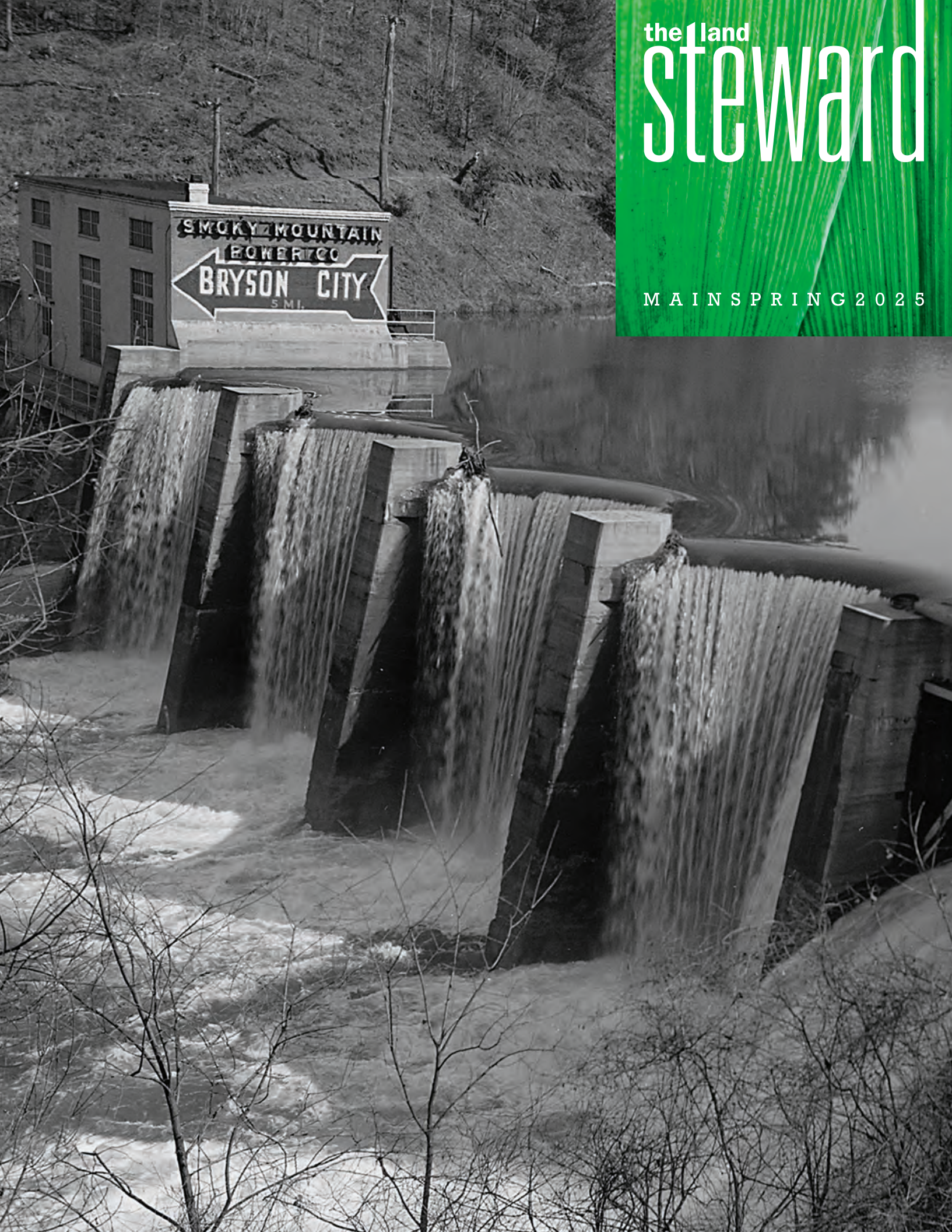
the land steward

MAINSPRING 2025



From the Board Chair

This past year has carried both challenges and opportunities that have shaped Mainspring's work — and conservation efforts across western North Carolina — in lasting ways. In Jackson County, we've completed the acquisition of a large private in-holding in Panthertown Valley, known to many as the Yosemite of the East. In Macon County, we have taken steps toward restoration of the historic Siler-Jones House, an extraordinary 19th-century structure that tells the compelling history of the native Cherokee inhabitants and early European settlers in this region. In Swain County, efforts are underway to prepare for the removal of Ela Dam from the Oconaluftee River, restoring miles of continuous river habitat for native fish and aquatic species. And in Cherokee and Graham counties, we are working to conserve the natural beauty of the Snowbird Mountains.

These are but a few of the many achievements that our excellent staff have carried forward with skill and dedication in 2025. Yet, alongside these achievements, we have also experienced immense loss this year, with the passing of several cherished members of the Mainspring family — individuals who were highly influential in our founding and direction. We are grateful for the opportunity to carry their vision and legacy forward.

Change is the one constant in life that none of us can truly avoid. Yet, as a land trust charged with conserving the natural world in perpetuity, we are uniquely positioned to embrace change and seek out the opportunities it brings. Now, we are preparing for the next step by welcoming Jeremy Hyatt, Mainspring's new executive director, who will help guide us into another chapter of conservation in the Southern Blue Ridge.

On behalf of the board of directors, I want to thank you for your support and commitment to our mission of conserving the unique and special places of the Southern Blue Ridge for the benefit of all.

David Adams
Chair, Mainspring Board of Directors

The annual publication about the activities of Mainspring Conservation Trust

November 2025

MAINSPRING
CONSERVATION TRUST

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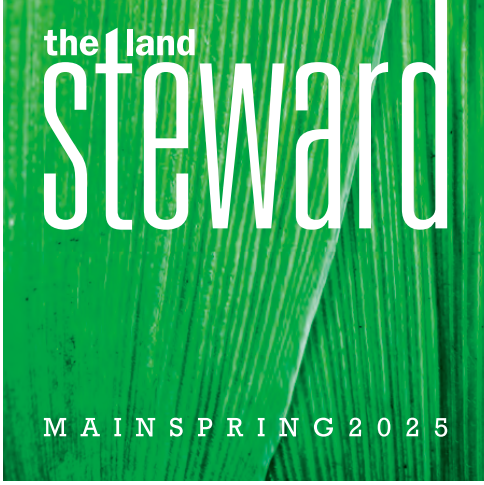
www.mainspringconserves.org



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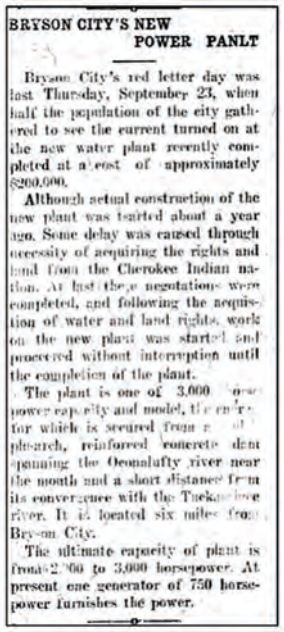
PHOTOS: cover, Tennessee Valley Authority; p6-8, archival photos from Museum of the Cherokee People, Jackson County Journal, Library of Congress, Asheville Citizen Times, WCU, NCWRC, USFWS; p9–11, Andrew Renfro; p16, p18 & p22, Bob Scott; p24–27, courtesy of Tom Hemstreet & Sally Crawford; all other photos, Mainspring staff.


ODE
TO
LONG
MAN

FOR CENTURIES, THE Oconaluftee River has carried more than water through the valleys of Swain County. It has carried stories — stories of Cherokee towns, families who fished its bends and visitors who once filled its roadside motels. Now, as the Ela Dam nears the end of its life, archaeologists Paul Webb and Kaley Kelly are helping ensure those stories are not lost.

Webb and Kelly recently developed a public "storyboard" on the history of Ela and its river. The report, which has been submitted to the North Carolina Historic Preservation Office, is technically about the dam, but Webb views it differently. "Although the project is about the dam, it's really about the river," he says. "The dam is just a small blip in the history of the Oconaluftee. The water was here long before, and it will be here long after."

The Oconaluftee begins high in the Smokies before joining the Tuckasegee less than a mile south of the dam. Long before concrete and turbines popped up, it was free-flowing water that sustained fish, mussels, eels and people alike. The river provided food, passage and connection. Cherokee accounts describe the Oconaluftee as "Long Man," a living being with a head in



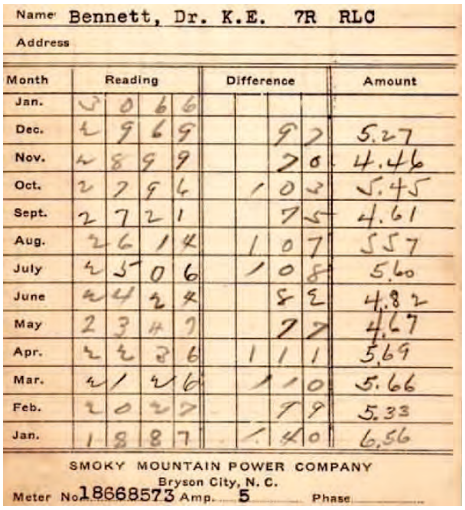
BRYSON CITY'S NEW POWER PANLT

Bryson City's red letter day was last Thursday, September 23, when half the population of the city gathered to see the current turned on at the new water plant recently completed at a cost of approximately $200,000.

Although actual construction of the new plant was started about a year ago. Some delay was caused through necessity of acquiring the rights and land from the Cherokee Indian nation. At last these negotiations were completed, and following the acquisition of water and land rights, work on the new plant was started and proceeded without interruption until the completion of the plant.

The plant is one of 3,000 [illegible] power capacity and model, the entire for which is secured from a [illegible] pleasch, reinforced concrete dam spanning the Oconaluftv river near the mouth and a short distance from its convergence with the Tucka[illegible] river. It is located six miles from Bryson City.

The ultimate capacity of plant is from 2,700 to 3,000 horsepower. At present one generator of 750 horsepower furnishes the power.



Name Bennett, Dr. K.E. 7R RLC

Address

Month	Reading	Difference	Amount
Jan.	3066		
Dec.	2969	97	5.27
Nov.	2899	70	4.46
Oct.	2796	103	5.45
Sept.	2721	75	4.61
Aug.	2614	107	5.57
July	2506	108	5.60
June	2424	82	4.82
May	2343	77	4.67
Apr.	2262	111	5.69
Mar.	2151	110	5.66
Feb.	2052	99	5.33
Jan.	1987	140	6.56

SMOKY MOUNTAIN POWER COMPANY
Bryson City, N. C.
Meter No. 18668573 Amp. 5 Phase

Onitaluga Inn

Announces Its Official Opening

FRIDAY, JUNE 12

Located on the shores of beautiful Lake Ocona, Onitaluga is an inn for the discriminating public who wants the utmost in relaxation and recreation. Situated as it is on a high knoll overlooking the lake, and looking directly into the heart of the Great Smokies, Onitaluga Inn enjoys advantages unequalled and unsurpassed by any other inn. It is the newest and best hotel in the Smoky Mountain Park area.

Free Boats
Free Golf

We Own Our Own Water System — From Pure Mountain Springs

On Highway U. S. 19
5 Miles East of Bryson City

Rates
Single $3.25 to $5 Daily
$18.50 to $30 Weekly
Double $5.50 to $8.50 Daily
$35 to $51 Weekly

ONITALUGA INN

Bryson City, North Carolina

WILEY SMITH, Owner

A collection of newspaper articles and other historic documents, sprinkled throughout the storyboard, help illustrate life in the region before, during and after the dam's construction.

the mountains and feet in the sea. Another folk story, recorded in the late 1800s, spoke of "water bears" that lived in a deep pool within today's Lake Ela.

In the early 1900s, the Appalachian Railroad established a stop called "Ela," a name some trace to the Cherokee word *Elawodi*, meaning "yellow hill." A small, close-knit community soon formed along the tracks, with a church, bridges and later motels to serve tourists. At one point, entrepreneurs attempted to sell "lakefront lots" for vacation homes, but the idea never gained traction and Ela remained a very rural area.

For the people who lived there, the river was central. Kids swam and fished in its natural pools and families picnicked on its banks. Webb says he and Kelly heard from longtime residents who remember fishing holes so productive they became

family traditions. Webb recalls a Cherokee elder mentioning she had made it her mission to teach her grandchildren how to fish those same waters, keeping those traditions alive.

The dam, completed in 1925, provided electricity to the area but little identity. "I'm surprised in Swain County that I haven't heard anyone say they shouldn't take it down," Webb says. "No one seems emotionally tied to the dam. Most people are tied to the river."

As the dam fades into history, Webb and Kelly hope the storyboard will serve as a reminder that the river's true power lies in the lives it touches. "Everybody is tied to the river one way or another," he says. "The dam is just one chapter. The river is the whole story."

The storyboard can be found at arcg.is/1CuWHL3.

For centuries, people have fished these clear waters alongside native species like Sicklefin Redhorse, Hellbenders, Mudpuppies and Brook Trout.

A Fragile Gem

A DEEP SENSE OF PEACE can be felt walking into Panthertown Valley. The outside world fades to the sound of water and a chorus of birds. Little streams trickle beside well-worn trails, a waterfall roars around a bend, and the air smells of hemlock and fir. Granite domes can be seen on surrounding cliffs while pocket meadows open between dark forest walls, bursting with flame azaleas and colorful wildflowers.

Inside its borders, botanists find rare plants, climbers scale boulders and families cool off in clear waters.

For hikers, climbers, anglers and anyone who knows the relief of getting truly away, Panthertown feels like a private world — wild, relaxed and utterly unspoiled.

Often called the "Yosemite of the East," Panthertown stretches across 6,300 acres along the Eastern Continental Divide in Jackson County. It's a backcountry treasure of boulder fields, brook trout streams and rare plants, with more than 25 miles of trails winding through gorges, valleys, mountain bogs and waterfalls. Since entering public ownership in 1989 as part of the Nantahala National Forest, the valley has been managed by the U.S. Forest Service with help from Friends of Panthertown (FOP), which maintains its network of trails and welcomes visitors.

Panthertown's beauty is spectacular — and fragile. Limestone outcrops, granite slabs and pristine creeks shelter biodiversity found nowhere else. Visitors from all over the world glimpse its vastness from the Blue Ridge Parkway, while inside its borders, botanists find rare plants, climbers scale boulders and families cool off in clear waters.

Yet for decades, a 94-acre parcel tucked into the heart of the valley remained out of public reach. This land is an ecological gem, with more than half a mile of Slickens Creek, a wild trout stream and a spray-cliff waterfall that shelters plants and animals. Its meadows provide nesting grounds for wildlife like Golden-Winged Warblers and Ruffed Grouse, two of North Carolina's most vulnerable birds. The property also connects directly to popular hiking trails like Rattlesnake Knob and Turkey Knob, making it both a natural treasure and a gateway for recreation.

For decades, conserving this tract has been a priority for Mainspring, FOP, Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust,

USFS and other partners, and the opportunity finally came when longtime owner L.C. Brown passed away, leaving the property to his sisters. When they also passed and their heirs prepared to sell, Sylva attorney Jay Coward, who had long kept Mainspring informed of its status, alerted the organization. With the help of a private donor and Atira Conservation, Mainspring was able to move quickly and secure the land before it could be lost to private development.

This is not Mainspring's first step into Panthertown. In 2017, the organization purchased 15.9 acres at the Salt Rock Gap trailhead. Working with FOP, the land trust built organized parking and turned a pinch point into a welcoming public entrance before transferring it to USFS. The Slickens Creek purchase builds on that success, knitting together public and private lands into a seamless backcountry experience.

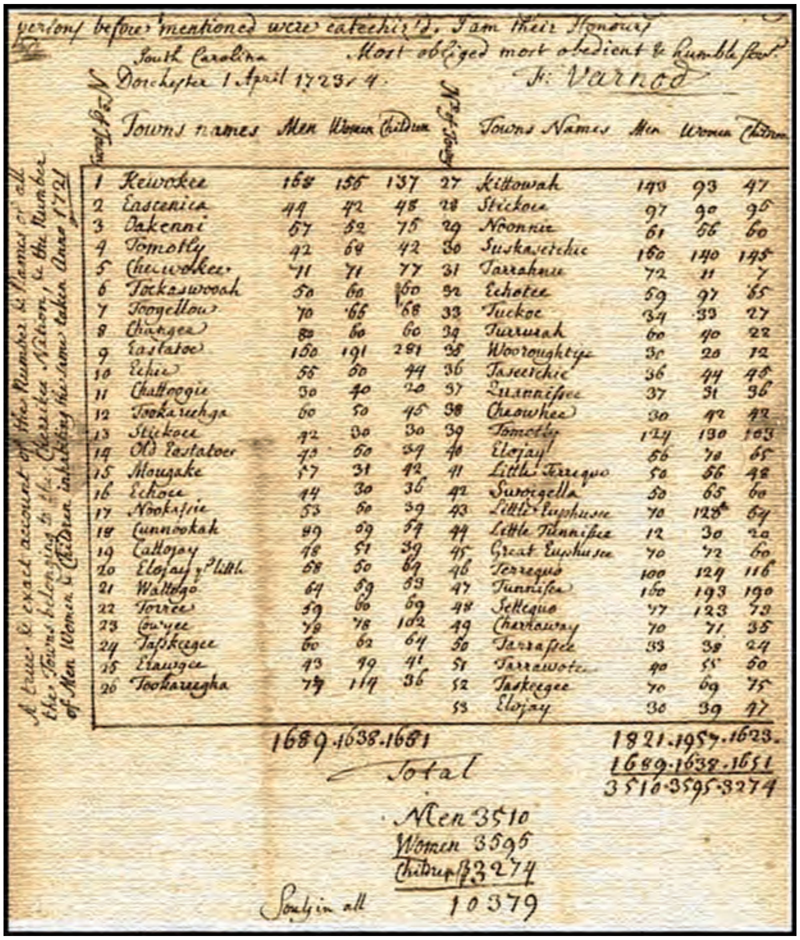
Now under Mainspring's care, funds are being raised to restore the tract by removing collapsing structures, protecting fragile habitats and allowing limited public access. With enough support, the goal is to one day restore the historic hand-hewn pole barn to honor the valley's human history. Mainspring, FOP and Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust are all working to make that happen and welcome donations to help.

For Panthertown, this is more than 94 acres added to a map. It's the last unconserved piece in the valley's center, a link between trails for hikers, and a reminder that protecting wild places doesn't always happen overnight. It's proof of what can be achieved when preparation meets opportunity. And for those who love Panthertown, it means one more piece of this wild, improbable paradise has finally found its forever home.

With the help of a private donor and Atira Conservation, Mainspring was able to move quickly and secure the land before it could be lost to private development.

A Treasure Returned

MAINSPRING'S ENTIRE SERVICE AREA is rich in cultural history, but few places are as significant as Stecoah Old Fields, an 85-acre property on the bend of the Tuckasegee River in Jackson County. Among the mixture of farm fields, forest and riverfront sits the historic homestead of William Holland Thomas, a 19th-century lawyer who used his legal skills and status to fight for Cherokee rights.



persons before mentioned were catechiz'd. I am their Honours
South Carolina Most obliged most obedient & humble Servt.
Dorchester 1 April 1723/4. Fr. Varnod

A true & exact account of the Number & Names of all the Towns belonging to the Cherokee Nation, & the Number of Men Women & Children inhabiting the same taken Anno 1721

No. of Towns	Towns names	Men	Women	Children	No. of Towns	Towns Names	Men	Women	Children
1	Keiwokee	168	155	137	27	Kittowah	140	93	47
2	Eastenica	44	42	48	28	Stickoee	97	90	95
3	Oakenni	57	52	75	29	Noonnie	61	56	60
4	Tomotly	42	64	42	30	Suskasetchie	160	140	145
5	Cheewokee	71	71	77	31	Tarrahnie	72	11	7
6	Tockaswoosh	50	60	60	32	Echotee	59	97	65
7	Toogellow	70	65	68	33	Tuckoe	34	33	27
8	Changee	80	60	60	34	Turrurah	60	40	22
9	Eastatoe	150	191	281	35	Wooroughtye	30	20	12
10	Echie	55	60	44	36	Taseechie	36	44	45
11	Chattoogie	30	40	20	37	Quannissee	37	31	36
12	Tookareehga	60	50	45	38	Cheowhee	30	42	42
13	Stickoee	42	30	30	39	Tomotly	124	130	103
14	Old Eastatoe	43	50	59	40	Elojay	56	70	65
15	Mougake	57	31	42	41	Little Terrequo	50	56	48
16	Echoee	44	30	36	42	Suroegella	50	65	60
17	Nookassie	53	60	39	43	Little Euphusee	70	128	64
18	Cunnookah	49	69	54	44	Little Tunnissee	12	30	20
19	Callojay	48	51	39	45	Great Euphusee	70	72	60
20	Elojay ye little	58	50	69	46	Terrequo	100	124	116
21	Wattogo	64	59	53	47	Tunnissee	160	193	190
22	Torree	59	60	69	48	Settequo	77	123	73
23	Cowyee	79	78	102	49	Charrowny	70	71	35
24	Tasskeegee	60	62	64	50	Tarrassee	33	38	24
25	Erawgee	43	49	41	51	Tarrawote	40	55	50
26	Tookareegha	77	117	36	52	Taskeegee	70	69	75
					53	Elojay	30	39	47

1689.1638.1651 Total
1821.1957.1623.
1689.1638.1651
3510.3595.3274

Men 3510
Women 3595
Children 3274
Souls in all 10379

A 1721 record of Cherokee towns included "Stickoe" Old Town, home to 97 men, 90 women and 95 children. Today, William Holland Thomas's home and the old red barn still stand along Thomas Valley Road in Whittier.

Last year, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) purchased Stecoah Old Fields, bringing the land back under Cherokee care for the first time in 200 years. Mainspring partnered with the Tribe to lay the necessary groundwork, and now this land of irreplaceable cultural, ecological and historical value has returned to its rightful stewards.

The Stecoah Old Fields are part of the historic Cherokee Out Towns, with roots stretching back long before European arrival. In the 1700s, Stecoah was a thriving Cherokee farming community, though it was raided and burned multiple times during frontier conflicts. Even after the town was destroyed in 1776, Cherokee families returned to farm its fertile bottomlands and gather in council.

One of the most important councils met here in between 1819 and 1820, when Cherokee leaders organized against growing settler pressure. The property also contains parts of three historic reservations — Arkaluke, Chiula and Kahkulla — and a section of the Cowee-to-Stecoah trading trail, a route once vital to Cherokee commerce and travel.

The land later became associated with William Holland Thomas, whose house still stands on the property. Oral accounts say Thomas built directly on the site of an old Cherokee Council House mound. When the cellar was dug, workers uncovered bones, arrowheads and pottery — signs that leaders and community members may have been buried there and adding another layer to the importance of the site.

More recent research has revealed other layers of history, including evidence of a cemetery believed to hold enslaved people who labored in the valley.

Who was William Holland Thomas?

- ***Adopted by the Cherokee:*** *Born in 1805 near Waynesville, Thomas grew up working in a trading post where he met and befriended Cherokee people. Chief Yonaguska later adopted him, and Thomas became fluent in the Cherokee language.*
- ***Legal Advocate:*** *At a time when Cherokee people were barred from owning land, Thomas used his position as a white citizen to purchase property on their behalf. These tracts formed the basis of the modern Qualla Boundary and helped the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians remain in their homeland after the Indian Removal Act of 1830.*
- ***Politician:*** *Thomas served in the North Carolina State Senate from 1848-1860. He was a skilled negotiator and often acted as tribal agent and intermediary between the Tribe and the U.S. government.*
- ***Confederate Officer:*** *During the Civil War, Thomas led the "Thomas Legion," a regiment of Cherokee warriors and white mountaineers who fought for the Confederacy. His role reflects both his loyalty to his community and the troubling alliances of the era.*
- ***Homesteader:*** *The Stecoah Old Fields property includes Thomas's homestead. While he is sometimes identified as the "white chief" of the Cherokee, the myth has been debunked by many, including his great-grandchildren — illustrating the complexities of 19th-century American history.*

In the last 20 years, Thomas Valley — where Stecoah Old Fields is located — has undergone a drastic transformation with the addition of RV parks, campgrounds and vacation homes. Without protection, this property could easily have been lost to that same wave of development.

Instead, the EBCI's purchase reclaims a living connection to Cherokee farming, river access and cultural traditions. The property includes more than 1,000 feet of riverfront, part of a state-recognized Aquatic Natural Heritage Area home to rare species like the Tuckasegee Stream Crayfish and Smallmouth Redhorse.

The path to protection was collaborative, with Mainspring negotiating with the sellers and setting the stage for conservation. The original plan was for Mainspring to hold the land until the EBCI was ready to assume ownership. Ultimately, the Tribe was able to acquire the land outright, bringing it more quickly under Cherokee stewardship.

Now, Stecoah Old Fields will once again be a place of remembrance, teaching and renewal, a place where future generations can walk the land, learn its stories and continue the enduring relationship between people and place.

The property contains parts of three historic reservations — Arkaluke, Chiula and Kahkulla — and a section of the Cowee-to-Stecoah trading trail, a route once vital to Cherokee commerce and travel.

Tales Twice Told

OLD HOUSES HAVE A WAY OF TALKING BACK. And, after a year and a half of restoration work, it is clear the Siler-Jones House has a lot to say.

Unearthing Stories in the Walls

Gifted to Mainspring in 2024 by the Jones family, the Siler-Jones House is one of the oldest surviving structures in Franklin and the only known Witness House on the Trail of Tears in North Carolina. With each plank of old-growth timber and every uncovered document, the story of the home's evolution and the people who lived there grows richer, more complex and more revealing of Appalachian life in the 19th century.

"Every element, from its architecture to the personal artifacts we've uncovered, offers a deeper connection to the people and the community that shaped it," says Shelly Gregg, owner, designer and historic preservation consultant of PastForward Design. "This has been — and continues to be — one of the most compelling and meaningful restoration projects I've had the privilege to work on."

The Story the House Was Supposed to Tell

The story of the Siler-Jones House has been passed down through the generations by anecdotes and assumptions that eventually hardened into truth. The home was thought to have been a basic two-story log cabin, possibly built by the Cherokee, and later transformed by subsequent owners. Additions, such as the ell (the wing extending from the main block at the back of the house) and the upper south gable facing the road, were long credited to George Jones, who traded with his wife's cousin for the property in 1888.

But as the project progressed, a different history began to emerge.

While manual work was underway at the house, Mainspring's project lead, Molly Phillips, worked with Gregg and her Western Carolina University interns to sift through memorabilia that the Jones family had kept for years. Their research uncovered a ledger dated 1853–1860, filled with sketches in Jesse Siler's own hand. Among them was a drawing of the home as it looks today — with the ell firmly in place. "Uncovering sketches from the Siler era was one of the most exciting discoveries we found," Gregg explains. "This finding not only challenged our earlier assumptions but also provided valuable insight into the home's architectural evolution."

In other words, the ell wasn't Jones's work at all — it was Siler's, finished decades earlier than anyone believed. A photo from around 1868 even shows the south gable already standing before Jones ever lived there. "What we've learned is that Siler made all the major changes, not Jones," Phillips explains. "He took a simple 1.5-story log cabin and turned it into a full, two-story, Federal-style house. He raised the ceilings, covered the logs with beaded lap siding, and added elaborate cornices rarely seen in this region. Then, before the Civil War, he doubled the size of the home with a big addition and a two-story front porch, shifting the look toward Georgian style. For its day, it was probably one of the grandest houses in the region — and since as many as 31 enslaved people lived on the property, we are assuming that their craftsmanship contributed to those changes."

A Saltbox in the Mountains

If the ell and gable discoveries reshaped the home's later history,

"Every element, from its architecture to the personal artifacts we've uncovered, offers a deeper connection to the people and the community that shaped it."

– Shelly Gregg

Tales

another revelation upended assumptions about its beginning. As the original log cabin was slowly revealed, lead contractor Jim Byrd realized that the structure was not a conventional two-story cabin, but a saltbox-style dwelling — an architectural form far more common in colonial New England than in the Southern Appalachians.

"The biggest surprise was identifying the original log structure as having been built in the saltbox style — an architectural form that is highly uncommon in this region," Gregg says. "This revelation significantly reshaped our understanding of the home's early construction and the influences that may have guided its design."

Reading the Architecture

Even seemingly minor details have revealed big stories about the Siler-Jones House. When Byrd's team removed the beadboard ceiling in a front room that was added between 1830 and 1860, they uncovered a narrow staircase, indicating that the house once had two separate ways to reach the upstairs: one for guests and another for the family. "We saw irregular floor patching, and then noticed a cut ceiling joist and another

joist with a large notch,'' Byrd says. ''It was probably cut so no one would hit their head on the steep stairs.'' The arrangement suggests the home was designed to keep visitors separate from the family's private spaces.

Other discoveries over the past year have further highlighted Jesse Siler's desire to convey sophistication and prosperity. A historic window on the south side, long hidden behind siding, once created the symmetry typical of the Federal style he preferred. When the ell was added to the back of the house, he preserved part of the earlier decorative cornice, which not only helped direct rain away from the structure but also added elegance and prestige. Siler, it seems, wanted the home not just for function, but also to reflect his sophistication and status.

Which Version of History to Honor?

One of the most difficult questions facing the restoration team is not what to restore, but when. Should the house reflect its earliest log-cabin form? Its Federal-style transformation under Jesse Siler and the people he enslaved? Or its later life as a Jones family home, with its elaborate millwork and modernization?

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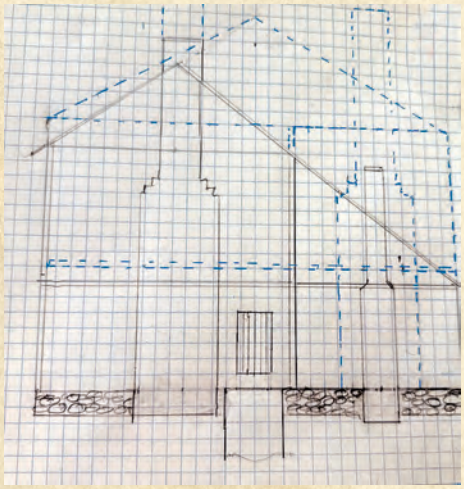


Skilled local woodworkers have handcrafted new poplar siding and window frames to match the home's historic details — carefully replicated against the original beaded siding (bottom right), which was revealed beneath layers of paint. Part of the process included determining which era of the house to focus on during the restoration: the early 1.5-story saltbox log cabin or the two-story Federal-style home, the first major transformation by Jesse Siler.

Tales

Phillips says the team has wrestled with these choices. ''Jim, Shelly and I have spent hours debating about what to reveal and what to leave covered,'' she explains. ''For instance, the original hand-hewn log walls are remarkable, and no one has seen them in more than 200 years. But they've survived in such good condition precisely because they've been protected by lap siding. The question now becomes: Can visitors still understand the story of the house without physically seeing every layer?''

Gregg agrees: ''Determining the appropriate period to which the home should be restored has been one of the most complex challenges,'' she says. ''The house has undergone numerous alterations over the decades, each representing a different chapter in its history. Striking a balance between historical accuracy and honoring the home's layered past requires careful research, thoughtful decision-making and collaboration across disciplines.''

Jennifer Cathey, restoration specialist with the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, explains that this challenge is typical for preservationists across the state: ''A common approach to

stewardship of an important site like the Siler-Jones House is to assemble all available documentary history, allow for time to carefully examine and document the core structure of the house and its many layers of alterations and finishes, and then pose questions about additional topics for study and examination," she says. "Sometimes we'll preserve and protect features that span the whole history and evolution of a house, and sometimes we'll elect to return a site to the way it appeared in a particularly significant period or era in its history. Every site is unique and may warrant a different approach."

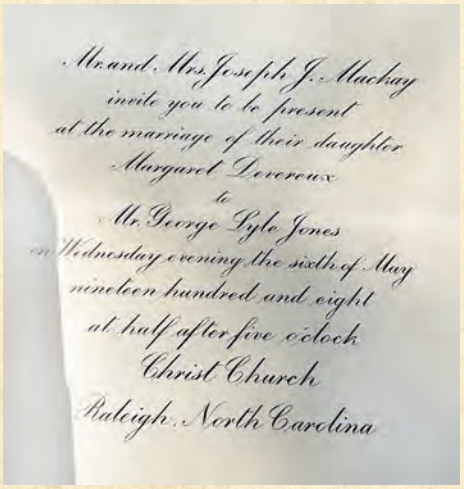
The solution, then, is not to erase change, but to interpret it. Every modification — whether an elegant Federal window or a simple stone fireplace — tells us something about the people who lived here and the community that shaped them.

Appalachian Architecture as Memory

The Siler-Jones House is a timeline of Appalachian architecture in the 19th century, and few people are better positioned to recognize that than Byrd, the project contractor who has spent decades restoring historic structures across the region.

"The original hand-hewn log walls are remarkable, and no one has seen them in more than 200 years. But they've survived in such good condition precisely because they've been protected."

– Molly Phillips


Mr. and Mrs. Joseph J. Mackay
invite you to be present
at the marriage of their daughter
Margaret Devereux
to
Mr. George Lyle Jones
on Wednesday evening the sixth of May
nineteen hundred and eight
at half after five o'clock
Christ Church
Raleigh, North Carolina

To preserve the logs and daub for another century, workers cut insulation to go between the original logs and the furred-out boards set for siding. Beneath one of the old gables, the restoration crew uncovered a 117-year-old wedding invitation. Inside, the original log cabin fireplace is weathered but will soon be fully restored.

Tales

"It's remarkable to see three distinct methods of construction layered into one home," he says. "The original hand-hewn log walls show incredible artistry with simple iron tools. Jesse Siler's first major addition used a post-and-beam technique, which was faster and more efficient for its time. Finally, the third major addition of the ell at the rear was built with sawmill-cut lumber and nails, the approach that remains most common in wood construction today. Together, these stages tell the story of changing building traditions across the region."

Those living in the region built with what they had — towering red and white oaks and chestnuts for beams and siding, river clay for chinking, hand-forged nails traded for or carried in by wagon. While cities along the eastern seaboard could import fine materials, frontier families in Macon County relied on their own forests and ingenuity.

"What makes this house stand out is how it connects two very different worlds: the simple log cabin of early settlers and the more refined Federal and later Georgian and Greek Revival styles that showed wealth and permanence," says Phillips. "Its walls reveal the push and pull between basic survival and the desire to show

sophistication and belonging in a growing community.''

Why Old Houses Matter

Restoring an old house isn't just about nostalgia. It's about uncovering hidden stories. The Siler-Jones House shows how a single structure can hold layers of history, from early settlers and enslaved people to the Cherokee, whose removal in the 1830s still shapes this region. Few places in western North Carolina bring all those narratives together in one space.

''The Siler-Jones House is incredibly significant,'' Cathey says, due to ''the layers of history and occupation that are embodied by the frame additions to the log house. That the house survives with some of its original acreage intact is also very unusual and significant, [and] some study of the landscape may yield important information about the origins of the house and its use over time.''

At the Siler-Jones House, every change tells a story, and as the home is once again filled with the clatter of construction, it reminds us that history isn't finished. It waits, just beneath the surface, for someone willing to listen.

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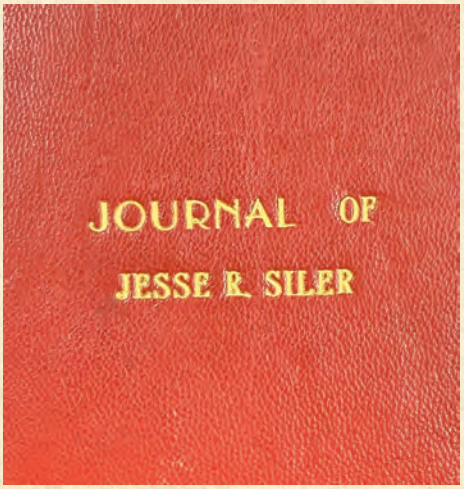


A worker carefully removes siding from the front gable, which will be reused at the back of the house. Jesse Siler's journal, along with letters and documents preserved by the Jones family, have all provided invaluable insight into the home's evolution.

> "We could see the stars, hear the owls. That was our tradition — to stop and enjoy the quiet."

A Tradition of Stewardship

Tucked away in Swain County's Brush Creek watershed lies 101 acres of forest and stream that have anchored the Hemstreet family for more than half a century.

What began in 1970 as a summer retreat from the Florida heat has grown into a multi-generational sanctuary — one that six siblings recently placed under a conservation easement with Mainspring to ensure its future is forever rooted in nature.

The family's conservation story begins with their parents, Don and Betty Hemstreet. "They always loved coming to the mountains of North Carolina," recalls Tom Hemstreet, the youngest of the siblings. "But we didn't have a lot of money growing up, so we always camped. Everywhere we went, we'd always be camping out in the woods, and being out in nature really influenced us all. When I was about 13, the opportunity came up [for my parents] to purchase property, and mom and dad bought the first 33 acres. After that, summers were always up in the mountains."

Tom's sister, Sally Crawford, was away in college when her parents first learned of the Dolph Cove property. "My dad went up to take a look at it and saw what a beautiful spot it was," she says. "It kind of checked all the boxes: mountains, streams, water." But most of all, Sally

continues, her parents were looking for solitude, for "the kind of quiet, away from the busyness of life, to just sit and be in nature." And this rich cove forest, framed by cliffs, rock outcrops and the tumbling waters of Dolph Branch, provided precisely the peace they needed.

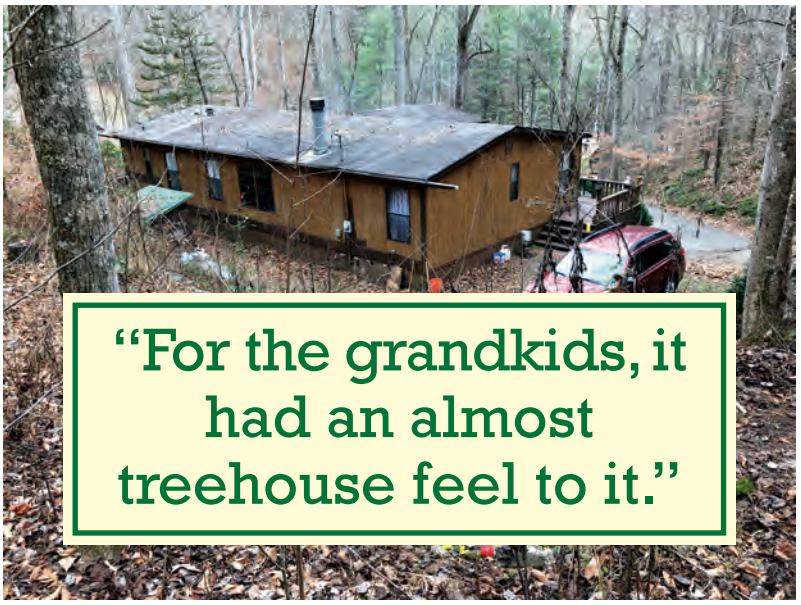
As the youngest, Tom spent a great deal of time on the property, working with his father each summer to build a cabin for the family. Years later, when Don and Betty were ready to retire, they sold that original cabin and its surrounding land to fund their move to a retirement community — but hung onto the bulk of their acreage to continue using the property for family gatherings.

In need of another structure to host holidays for the growing family, which by this time included multiple grandchildren, the Hemstreets purchased a doublewide trailer, perched it up a steep hillside and built a wide deck around the perimeter, with one side high above the slope below, amid the leaves of poplar trees. "For the grandkids, it had an almost treehouse feel to it, like you're literally up in the poplars," Tom explains. "So that's how it became known as The Treehouse."

The Treehouse became the family's gathering place — especially at Thanksgiving, when 30-plus people would bustle about the property, taking turns crunching through the leaves to gather firewood and preparing dishes for the family's feast. The following days were then spent maintaining trails, clearing brush, repairing the house and gathering around the campfire for music and meals. "We always had a fire at night," Sally remembers. "We could see the stars, hear the owls. That was our tradition — to stop and enjoy the quiet."

As the family grew, their connection to nature passed down to new members of Don and Betty's descendants. Two of the siblings are proud Scoutmasters and carried the Eagle Scout tradition on to the next generation, as well as the generation after that. As adults, one sibling went on to help conservation groups restore prairie habitat in the Midwest; another became a fisheries biologist. Tom is now a veterinarian, which he attributes to being "tuned into animals and the ecosystems they depend on" from a young age. Now, four

Most days, the couple would hike up to their favorite spot — a terraced hillside built by settler Adolphus ("Dolph") Welch.



> "For the grandkids, it had an almost treehouse feel to it."

generations have walked Dolph Cove's trails, caught crawdads in the creek, splashed in the water and sung around the campfire.

For Don and Betty, the mountains were not only a retreat but also a place of reflection. Most days, the couple would hike up to their favorite spot — a terraced hillside built by settler Adolphus ("Dolph") Welch, for whom the property and creek are named — to meditate and read. Laid between 1815 and 1835, the stone wall still carved into the steep terrain once supported a farm plot for Welch's vineyard.

As the years went by, "it started getting harder for mom to get up to the terrace, and one day, I came home from college and found my dad out there building stone steps," Tom explains. "He said, 'Son, I'm building a stairway to heaven. When we die, this is where our ashes are going to be.'" Tom's voice grew heavy with emotion. "And that's where they rest today. My sister, Linda, who passed away about a year and a half ago, she's up there now too. It's a spiritual connection for all of us."

When an adjacent 70 acres of land came on the market in 2020 — recently logged but still rich with potential — the family pooled their resources to buy it, protecting the serene woodlands from future development. To make the preservation effort official, the siblings connected with Mainspring in 2021 to place a conservation easement on their family acreage, ensuring its perpetual protection. "It's what my parents would have wanted," Tom explains.

Sally agrees: ''Having lived in Central Florida before and after Disney, our parents saw what happens when natural areas are overtaken by growth and what development can do to the environment. When they bought this property, they wanted to preserve it and keep it as natural as possible, and that's been in the back of our minds for so many years. We finally decided to do what we needed to move forward with it and keep it preserved.''

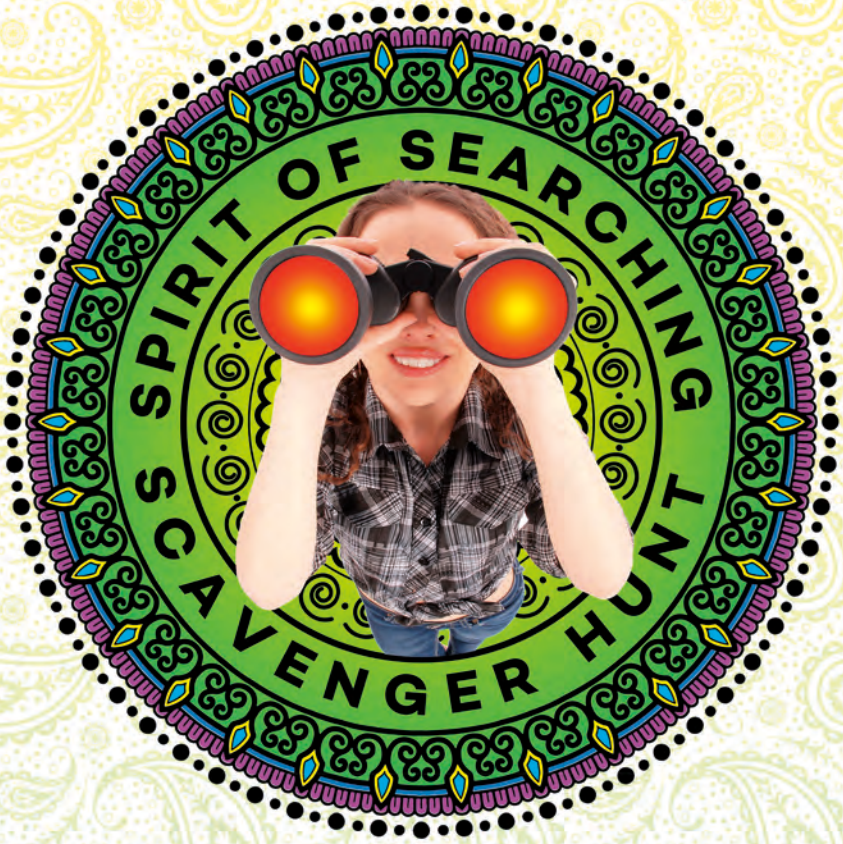
The family's conservation work has been supported by an $80,000 Natural Resources Conservation Service grant, a mini-grant from the North Carolina Land and Water Fund, and a contribution from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Partnering with the Ruffed Grouse Society, they are replanting logged sections, tackling invasive species like kudzu and managing the forest to restore native wildlife habitat. They've also reserved space for the family's traditions: small Appalachian Trail-style shelters, group camping sites and trails for future generations of Hemstreet Scouts to explore.

Though they admit the process to conserve Dolph Cove wasn't always easy, in the end, it was worth it to protect this special place. ''We're all totally different personalities, so we couldn't always agree on the 'how,''' Sally says, laughing. ''But we worked together to protect this land for our parents, our children and grandchildren, and for the environment — to protect habitat for native wildlife.''

The first family-held easement of its size in Swain County, Dolph Cove proves that there is power in numbers — and in families who come together to protect the places they love and pass them down to generations they've yet to meet.

''In the 50-something years we've been here, we've seen the forest logged, we've seen its regrowth, and we've seen what a mature forest really is — and it gives me a vision of what my grandkids and great grandkids may see one day as we continue to steward the land,'' Tom says. ''It will take years for this forest to fully mature, but the knowledge that that's where we're headed is really comforting in a way, even though [my generation] won't be around to see it.''

Don and Betty (front center) passed down a love of nature to their six children: (left to right) Bill, Sally, Tom, Dave, Don and Linda.



IT'S NO SECRET THAT PRACTICING MINDFULNESS in nature has many mental and physical health benefits, but it can be hard to set aside the time to unplug, unwind and re-root. This scavenger hunt is designed to reconnect you with the outdoors no matter where you are in your life, the year or the world. As you work your way through this activity, notice how the spirit of searching brings you into the present. Regardless of deadlines, bills, family obligations and unanswered emails, the trees, birds and creeks are always there to coax you into a more peaceful state of mind.

WAYS TO PLAY

Search through the seasons. Choose one location and revisit this scavenger hunt as the wheel of the seasons turns. Observe how your chosen spot changes throughout the year. Are some items easier to find in certain seasons?

Challenge yourself to hunt only in new places. Try to check off one item every time you walk a new trail or visit a new park.

Make it a habit, and pick one day each month — say, the second Wednesday — to break out this activity. Mark it off on your calendar and dedicate any amount of time to scavenging.

Hunt from home. You don't have to travel to complete this activity. See how many of these items you can find right in your own yard or neighborhood. Can you check off the remaining items at a different time of day — or during a different season?

Search in all your favorite places. Make copies of this activity, and assign them to your favorite hiking trails, dog-walking areas or picnicking spots. Each time you visit, see how many new items you can find.

Any other way that works for you!

SCANNING THE SCENERY

- ☐ a rock with at least three different colors
- ☐ a raindrop
- ☐ an unexpected smell, such as the scent of honeysuckle
- ☐ a log big enough to sit on
- ☐ a transition between two habitats, such as a forest meeting a meadow
- ☐ the sound of running water
- ☐ a fluffy, white cloud
- ☐ a spot that makes you say, "Wow, that's pretty!"
- ☐ a smooth stone
- ☐ a vein of wild clay *(Unsure if it's really clay? Pick some up and try to shape it! If it's wet enough, clay will easily mold into different shapes.)*

SEARCHING FOR SPECIES

- ☐ a singing bird
- ☐ an animal track in the mud, snow or sand
- ☐ an anthill or a line of ants
- ☐ an animal's home, such as a burrow, nest or hive
- ☐ an animal enjoying a meal
- ☐ a feather, bone, tuft of fur or shell on the ground
- ☐ an animal with scales
- ☐ any kind of animal scat
- ☐ an animal that's camouflaged
- ☐ a mushroom *(Fun Fact: Fungi are more closely related to animals than to plants!)*

SEEKING SPROUTS

- ☐ a leaf that's larger than your hand
- ☐ a plant with a fragrance
- ☐ a fruit, seed, nut, or pinecone
- ☐ a plant that's been chewed on by an animal
- ☐ a plant displaying a color you didn't expect
- ☐ a root that is visible on the surface of the soil
- ☐ a vining or climbing plant
- ☐ a tree that's providing shelter to an animal
- ☐ a plant that is soft to the touch
- ☐ a blooming flower *(Hint: Even if you think it's not the right season for flowers, the plants may surprise you!)*

SIGNS OF SELF

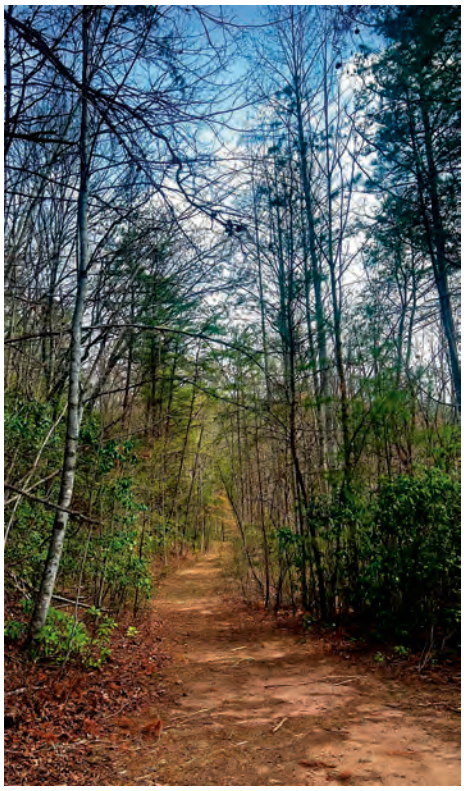
- ☐ a domesticated animal or livestock
- ☐ a natural object that can be used to start a fire
- ☐ another person enjoying the same place as you
- ☐ a place you want to take a nap
- ☐ a plant growing in an unlikely place, such as through a sidewalk or out of a stone wall
- ☐ a human shoeprint (or footprint)
- ☐ the sound of a car driving by
- ☐ a tree that has been cut down or carved
- ☐ an abandoned structure or piece of equipment
- ☐ a piece of litter *(If safe to do so, pick it up and throw it away.)*

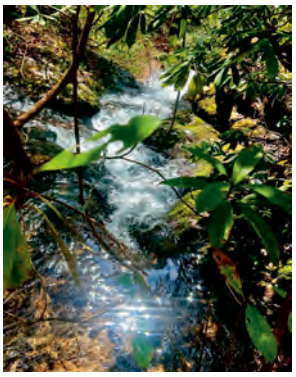
Under Cover

TUCKED JUST A MILE OUTSIDE the heart of Andrews, North Carolina, a 30-foot veil of water tumbles down a mossy cliff into the trout-rich waters of Britton Creek. Cover Falls isn't marked on roadside signs or mapped in glossy guidebooks, but it's a place locals know about — and it's worth venturing off the beaten path to find.

Here, where the spray of the falls keeps the rocks damp year-round, rare wildflowers flourish. Wildlife moves freely between this property and the 30,000 acres of adjoining U.S. Forest Service land in the Snowbird Mountains. Beneath the surface, the cold, clean waters of Britton Creek shelter native brook trout and the endemic Valley River Crayfish, a species found nowhere else in the world.

But the natural beauty of Cover Falls is only part of its story. The creek and the falls are named for Lillian Brittain Cover, an Andrews native and political pioneer who, just four years after women gained the right to vote, became a delegate to the 1924 Democratic Convention. She later broke barriers as the first woman to serve on North Carolina's State Stream Commission, championing clean water and conservation decades before it was commonplace. The property also borders more than





Along the trail that leads to the falls, hikers can spot fall bloomers like turtlehead flowers or catch a glimpse of the rare Valley River Crayfish. Namesake Lillian Brittain Cover smiles in a historic photo.

2,200 feet of Tatham Gap Road, a segment of the Trail of Tears.

Despite its many cultural and ecological values, this remarkable place recently came close to being lost. The previous owner had purchased the tract with plans for residential development, and with its proximity to downtown Andrews and other residences nearby, the threat of construction loomed large. Negotiations to protect the land came down to the wire, then intensified when another buyer made a higher offer. Although the owner preferred to conserve the land, they made it clear that if Mainspring's deal fell through, the property would be developed.

Happily, however, through support from some generous anonymous donors and other partners, the land is now permanently protected from private development under Mainspring's ownership, to eventually be protected in perpetuity by a North Carolina Land and Water Fund conservation easement.

The Cover Falls property will ultimately become Mainspring's newest public preserve, complete with safe, well-marked trails, educational signage and an access area that honors both the area's ecology and history. Visitors will soon be able to follow a loop trail dedicated to Lillian Brittain Cover, learn her story and experience the same natural wonders she once knew and fought to protect.

"This project reflects one of Mainspring's core commitments, conserving special places in ways that connect people to the land," says Graham Garrett, Mainspring land conservation associate. "While there is sometimes a perception that land trusts 'lock away' land, Cover Falls is a great example of how conservation can create lasting public benefits. When my boys and I play at the base of the falls and feel the spray on our faces, I take pleasure in knowing that one day they may do the very same thing with their children."

"This project reflects one of Mainspring's core commitments, conserving special places in ways that connect people to the land."

– Graham Garrett

DIVIDED

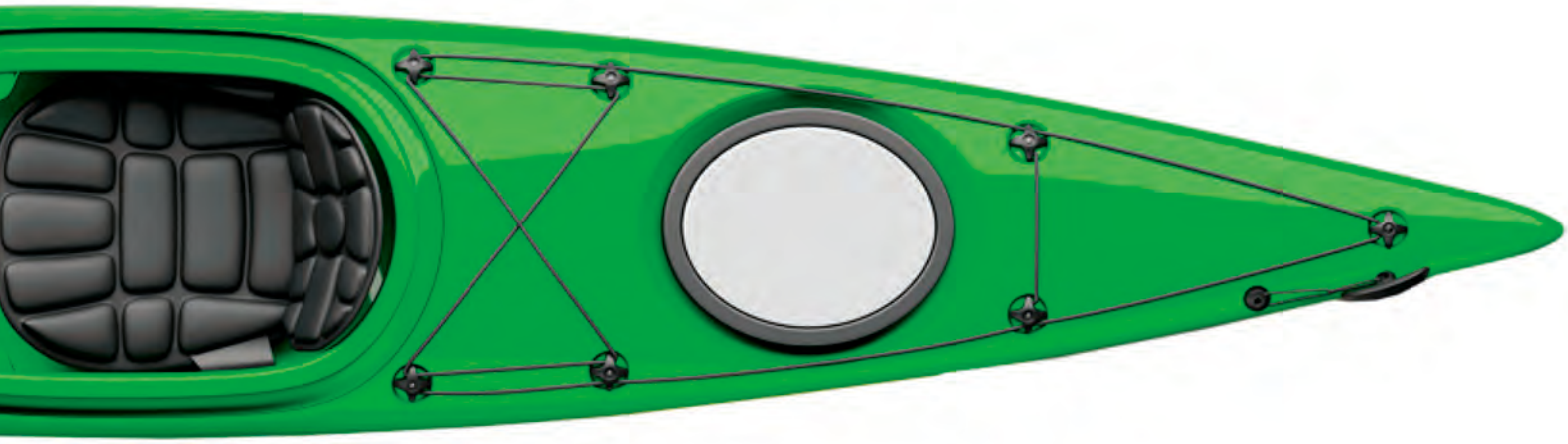
Communities working together for conservation often sidestep the shouting matches of national politics because the results are visible and local.

TWO TRUCKS PULL UP to a public boat ramp at the same time on a bright spring morning. The driver of one vehicle, sporting a "Make America Great Again" decal on the bumper, unloads a tackle box and rods. The other truck bears a "Protect Our Planet" sticker — its owner pulling a colorful kayak off the rack. They nod and smile at one another, exchanging a few words about the weather and the water level.

Here, at the edge of the Little Tennessee River, political identity fades, and a shared love of being outside takes over.

In western North Carolina, rivers like the Little Tennessee are more than scenery. They're ecological treasures, home to rare fish and mussels found almost nowhere else. They're economic engines, feeding farms, drawing anglers and paddlers, and supporting cafés, outfitters, tackle shops and guide services that rely on a steady flow of visitors. And for generations of local families, these waters and surrounding lands have been common ground — a place where grandparents teach their grandchildren to cast, cousins spend summer afternoons swimming, and neighbors walk fields and forests together regardless of politics. Conservation here is both practical and deeply personal.

"When I'm talking to people about our work, it's clear that folks who care about this region's natural resources want the same thing — to protect the land and water in this place where many of us are fortunate enough to live, work and play," says Mainspring Deputy Director Ben Laseter. "Just as



LOYALTY

our mountains form the backdrop for life here in Southern Appalachia, our streams and rivers literally connect us to this landscape and to one another. When something is that fundamental to a place treasured by so many, finding common ground isn't difficult.''

In a time when every topic feels divided, conservation remains one of the few things that brings people together. Clean water, healthy forests, and working farms matter to everyone, no matter their politics. A hunter and a hiker might use the woods differently, but both want wildlife to thrive. Farmers depend on good soil and steady rains just as families count on safe drinking water. And whether you're running a rafting business, hiking a ridgeline or teaching your kids to fish, you benefit from land and water that are well cared for. Protecting these places gives us all some much-needed common ground.

Even mistakes by powerful agencies can ignite bipartisan concern, like when the Corps of Engineers' heavy equipment scarred the Little Tennessee's banks and churned through the water earlier this year under the guise of river restoration following Hurricane Helene damages. That incident reminded the region that stewardship of the land and water matters more than party lines.

This isn't new. Thirty-two years ago, representatives from the Tennessee Valley Authority, the League of Women Voters, the National Rifle Association and others met in Franklin with a shared goal: to protect

We have a shared responsibility to steward this irreplaceable resource for the generations that will come after us.

the Little Tennessee River watershed. Their efforts helped make it one of the cleanest rivers in the Blue Ridge Mountains and sparked what is now Mainspring. Today, the 30 miles of free-flowing river between Lake Emory and Lake Fontana supports one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world.

In 2004, when Duke Energy announced plans to sell 4,500 acres along the river in Macon and Swain counties, both county commissions — each a mix of democrats and republicans — unanimously passed resolutions urging permanent conservation. The result was the establishment of the Needmore Game Lands: now more than 5,000 acres and 30 miles of riverfront permanently protected so future generations can fish, hunt, paddle, swim and walk its banks.

Two decades later, the same spirit surfaced in a different debate. In 2024, Macon County considered loosening its Flood Damage Prevention Ordinance to allow more fill in the floodplain. The proposal drew an unlikely coalition into the same room: farmers, anglers, conservationists and local volunteers.

Regardless of political affiliation, sentiment was similar: Don't gamble with our lands and waters. Kenneth McCaskill with Macon County Farm Bureau said, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," while Republican Bob Cook argued that "our property brings tax revenue. The river brings in tax revenue. … Let's not have this add to our concerns and rising waters." Meanwhile, advocacy group MountainTrue spoke against the proposal, and a committee comprising scientists, attorneys, engineers, contractors and ecologists argued that weakening protections would "introduce unacceptable risks." The board tabled the vote — a reminder that positive change can happen when enough people speak from shared values.

Communities working together for conservation often sidestep the shouting matches of national politics because the results are visible and local. You can see the litter gone from a creek. You can notice the clarity of the water after erosion controls are in place. You can walk a new trail on protected land. You can watch a tubing business thrive in July because the river is safe for families. You can farm ground that stays fertile because it hasn't washed away.

Even at the state level, conservation draws unified support. When helping pass the N.C. Farm Act, republican Senator Brent Jackson cited agriculture as North Carolina's No. 1 industry, adding that we must "support all the families who depend on agriculture to support their livelihood." Then-Governor Roy Cooper, a democrat, agreed, noting that the same conservation tax credit would "make us more resilient to climate hazards, … support local economies," and help conserve one million new acres by 2040. The impact remains immediate and local — it's our rivers, our forests, our farms — and we have a shared responsibility to steward this irreplaceable resource for the generations that will come after us.

The Needmore conservation effort, the floodplain debate and the bipartisan outrage over the Corps' improper use of heavy equipment remind us what's possible when people set aside labels to protect something so important.

And when the morning sun catches the Little Tennessee just right, the two strangers — one unloading a rod and reel, the other a kayak — are not labeling each other as red or blue. They're simply people who care enough about this place to keep it special.

The Last Word

MOLLY PHILLIPS
Communications Director

The first holiday after my father's death was tough. The empty chair at the head of the table was a visible reminder of his absence. But rather than let grief take over, my family began sharing stories about Dad — the farming practices he taught us, the phrases he repeated, the quiet ways he helped others. Before long, our laughter pushed back the tears, and that meal became one of my favorite memories. My brother and I still keep some of the land he farmed in Arkansas, a way of honoring him and holding onto the soil that shaped our family.

This year, Mainspring lost several beloved friends and leaders, and the empty chairs at their family tables are felt just as deeply. Yet when I travel through this region, my grief is tempered by gratitude for the lives they led and the impacts they made on the land we love so much.

I think of Dan Pittillo, a botanist who could name every fern and wildflower in Panthertown with just a glance. Although his chair sits empty, those same plants will return each spring, as if still answering to his voice. I think of Dick Jones, patriarch of the family that entrusted Mainspring with the Siler-Jones home. His chair is empty now, but the beams of that house, built by his ancestors, will stand for generations. And I think of Lydia McCauley and Dick Heywood, two of our first emeriti board members. Their extraordinary wisdom and generosity helped shape Mainspring in its earliest years and their influence has forever shaped this region.

At its heart, conservation is an act of memory. It's a way of carrying forward the legacies of those who came before us. Just as we hold onto the stories of people we love, we honor and care for the landscapes that shaped them. It is here — by the rivers where families gathered, mountains that stirred awe, farms where traditions were passed down — that their memory is most deeply felt.

From my father's farm to these mountains and rivers, caring for the land carries forward the voices of those we've lost and keeps their stories alive for the generations yet to come.

Lydia McCauley and Dick Heywood, early Mainspring Board members

Leave a Legacy

The next generation should inherit the vital resources of this region: clean water, healthy forests and productive farmland.

If you are interested in making a lasting difference in the Southern Blue Ridge, including a gift of a required minimum distribution from your retirement account or from your estate plan, contact Mainspring's executive director at 828.524.2711, or visit mainspringconserves.org.

MAINSPRING
CONSERVATION TRUST

Stewards of the Southern Blue Ridge

P. O. Box 1148, Franklin, NC 28744

Our mission is to conserve special places in the heart of the Southern Blue Ridge for the benefit of all.