AN ANNOUNCEMENT

The on-line *Journal of Backcountry Studies*

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The *Journal of Backcountry Studies* celebrates and promises to serve the coming of age of an important sub-field of early American History, the study of the southern backcountry. Six contingencies have defined backcountry historiography.

Perhaps the *first* and certainly the most decisive, was Carl Bridenbaugh's Fleming Lectures in Southern History at Louisiana State University in 1951, published as *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (1952) and concluding dramatically with a final lecture/chapter on "The Back Settlements." The audience at Baton Rouge and readers of the published lectures would not have been surprised by Bridenbaugh's opening analysis of political responsibility of the Chesapeake aristocracy—a theme he had already explored in *Seat of Empire: The Political Role of Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (1950). Bridenbaugh anticipated by only a few months Charles S. Sydnor's classic statement discovery of *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (1952). Bridenbaugh's second lecture, on the Carolina Low Country, in contrast, brought listeners up short with its brusque criticism of conspicuous consumption and social climbing among the lowcountry Carolina elite.

Taken together, Bridenbaugh's two-part sermon on enlightened statecraft in the tidewater and on feckless consumerism in Charles Town was an adroit prelude to his bold and surprising discovery of a fully-formed, vibrant, and unpredictable backcountry society in the Shenandoah Valley, the North Carolina piedmont, South Carolina upcountry, and the interior of Georgia. Previously almost unbeknownst to historians, a

functioning southern frontier society had grown up so naturally and unselfconsciously that scholars in the middle of the 20th century had barely noticed its existence.

As the first prominent historian to appreciate the magnitude of this development, Bridenbaugh—then the first Director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture and well situated to see the field as a whole—came away from this exciting discovery irritated and affronted by the hedonism, earthiness, and religious zeal he found in the Backcountry. That idiosyncratic twist in *Myths and Realities* left historical interpretation partially in limbo and many questions unanswered, indeed, not yet asked.

The *second* stage of backcountry historiography was inextricably tied—not to one but to a pair of scholars: Robert D. Mitchell and Warren Hofstra. Mitchell, historical geographer at the University of Maryland, had published *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* in 1977, just a year after Hofstra joined the faculty of Shenandoah University and eight years before he defended his path breaking University of Virginia dissertation on Frederick County from 1738 to 1840.

Bob and Warren recognized that their work on the Valley of Virginia touched on the efforts of scores of local historians, historical geographers, preservationists, and students of material culture. They set out transform this loose-knit network into an engine of inquiry and interpretation. Twelve years later, it took Gregory D. Nobles 113 footnotes to chronicle "Breaking into the Backcountry" by African, Native American, and European settlers in the eighteenth century and by historians in our own time (*William and Mary Quarterly*, October 1989).

Hofstra and Mitchell played innovative, collegial roles both as organizers and as participants in a series of remarkable conferences, beginning with a gathering Mitchell

organized at Mary Baldwin College in 1985 on “The Appalachian Frontier.” When Michael J. Puglisi initiated a Virginia backcountry conference at Emory and Henry College in 1992 and the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina followed suit in 1993 (proceedings published respectively in 1997 and 1998), Mitchell and Hofstra presented major papers at both events. Shenandoah University’s Community History Project, inaugurated in 1987, institutionalized what was coming to be called “Public History” in the lower Shenandoah Valley and prepared the ground for a broadly based conference in 1989, the bicentennial of Washington’s presidency, on *George Washington and the Backcountry*, with the conference proceedings published in 1998.

Backcountry conferences were more than just events; they were moveable feasts. From the Bicentennial of American Independence until mid-1990s, Professor Ronald Hoffman brought all the cutting edge issues in Revolutionary scholarship before large audiences visiting Capitol Hill each April. In 1982, the bicentennial of the conclusion of revolutionary warfare in the South, Hoffman’s Capitol Hill Symposium topic was *The Uncivil War: the American Revolution in the Southern Backcountry* (proceedings published in 1985), a *third* major landmark in Backcountry historiography. In common with other Capitol Hill themes (women, slavery, religion, material culture, and the re-emergence of J. Franklin Jameson’s interpretation of the Revolution as a social movement), the rising profile of the Backcountry in Revolution historiography became clearer in the years just after Hoffman brought it to the fore.

A *fourth* contingency bringing Backcountry studies into being was the initiative by lay and academic historians in Ulster and in the southern backcountry and Appalachia

to institute a series of biennial, transatlantic symposia on the Ulster-American heritage. Beginning in 1978 the Ulster American the symposia held on this side of the Atlantic, alternating every two years with those in Ulster, occurred at university campuses at Asheville, Boone, and Cullowhee in North Carolina, and Johnson City, Tennessee, as well as museum and archival sites in Staunton, Virginia, Rock Hill, South Carolina, and next month in Knoxville. Immigration history rooted on both sides of the Atlantic and bringing Ulster and American historians together on a regular basis has restored the backcountry to its status as an Atlantic world geographic and historical entity.

By the time in 1989 George Washington and the Backcountry conference, a pattern had been set. Breakfast on the last day of a conference was an informal planning session for the next backcountry symposium, in this instance a major conference at the Virginia Military Institute in 1994 on the social aftermath of backcountry settlement. *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800-1900* (2000), Kenneth E. Koons and Warren Hofstra, eds., recounted and interpreted that aftermath. The hallmark of Bob's and Warren's conferences in the 1980s and 90s was their inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary character.

Those conferences also thrived in part because they rode the crest of the rise of Public History as a national development with the historical profession. Warren's most recent conferences on the Frontier Heritage in the Southern Backcountry (1991), on Comparative North American Frontiers (1999), and on the Seven Years' War (2004), climaxed the effort to meld the work of historians, preservationists, social scientists, and students of material culture. At the close of the Comparative Frontiers conference, in

1999, Warren formally passed the torch to his colleagues in North Carolina. He challenged John Larson and me to organize a Backcountry Conference in North Carolina.

Warren's initiative was not entirely out of the blue. By the mid-1980s he had become a regular lecturer at the UNCG-MESDA (University of North Carolina at Greensboro/Museum of the Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem) Summer Institutes on Material Culture. Beginning in 1979, the Institute was the brainchild of Professor Jean Gordon and MESDA's Jan McArthur and Sally Gant. Each summer, the Institutes brought fifteen graduate students and museum professionals to the Museum and rotated its program-focus on a three-year cycle from Tidewater Virginia to Charleston and the low country and finally to the Backcountry. The nine triennial Backcountry summer programs at MESDA—a *fifth* landmark in Backcountry studies—have produced a unique body of scholarship—nearly 135 curatorial studies of particular backcountry artifacts, many of them in the MESDA collection.

The UNCG/MESDA Conference on "Bringing the North Carolina Backcountry to the Public," occurred at Old Salem on September 14 and 15, 2004. Following the Keynote Address by Professor Sylvia Frey on "The Southern Backcountry as a Multi-Cultural Society," the conference heard a major paper on the Old Stone Churches of Rowan County as well as reports on the Guilford Courthouse National Battleground and Tannenbaum Historic Park, and made site visits to Bethabara Park, Horne Creek Historic Farm, and the St. Philips African Moravian Church. At a concluding dinner, featuring Moravian cuisine and some excellent Yadkin Valley wine, the academic and public historians attending the Conference endorsed the creation an on-line *Journal of Backcountry Studies*.

We are not alone in this venture. More than a decade ago, our colleagues in the neighboring sub-field of Appalachia launched their own *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, backcountry contingency number *six*. The two regions overlap and yet are, at the same time, distinct. The first ridge of the Appalachians towers over the Shenandoah valley and the foothills west of the Carolina piedmont. But, undeterred by that shadow, settlers from the backcountry carried their culture into western Virginia, Kentucky, east Tennessee, northern Georgia and Alabama—into what became known by the late nineteenth century as *Appalachia.* This *Journal* will follow Backcountry culture westward and southwestward.

Dwight B. Billings, current editor of the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, graciously welcomed the *Journal of Backcountry Studies* into the field. The historic and geographic centers of gravity in the Backcountry were the late colonial period in the Valley of Virginia/Carolina piedmont; the center of gravity for Appalachian studies is the proud, tenacious state of mind of the people of Appalachia from the late nineteenth century to the dawn of the new millennium.

The interactions between these two historic regions promise to be fruitful and ongoing. The potential significance of backcount*ries*--north and south, from Maine to the Gulf of Mexico—is one Thomas Slaughter exploited in *The Whiskey Rebellion* (1986). More recently, Joyce Chaplin reminded us, in her 2005 SHA paper "Whose Globe?" that the global significance of the backcountry was something Verner W. Crane spotted as early as 1928 in *The Southern Frontier*. "That book," she declared, "is still essential reading. [It] interpreted the English colonies in the South as within the demands of competing nations, especially Indian nations but also Britain's imperial rivals,

particularly Spain." Her prescient observation should someday rank as contingency number *seven* in Backcountry annals. The other great prescient historical observation about the Backcountry is, of course, Edward Ayers's *Valley of the Shadow Project* on the Civil was in the lower Shenandoah. Ayers finds in Civil War Backcountry the most American of societies, neither truly southern or northern but conflicted over race, equality, and the human condition as only nineteenth-century Americans could be.

The backcountry as a membrane between the Lost Cause and the Gilded Age, between global cultures, and as a point of connection integral to the structure of the Atlantic world are just a few of the possibilities this *Journal*—even the modest electronic medium that it is—promises to explore. We begin this work with Catawba College professor Gary Freeze's stunning presentation from the Old Salem Conference of 2004 on German Stone Churches in Rowan County. Lavished illustrated as a lecture, and here as a published paper, Gary literally read the words appearing on, and implied by, the building of competing and collaborating German Lutheran (Organ) and Reformed (Old Stone) churches. German ethnicity and piety were conflicted historical developments and functioned at cross purposes with British settlement of the region. Gary's subtle exploration captures the cultural tensions at the heart of North Carolina backcountry settlement.

The second article in the inaugural issue of the *Journal*, by Professor Robert Scott Davis, of Wallace State College, examines another vortex of cultural conflict: the ethnic and neighborhood violence fueled by the British invasion of the southern backcountry in 1780-1782. Taking a single skirmish at Kettle Creek as a test case, Professor Davis

throws new light on the most contemporary of American dilemmas: the cost of imperial counter-insurgency in global wars for empire.

The inaugural issue concludes with a gallery of reviews by Scott Philyaw, Peter Moore, Gregory Massey, and Ellen Pearson of the most important book on the backcountry since *Myths and Realities*, Warren Hofstra's long-awaited *The Planting of a New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley* (2005).

We will begin the formidable task of catching up with a burgeoning historical literature by reviewing the major books on the Backcountry published in the past decade, and we appeal to publishers to send us review copies of new works in the field. We invite submission of articles on all aspects of Backcountry studies. We have already commissioned an article on the history of the UNCG/MESDA summer Backcountry institutes and hope that other historiographical and institutional studies of the events sketched above will be undertaken and submitted. For example, we encourage submissions exploring the religious and cultural geography of the region—the connections between New Market and Salisbury for backcountry Lutherans, between Washington County, Pennsylvania and Abbeville District, South Carolina for Associate Reformed Presbyterians, O'Kellyite churches in Virginia and North Carolina, as well and the Moravian world from Bethlehem to Wachovia, and the Quaker world from Philadelphia to New Garden.

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May 1, 2006