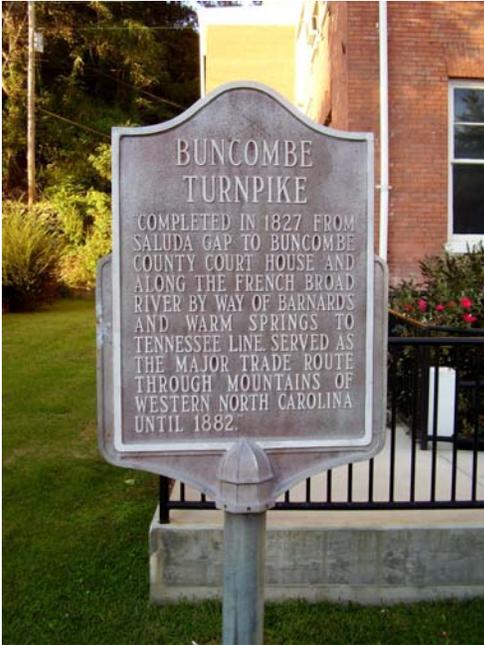
Source: *Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, Douglas Swaim (1981) at 35, 36, and 88.

This ancient hostelry was built by the late James M. Smith and stood where the new Langren hotel now stands. It was the first hotel west of the Blue Ridge, but when it was built is not stated in "Asheville's Centenary" (1898), the best authority we have on local ancient history. He was the son of Col. Daniel Smith of New Jersey, who died May 17, 1824, aged 67. James M. was born January 7, 1794 [thought incorrect], near the present Asheville passenger depot. His mother was Mary, a daughter of William Davidson, a cousin of Gen. William Davidson, who was killed at Cowan's Ford. It was Gen. Davidson's brother Samuel who was killed by the Indians at the head of Swannanoa in 1781-82. James M. Smith married Polly Patton, a daughter of Col. John Patton, who was a merchant, hotel keeper, manufacturer, farmer, tanner, large landowner, and very wealthy. The Buck hotel stood, till about 1907, when it was removed. In the 1890s it became Mrs. Evans's Boarding House.

The Langren Hotel. This fine structure of reinforced concrete was finished and thrown open July 4, 1912. It is near the Pack Square, Asheville, and stands on the much litigated Smith property on the [northeast] corner of North Main [now Broadway Street] and College Streets, where formerly stood the old Buck hotel. It is a commercial and tourist hotel, and popular. Source: *Western North Carolina: A History from 1730-1913*, John Preston Arthur (1914) at 491 and 507.

From 1803 to 1844 the number of buildings in Asheville nearly doubled. But that is saying very little when we consider that in the latter year there were less than a score; and all of these were either on or near Main Street. In the year 1844, there was no building on the east side of Main Street [now Broadway Street], between the old Buck Hotel and Woodfin Street. There was a small building on the Woodfin Place which is now used as a kitchen. Mr. Peter Stradley had a blacksmith shop on the ground where the Carolina House now stands; he lived in a house back of the shop. Source: *The Standard Guide to Asheville and Western North Carolina*, Published by Fred L. Jacobs, Asheville, N.C. (1887) at 14.

By 1883, the name of the hotel had been changed to the Central Hotel. Source: *The Asheville City Directory and Gazetteer of Buncombe County for 1883-'84*, J. P. Davison, Compiler (1883) at 121.



The Buncombe Turnpike

In 1824, the legislature of North Carolina incorporated The Buncombe Turnpike Company under the control of James Patton, Samuel Chunn, and George Swain. The Company had an authorized capital stock of \$50,000 at \$50 a share. The initial work on the Turnpike Company included surveys of the land. By 1827, the Buncombe Turnpike was completed and was considered the finest road in North Carolina. The Turnpike led from the Poinsett Road on the state line, through the Saluda Gap, by way of Flat Rock and Hendersonville, across the Asheville plateau to the Buncombe County Courthouse in Asheville, down the gorge of the French Broad River to Warm Springs, and just north at Paint Rock where it joined the Tennessee Road. The

entire road was seventy-five miles in length.

James McConnell Smith purportedly was heavily invested in the Buncombe Turnpike, and he certainly profited handsomely from its traffic.

In 1824 Asheville received her greatest impetus. In that year the Legislature of North Carolina incorporated the now famous but abandoned Buncombe Turnpike road, directing James Patton, Samuel Chunn and George Swain to receive Subscriptions "for the purpose of laying out and making a turnpike road from the Saluda Gap, in the County of Buncombe, by way of Smith's, Murrayville, Asheville and the Warm Springs, to the Tennessee line." (2 Rev. Stat. of N. C., page 418.) This great thoroughfare [of some 75 miles] was completed in 1828, and brought a stream of travel through Western North Carolina. All the attacks upon the legality of the act establishing it were overruled by the Supreme Court of the State, and Western North Carolina entered through it upon a career of marvelous prosperity, which continued for many years. Source: *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley; *Genesis of Buncombe County*, Theodore F. Davidson (1922) at 112.

The Buncombe Turnpike, described as the best road in North Carolina in its day, was opened between Greenville, Tennessee, and Greenville, South Carolina, in 1827. The opening of the Turnpike ended Buncombe's frontier isolation and ushered in the region's first era of relative prosperity. James McConnell Smith, son of settler Daniel Smith and reportedly the first white child born west of the Blue Ridge in North Carolina, turned forty in 1827. His two score years coincided with the heyday of log building in Buncombe and can serve to recapitulate some history on the far side of the divide. Source: *Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, Douglas Swaim (1981) at 63.

The General Assembly in 1819 created a Board of Internal Improvement. Under this board steps were taken for a few long over-due roads in the mountain section. Appropriations were made for a highway from Old Fort to Asheville and for a turnpike along the French Broad River that would connect Greenville, South Carolina, with Greenville, Tennessee, passing through Asheville and Warm Springs. This road, known as the Buncombe Turnpike, was begun in 1824 and completed three years later. It was to be a major factor in the life and progress of Western North Carolina for many years and was, for some time, the finest road in North Carolina. Source; *Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People to 1880*, Ora Blackmun (1977) at 202-203.

Whether the Buncombe Turnpike crossed Smith's Bridge is not known, but is doubtful because the turnpike is believed to generally follow the route of what today is US Highway 25, which would have run through the center of Asheville. There would have been no need to cross Smith's Bridge, which was located further to the west than the drovers needed to go. Smith's Buck Hotel was, however, situated almost directly on the Buncombe Turnpike, and he undoubtedly benefited from the traffic.

The following is from *Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, Douglas Swaim (1981) at 188:

"it is unclear whether the Buncombe Turnpike, established in 1827, followed the path of present-day Broadway along the Reed Creek and north out of Asheville; however, the roadway was definitely in use, and known as N. Main Street, long before the Civil War. Early structures on present-day Broadway included James Smith's log and frame Buck Hotel, built around 1830 close to the square, and Israel Baird's brick and frame residence, later a hotel, built in 1842 on the southwest corner of Broadway and Cherry Street.

Roster of City Commissioners From 1849

1849 - July 24. James M. Smith, James W. Patton, N. W. Woodfin, William D. Rankin and Montraville Patton were elected Commissioners of the City of Asheville. James M. Smith was elected Chairman of the Board. At this meeting by-laws and regulations for governing the City of Asheville were adopted. Source: Pack Memorial Library

Note that Montraville Patton was the brother-in-law of James McConnell Smith, and it is possible that James W. Patton was a first cousin of Mary (Polly) Patton, wife of James McConnell Smith.

Georgia Land and Gold Mine

A number of historians have referred to real estate and a gold mine owned by James McConnell Smith in Georgia. The following is from his will (Asheville, North Carolina, 9 February 1850):

My lands and gold min[e] in Rabun County in the State of Georgia I devise to my executors in trust for the use and benefit of all my children equally, the four children of my deceased daughter, Mary Emeline Shuford, taking one share, or ninth part, the property to be held for twenty-five years without sale or division.

Rabun County is the most northeasterly county in Georgia and borders North Carolina. It was created in 1819 from the cession of Cherokee Indian territory. Georgia's 47th county was named for Governor William Rabun, the state's 11th governor.

Slave Ownership

"In Western North Carolina some farms along the rivers east of the Blue Ridge were large enough to warrant slave labor. but the census of 1790 showed that even in that area slaves made up a small percentage of the population. . . . In the newer and more westerly counties a few owners of extensive lands worked their fields with slave labor. . . . Robert Love of Haywood County owned at least a hundred slaves, and James McConnell Smith of Buncombe County worked seventy-five slaves on each of two of his farms. Other men living in the fertile mountain valleys found it profitable to own slaves, but they were the exception. Most of the settlers neither owned nor could afford to own slaves, although some, especially those living in the towns and villages, might have an occasional house servant. The Negro population in the mountains was, therefore, almost negligible."

Source: *Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People to 1880*, Ora Blackmun (1977) at 195 (citing lists of slaves among the McDowell family papers in the possession of Miss Margaret Ligon of Asheville).

The 1850 will of James McConnell Smith listed many slaves. See below.

Tannery

According to historian F. A. Sondley, James McConnell Smith operated a tanyard (tannery) "where is now the junction of Southside and Coxe Avenue . . ." Some maps show a stream at this location that runs south/southwesterly and empties into the French Broad River. This should help place the enterprise because tanneries required water. Because of the foul odor generated, tanneries usually were consigned to the outskirts of town. See: *A History of Buncombe County North Carolina*, F. A. Sondley, LL.D. (1930) at 748.

That stream is described by Sondley as follows:

On the other side of French Broad River going from Swannanoa River in the direction of Asheville the first stream of considerable size is that now crossed three times by Southside Avenue and called sometimes "Cripple Creek." It was known as the Big Branch at the time when Asheville's site was chosen for that of the county town of Buncombe in 1792. Later a man named Gash owned land on that branch, living on that land near the entrance of McDowell Street into South Main Street, where was for many years later the Gash burying-ground. For a long while the branch was called Gash's

Creek. Later it acquired the name of "Town Branch" and finally the senseless appellation of "Cripple Creek. Source: *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley (1922) at 40-41.

The Big Branch mentioned in this report [to determine the county seat of Buncombe County] is that which a short while after became known as Gash's Creek, and in later years was called Town Branch. and is now commonly known by the meaningless name of Cripple Creek. It is the stream which runs by the passenger station at Asheville.

Source: *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley (1922) at 74.

Will of James McConnell Smith

Set forth below is an abstract of the will:

James McConnell Smith of Buncombe County, North Carolina (Will Book A, Pages 171-180)

Wife: Polly

Children: daughters Ann Catharine Crook; Ruth W. Ripley; Harriet Eliza Brown; Mary Emeline Shuford (deceased); Sarah L. McDowell; Elizabeth Adaline Smith; Lucinda Smith; Jane Cordelia Smith; sons John P. Smith; Jesse J. [S.] Smith.

Grandchildren: children of my son Jesse S. Smith; four children of deceased Mary Shuford (Marcus L. H.; Mary Eliz.; James Martin; Harriet L.)

Slaves: Bob (the tanner); Hardin? and his wife Lidia and her children; Alexander, Sy (the blacksmith) [here is written Bob Hardin, cattleman and Betsy], also Moses; man George (the show snakes) his wife Louiza and her child William; girl Carolina, Daughter of Lillia; Miles and Charles (sons of George); Alford; Susan; Lucy Ann and Tom (the miller); Joe (the waggoner) and his wife Tilda and her children; Alford; Joe; Mary Jane; Vina; Peter; Charles (son of Clara?) and Rabb; Caroline (child of ?ansela); Jeff and his wife; Mary and her child Samuel; Martha; Henry; Julia Ann; Carna; George her children; "my old man Philip."

Other: "my lands & gold mine in Rabun Co., Georgia"

Executors: Honorable David L. Swain of Chapel Hill and my sons-in-law Valentine Ripley and William McDowell and my son John J. [P.] Smith.

Witnesses: John E. Patton; J---- Burgin; M. Patton

Signed: James M. Smith (seal)

Dated: 9 February 1850

Codicil: Dated 29 October 1851 - states that he and W. W. McDowell are partners in merchandising; "my son Jesse S. Smith has since the making of my said will and codicil thereto, intermarried with his present wife Margaret Issabella and has by her one female child not yet names [named];' mentions a slave Rebecca and her child Charlotte which I purchased of Wm. W. McDowell; mentions that daughter Elizabeth Adoline Smith has married Joseph Gudger.

Second Codicil: Dated 7 January 1854.

Final Codicil: 8 February 1856, making land changes among the children.

Probated: July Term 1856

Source: Ingmire, Frances Terry, Compiler. *Abstracted Wills of Buncombe County, North Carolina 1831-1872*. Signal Mountain, Tennessee: Mountain Press, 1984 (Page 29-30).

This will (bequest to daughter Elizabeth Adaline Smith Gudger) generated extensive litigation. See: Smith Real Estate Litigation.

Litigation and Legislation

James McConnell Smith was the first white child born west of the Blue Ridge, in Buncombe county, but he will be remembered longer than many because of his will. He died December 11, 1853 [18 May 1856], leaving a will by which he devised to his daughter, Elizabeth A., wife of J. H. Gudger certain real estate in Asheville, "to her sole and separate use and benefit for and during her natural life, with remainder to such children as she may leave surviving her, and those representing the interest of any that may die leaving children." [1] A petition was filed in the Superior court asking for an order to sell this property, and such an order was made and several lots were sold with partial payments made of the purchase money, when a question was raised as to the power of the court to order the sale of the property so devised. In *Miller, ex parte* (90 N. C. Reports, p.625), the Supreme court held that land so devised could "not be sold for partition during the continuance of the estate of the life tenant; for, until the death of the life tenant, those in remainder cannot be ascertained." The sales so made, were, therefore, void.

But years passed and some of the property became quite valuable, while another part of it, being unimproved, was nonproductive, and a charge upon the productive portion. But there seemed to be no remedy till the city of Asheville condemned a portion of the productive part for the widening of College Street. The question then arose as to how the money paid by the city for the land so appropriated to public use should be applied. On this question the Supreme court decided in *Miller V. Asheville* (112 N. C. Reports, 759), that the money so paid by way of damages should be substituted for the realty, and upon the happening of the contingency (death of the life tenant) be divided among the parties entitled in the same manner as the realty would have been if left intact.

Upon this hint, on the petition of the life tenant and the remaindermen, a special act was passed by the legislature (Private Laws of N. C., 1897, Ch. 152, p.286) appointing C. H. Miller a commissioner of the General Assembly to sell the land, the proceeds to become a trust fund to be applied as the will directs.

This was done; but the Supreme court (Miller V. Alexander, 122 N. C., 718) held this was in effect an attempted judicial act and therefore unconstitutional. The legislature afterwards passed a general act, which is embodied in section 1590 of the Revisal, for the sale of estates similarly situated, and under this authority some of the land was sold and the proceeds were applied to the construction of a hotel on another part. The proceeds, however, proved insufficient to complete the hotel, and in an action brought to sell still more of this land for the purpose of completing the hotel, the Supreme court held in Smith V. Miller (151 N. C., p.620), that, while the purchasers of the land already sold had received valid title to the same, still as the hotel, when completed, would not be a desirable investment, the decree for the sale of the other land, in order to provide funds for its completion, was void because it did not meet the statutory requirements that the interests involved be properly safeguarded.

Notes:

1. Mrs. Elizabeth Smith Gudger died in October, 1912 [1 November 1912].

Source: *Western North Carolina: A History from 1730-1913*, John Preston Arthur (1914) at 407-408.

Miscellaneous Records and Quotations

"James M. Smith, Esq., now of Asheville, was the first white child born west of the Blue Ridge in the State of North Carolina."

Source: *Historical Sketches of North Carolina from 1584 to 1851*, John H. Wheeler, Compiler (1851) at 52.

Death Notice

Smith, James M., the first white child born west of the Blue Ridge in N.C. and one of the leading business men of Western Carolina, May 18, 1856, at his residence in Asheville (Asheville News, May 22, 1856). Source: Marriage and Death Notices from Extant Asheville, N.C. Newspapers 1840-1870, An Index, Robert M. Topkins, Compiler and Editor (1977) (1983 Reprint Edition) at 123.

Name: James McConnell Smith

Given Name: James McConnell

Surname: Smith

Sex: M

Birth:06/14/1787 in Asheville, NC, two-story log house on a knoll where the Asheville Depot stood

Death: 05/18/1856

Event: 7 daughters and 2 sons lived to maturity Number of Children 11 children

Burial: Newton Academy Cemetery

Note:

"Mr. Smith was a man of untiring industry, economy and perseverance. He married Polly, daughter of Col. John Patton, settled at Asheville at an early day, and commenced merchandising and farming, both of which he prosecuted successfully till his death in 1856. He heeded not the fashions of the world, but steadily pursued his calling, and at his death left a large fortune for his children. Mrs. Smith died in 1843 [1853], respected and lamented. She was the mother of nine children, five of whom are still living...." (1858. Bennett, D. K., *Chronology of North Carolina*, 101-102.)

"James M. Smith told the writer of [The Baird Brothers] giving him [a Jewsharp] when a small boy, which pleased him more than any present he ever received." (1858. Bennett, D. K., *Chronology of North Carolina*, p. 102.) The Baird brothers probably were Bedent and Zebulon Baird, the first merchants in Buncombe County. Source: *Civilization in Early Buncombe*.

James McConnell Smith was the son of Col. Daniel Smith, and was the first white child born, west of the Blue Ridge, in the limits of North Carolina. Mr. Smith was a man of untiring industry, economy, and perseverance. He married Polly, daughter of Col. John Patton, settled at Asheville at an early day, and commenced merchandising and farming, both of which he prosecuted successfully till his death in 1856. He heeded not the fashions of the world, but steadily pursued his calling, and at his death left a large fortune for his children. Mrs. Smith died in 1843, respected and lamented. She was the mother of nine children, five of whom are still living - one, Mrs., Brown, at Washington, Texas; she has been married three times the first time to Mr. Hoke, who was killed by Mr. Henderson, at Lincolnton, in a fracas, several years since. She now enjoys a competency, and a bright hope of an inheritance where troubles and sorrows never come.

Source: Edney, James M. *"Buncombe Men." Chronology of North Carolina*. D. K. Bennett. New York: James M. Edney, 1858 at 101-102.

There is some indication that James McConnell Smith was of the Methodist religion. Note the following from *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley; *Genesis of Buncombe County*, Theodore F. Davidson (1922) at 149-150.:

Apparently the next church after that at the Melke place built in Asheville was an inferior frame structure of the Methodists. On July 20, 1839, James M. Alexander gave and

conveyed the land on which this building had been put "including the building erected for a female academy and Methodist E. church, and the Sunday School house," to "William Coleman, Israel Baird, Wilie Jones, J. F. E. Hardy, N. W. Woodfin, James M. Alexander, Geo. W. Jones, James M. Smith and Joshua Roberts, Trustees," as a gift "for the use of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and when the same is not in the occupancy of the said M. E. Church, ministers of any other regular orthodox denomination of Christians who shall come duly authorized by their respective churches and whose moral and religious character and habits are unexceptionable, may be authorized to occupy the same as transient visitors." About 1857 this old building was replaced by a brick structure which, after being remodeled several times was replaced by the stone edifice which is known as Central Methodist Episcopal Church, South, erected in 1903. It stands on the western side of Church Street. (Record Book 22, page 359.)

Reference has several times been made to James M. Smith. He was the first white child born west of the Blue Ridge in North Carolina. . . . At the home place of Colonel Daniel Smith just described was born on January 7, 1894, his son, James McConnell Smith. The latter married Polly Patton, daughter of Colonel John Patton hereinbefore mentioned. He settled in Asheville, and began at the old Buck Hotel and on the opposite side of the street his long and singularly successful career as hotel keeper, merchant and manufacturer of several kinds of articles. He also conducted farming on a large scale, and for many years kept a tanyard in the valley of Gash's Creek between where South Main Street crosses that stream and where Southside Avenue first crosses it going from the public square in Asheville. He was a large landowner in Asheville, and its vicinity, and at the time of his death was a very wealthy man. He died on December 11, 1853, and was buried at the graveyard of his family where Fernihurst is now; but in 1875 his body was removed to, and now rests in, the Newton Academy graveyard. His wife had died in 1843. A numerous family of children and descendants survive him, and are yet living in Buncombe County and elsewhere in the United States.

The Confederate post office was in the old Buck Hotel building, on North Main Street, now Langren.

On January 11, 1841, the Legislature passed another amendatory statute whereby "James M. Smith, James W. Patton, N. W. Woodfin, Isaac T. Poor and James F. E. Hardy" were "incorporated into a body politic and corporate by the name of the 'Board of Commissioners for the town of Asheville,'" with certain powers therein defined. Still later by an act ratified March 8, 1883, and entitled "An act to amend the charter of the town of Asheville," the town of Atlheville ceased to exist as such, and thenceforth became "The City of Asheville."

Source: *Asheville and Buncombe County*, F. A. Sondley; *Genesis of Buncombe County*, Theodore F. Davidson (1922) at 153-154, and 162-163.

Note that the above description by Sondley and Davidson may indicate that the Asheville house of James McConnell Smith was across the street from the Buck Hotel. Whether it

is across College or Broadway is unknown. In the third codicil to his will, James McConnell Smith described the property as follows:

" . . . the house and lots in which I live including the tavern and outbuildings contiguous on the east side of the Main street beginning on the street and J. B. Whiteside's corner south of the tavern house, and running with the Main street including five front half-acre lots passing below the fence north of the well and running with the lower or north line of the lower or fifth lot eastward by the east corner thereof and the same course to the street near Ephraim Clayton's and south with that street and the south line of my lot to the beginning, including the orchard"

Whether the house in which he lived was the Buck Hotel or another structure "on the opposite side of the street" is unknown.

Value of Real Estate Owned in 1850: \$30,000. Source: 1850 US Census.

References

The Smith-McDowell House: A History, Richard W. Iobst (1977), Western North Carolina Historical Association Republication (2006).

Mountain Living Magazine: "Historic Smith-McDowell House to Preserve WNC Heritage," Mildred Beedle Fossett (Spring 1976).

Chronology of North Carolina, D. K. Bennett (1858) at 101-102.

Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina, Douglas Swaim (1981).

A History of Fernihurst, Frances McDowell (1989) at 1.

Family and Descendants of William Wallace McDowell & Sarah Lucinda Smith McDowell, Frances Arthur McDowell (Compiler and Editor).

Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People to 1880, Ora Blackmun (1977).

Links

1. James McConnell Smith (1787-1856) (extensive biographical and genealogical information):

<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=caswellcounty&id=I1049>

2. Smith-McDowell House Museum:

<http://www.wnchistory.org/>

3. *Fernihurst* Photographs:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/48492290@N02/sets/72157623648175960/>

4. Smith-McDowell House Photographs:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/48492290@N02/sets/72157623534432919/>

5. Buck Hotel Photographs:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/48492290@N02/sets/72157623658970770/>

6. Smith-McDowell House Photographs:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/48492290@N02/sets/72157623534432919/>

7. Smith Family Photographs:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ncccha/sets/72157600260897058/>

8. Smith Family Gravestones:

<http://ashevilleandbuncombecounty.blogspot.com/2010/02/smith-family-gravestones-newton-academy.html>

9. Early Settlement of Buncombe County and the Drovers' Road:

<http://ashevilleandbuncombecounty.blogspot.com/2010/02/early-settlement-of-buncombe-county-and.html>

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