



Highlands Historical Society



Fall 2024

To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands

Highlands, N.C.

The Founding Fathers of Highlands

It is often said that the Town of Highlands was founded by two men – Samuel Truman Kelsey and Clinton Carter “C.C.” Hutchinson – in 1875. History would argue that four men bear primary responsibility for the founding as Kelsey and Hutchinson would never have had the knowledge or opportunity without the efforts of two others – William Dobson and Silas McDowell.

William Dobson had inherited over one thousand acres of land on the Highlands Plateau from his father who had acquired the land through state land grants. The land in-



Early Map of Highlands

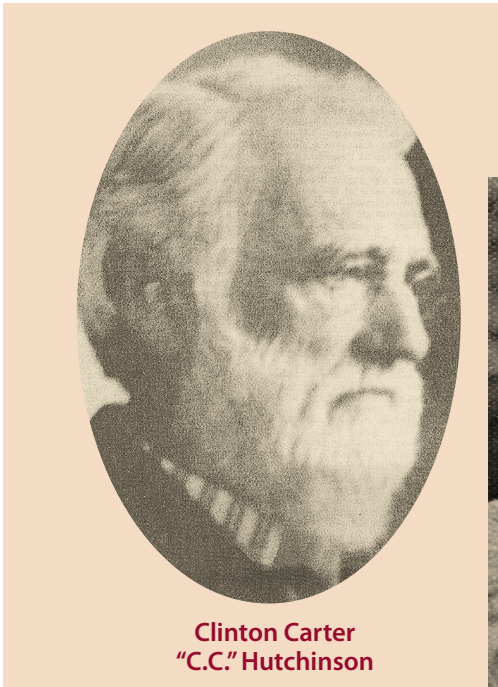
Silas McDowell was a self-taught geologist, zoologist and botanist who lived down the mountain in Sugartown, an old Cherokee village near the current Cullasaja Community just east of Franklin. For years, McDowell had been writing of the “Sugartown Highlands” near the headwaters of the Sugartown River, which is today’s Cullasaja River. In various horticultural publications and the Smithsonian Reports of 1856, McDowell was the first to describe “a vast green ribbon” running through what he termed the “thermal belt” in which early frosts failed to affect the mountainsides between certain elevations throughout western North Carolina.

For over thirty years, McDowell sought to promote Sugartown Highlands as both an agricultural wonder and a health resort due to its unique climate. McDowell’s writings attracted the interest of famous botanists like Dr. Moses Ashley Curtis and Asa Gray, who in turn, further added to the promotion of Highlands as an area rich and diverse in botanical offerings.

Hutchinson and Kelsey had both been born in the east, lived in Illinois for a time, and ended up in Kansas by the mid-1860’s. Hutchinson was a cartographer, businessman and politician. Kelsey was an agriculturalist who specialized in the cultivation of fruit trees. The two met at Ottawa University in Kansas, which had been established by Hutchinson, when Kelsey was hired to plant over 15,000 trees on the campus property.

Hutchinson was the first to be attracted to the environment described by McDowell due to health problems which he ascribed to poor climate and he traveled

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Clinton Carter
“C.C.” Hutchinson

cluded 839 acres that make up most of the town limits of Highlands today. Dobson used the heavily forested land to run sheep and cattle and had cleared small tracts to plant apple orchards. The only residents within the current town limits were Hugh and Mary Ann Gibson, caretakers for Dobson, who lived in a rough-hewn log cabin near Main and First Street today.



Samuel Truman Kelsey
with grandson Harlan Page Kelsey

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to the area to witness the conditions firsthand. Making the decision to move his family to the mountains of North Carolina, Hutchinson enlisted Kelsey to join him. On March 6, 1875, the two were joined by a local guide, Charlie Jenks, atop the summit of Satulah Mountain where they laid out a crude survey of the town that would become Highlands. The compass that they used that day remains in the archives of the Historical Society.

Kelsey and Hutchinson began negotiating with William Dobson and, on March 26th, they purchased the 839 acres of land for the price of \$2 an acre. For the first year, the two men lived in the cabin previously occupied by the Gibsons as they fenced acreage for pasture and planted some of the few acres that were cleared. They did not begin laying out the streets until 1876 when Main Street, Laurel Avenue and sites for churches and a town hall were located.

The task of developing and promoting the town fell to Kelsey. Hutchinson left town for good in 1878, having spent less than a year total in the area. On the other hand, Kelsey worked diligently to promote the town, declaring in pamphlets that “there is no better place in the world for health, comfort and enjoyment” and, in a later pamphlet published in 1887, that Highlands is “the Greatest HEALTH and PLEASURE RESORT in the United States.”

Kelsey lived in Highlands until 1890 when, discouraged by the lack of growth, he left for the new town of Linville at the base of Grandfather Mountain. Less than ten years later, Highlands had more than doubled in population with an influx of summer residents and the trend of enjoying Highlands as an escape from the heat of summer began.

Today, the Town of Highlands looks far different than it did at the time of its founding. Primeval forests have come and gone. Businesses and residences have been built and torn down. However – thanks to the vision and efforts of these four “Founding Fathers” – Highlands remains a place of cool beauty and tranquility for generations of people who have enjoyed a respite from the busyness of life down the mountain.

X Marks the Spot



An often told legend of the founding of Highlands states that Samuel Kelsey and C.C. Hutchinson took a map of the United States and drew two lines connecting great trade centers. The first line connected Chicago and Savannah. The second connected New York and New Orleans. Where these two trade routes crossed, they argued, would one day be a population center worthy of their investment.

Though the veracity of the legend is doubtful, the Highlands Plateau is, in fact, very near where the imagined lines cross. As savvy businessmen, it is hard to envision that the two would use such a whimsical approach to make a life altering decision. It is much more likely that the two entrepreneurs were looking for a climate that would suit their agricultural and health needs and in the writings of Silas McDowell, they were alerted to the fact that Highlands was just the place.

As McDowell later wrote, “For thirty years I have been trying to call attention to these Highlands. I have described these bold surroundings as having no peer in the Southern States . . . I have piped and piped, but could get no one to dance, until now! But now, and for all time after this, the Sugartown Highlands will be as a ‘city on a hill,’ and no longer hidden from the world.”

[Source: Randolph P. Shaffner, *Heart of the Blue Ridge: Highlands, North Carolina*, 2001]

The Women Who Helped Shape Highlands

The Highlands Historical Society was invited to make presentations to the Cullasaja Women’s Outreach and the Highlands Falls Member/Guest Women’s Luncheon this July. Tracy Foor was joined in presenting *The Women Who Helped Shape Highlands* by Lee Lyons and Joan Worthy, who portrayed Helen Wright and Dr. Mary Lapham, respectively. Both programs were well received and were part of the emphasis this year on outreach to our community.





President's Letter – Fall 2024

As the 2024 Season at the Highlands Historical Society comes to a close, we turn the page in anticipation of an exciting year ahead. The year 2025 marks the Sesquicentennial (150th Anniversary) of the founding of Highlands. The lead article in this newsletter is an homage to the “Founding Fathers” of Highlands and describes the unusual circumstances behind their decision to found a town that was then in the middle of nowhere.

Before we turn the page to 2025, I want to take a look back at the events and activities sponsored by HHS this past year – and there were many! The Season Opening event in May, was held inside the museum due to rain, but was otherwise a great success. A new exhibit – *Hosts on High: a History of Hotels and Inns of Highlands* – opened in July and a Sneak Peek party was hosted at the museum for patrons to get a first look. July also included several presentations made to clubs and organizations around the Plateau of *The Women Who Helped Shape Highlands*. Thanks to the efforts of Lee Lyons and Joan Worthy, who portrayed Helen Wright and Dr. Mary Lapham, these women came to life for the audience each time.

August brought a new fundraiser associated with the Dahlia Festival – an Elevated Woodstock – that was co-hosted by the Highlands Smokehouse and Davis Family Wines. Over 140 people attended this groovy party where they enjoyed great food, drinks and music as well as the opportunity to win some fantastic prizes with an auction and raffle. The Dahlia Festival kicked off September with the Poster Party and the Single Bloom Competition at the Bascom. Vignettes adorned all of Highlands with flowers and native plants provided by the Dahlia Depot. There was a great day of music, moonshine and tours of the museum at the HHS campus. Everything was capped off with a concert in the Park on Saturday night by Steel Toe Stiletto. Thanks again to Kim Daugherty for her leadership with all things Dahlia. Look for her article elsewhere in this newsletter.

September also included HHS co-sponsoring an evening with the authors of a new book titled *George Masa: A Life Reimagined*. Unfortunately, Hurricane Helene hit our beautiful State hard and we were forced to cancel the Annual Descendants' Reception. However, Walk in the Park was held at the end of October to rave reviews. The year saw many other activities on our campus which point to our future. The repairs of the Prince House roof and exterior were made under the leadership of Price Kloess. Repairs to the museum roof will begin over the winter. New audio tours of the Prince House and historic buildings in Highlands are in the works and should be ready just in time to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Highlands this coming year.

In closing, I want to thank all of you for making these wonderful opportunities happen. As you consider your year-end giving, I ask that you consider a gift to an organization focusing on hurricane relief in Western North Carolina rather than a gift to the Historical Society. While contributions to HHS are always welcome, the needs elsewhere are far more critical at this time.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! *Tracy*

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The Highlands Historical Society wishes to thank the following organizations for their generous grants in 2024 to support the activities of HHS!

THE LAUREL GARDEN CLUB which helped fund landscaping around our new steps.

MOUNTAIN FINDINGS which helped fund our Raise the Roof Campaign which assisted with roof repairs to both the Prince House and those to come this winter at the museum.

CULLASAJA WOMEN'S OUTREACH which helped fund our new audio tour of the Prince House and of historic buildings in downtown Highlands which will be available in 2025.

THE HIGHLANDS CHAMBER OF COMMERCE which helped fund the Dazzling Dahlia Festival.



Dahlia Review by Kim Daugherty

The 14th annual Dazzling Dahlia Festival left us all feeling groovy as FLOWER POWER took over Highlands, with an explosion of florals, music, history, and even a bit of art. The dahlias provide the astounding color and beauty, but it is the incredible people who put their heart and soul into the dahlia festival that made the weekend so dear. This year HHS also hosted a dahlia patron's "Elevated Wood-

stock" party on the campus of Highlands Smokehouse and High Country Wine & Provisions. It was at the Woodstock party that we launched fundraising for a scholarship in Ran Shaffner's name for a Highlands School student. Woodstock proved a popular theme, as people really dressed the part and enjoyed getting down to the 60's music. Chris Wilkes was a charming and persuasive auctioneer as he led the sale of four live auction items that raised over \$20,000.00. A French river wine cruise, donated by Guy Davis, and a stunning peridot ring, donated and cut by HHS board member Peter Worthy, were the auction highlights. Additional money was raised thanks to the generosity of artists and businesses who donated items that were raffled. A good time was had by all, even Fred the bear who joined in to wrap up the festivities.

The weekend after Labor Day dahlias took over Highlands; the weather was absolutely perfect and the dahlias did not disappoint. The Bascom hosted the Single Bloom Competition where over 460 individual dahlias were entered into 17 categories. The judges selected amateur Best of Show as Bianca Mitchell's breathtaking yellow lacinated dahlia, "Encore." Professional Best of Show went to Tim Wheatley's absolutely perfect Ball dahlia, "KA's Rosie Joe." Tim opened the show with a very informative talk about growing dahlias.

Throughout Highlands there were 58 floral expressions of the power of flowers including a car full of love, flower children, an easy rider, and lots of peace and love. The people voted online and chose People's Choice Best of Show as "The Power of Play." The judges selected "Life is a Beautiful Ride" by First Bank as the Best of Show, for which they won \$500.

The HHS historical village hosted fantastic bluegrass music, moonshine, history, tours and food and was a beehive of activity all day as it finally got the attention it so deserves. Lots of people with local connections enjoyed visiting with each other and sharing stories about Highlands, filling the museum and Prince House to capacity.

Flower Power ended on a high note as Steel Toe Stiletto rocked KHFP for the Saturday evening concert. Winners were recognized and a raffle for the Prince House painting was held. Robin Austin won the painting and graciously donated it the HHS museum so all may enjoy it. Proceeds from the raffle were split between HHS, Boys & Girls Club of the Plateau and the PAC. Thanks to the Dahliabolics for putting the beautiful sounds to our visual festival; their generosity paid for all the music, both Steel Toe Stiletto in the park, and The Shedhouse Trio, featuring Darren Nicholson, at the historical village.

Great music, fairy crowns, and perfect weather make all the hard work worthwhile. There are too many people to thank individually here, but thank you to all who participated for the gift of your time, talents, and money; for that is the Dahlia Festival – people giving their time and talents.

Next year the weekend of September 6th we will celebrate the 15th Dazzling Dahlia Festival, when we explore, "Where the Wild Things Are." For more info and to see pictures of this past year go to highlandshistory.com

