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# From Development to Desintegration: Elites and the Connectedness of Mountain Communities in Western North Carolina from the Antebellum Period to the End of the Civil War

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From Development to Disintegration: Elites and the Connectedness of  
Mountain Communities in Western North Carolina from the Antebellum  
Period to the End of Civil War

By Colin Hull

History Honors Thesis

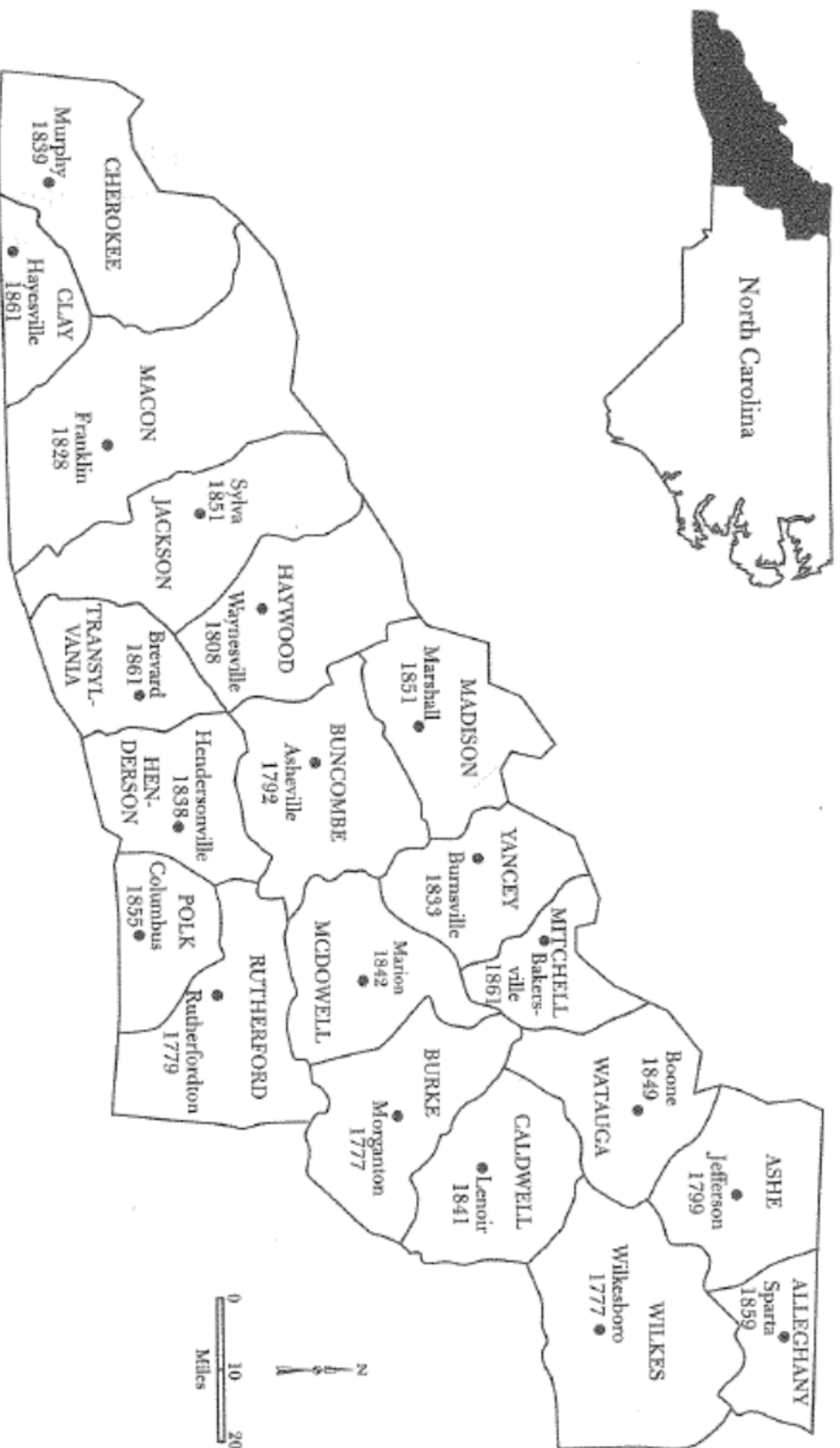
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**Figure 1.** Western North Carolina counties in 1861 (including county seats and years established) (University of Georgia Cartographic Services)



Source: John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3.

## Introduction

The region this paper refers to as western North Carolina lies along the Appalachian mountain range and deep within what constituted the Confederacy during the American Civil War. Western North Carolina is a portion of the geographical and geo-cultural region often called Appalachia or the southern highlands.<sup>1</sup> While its boundaries are often debated by both old and contemporary historians and anthropologists, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it consisted of portions of Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia by its most basic definition. More specifically, western North Carolina consisted of twenty mountain counties, stretching from Cherokee County in the southwest to Alleghany County in the northeast. While colloquially called the “mountains,” the terrain is highly varied, ranging from wide river valleys, to steep gorges, to rugged mountain peaks, to sloping tree-covered ridges. Additionally, the Appalachian mountain chain reaches its widest and highest point within this region. The region’s varying terrain and geography substantially shaped mountain communities and the lives of its people. At the same time, these natural features and the colorful individuals who inhabited the region during the Civil War era served as the basis for numerous assumptions and generalizations about life in western North Carolina during the antebellum period and the Civil War, some of which this essay will challenge.

The history of both Appalachia and western North Carolina remain today largely misunderstood. Numerous late 19<sup>th</sup>-and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century historians have presented or reinforced certain myths and stereotypes that have shaped popular conceptions of the region during the Civil War era. Surviving cultural elements such as music, persistent poverty, perceived

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<sup>1</sup> John Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance in the Appalachian South*, (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 3; Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Minds: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 68-69.

backwardness, outsider accounts, and Hollywood portrayals have combined to strengthen this image. However, an extensive study using primary sources demonstrates inconsistencies between the popular contemporary image of Appalachia and the realities of much of 19<sup>th</sup> Century mountain society.

Two major myths prevail about the antebellum period and the Civil War in western North Carolina. The first is the caricature of the hillbilly and mountain-man. What historian John Inscoe describes as “the first comprehensive codification of Southern Appalachian life and culture,” John C. Campbell’s 1921 *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, defined and reinforced this stereotype. Campbell wrote, “We have, then, in the Southern Highlander, an American, a rural dweller of the agricultural class, and a mountaineer who is still more or less of a pioneer. His dominant trait is independence....”<sup>2</sup> He went on, “Remote from ordered law and commerce, the Highlander learned by hard necessity to rely upon himself.”<sup>3</sup> Campbell attributed individualism, subsistence agriculture, and self-reliance, (products of their assumed isolation) to the highlander’s identity.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, early historians linked backwardness to the highlanders’ individualism. William Goodell Frost, the first President of Berea College in Kentucky, wrote an essay in 1899 called, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” in which he similarly codified this stereotype. More recently, historian Shannon Wilson argues that Frost’s article launched a nationwide fascination with Appalachia, for which Frost became an authority figure, therefore steering popular conceptions of Appalachia for much of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, (New York, N.Y.: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1921), 91.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Dwight Billings, “Culture and Poverty in Appalachia: A Theoretical Discussion and Empirical Analysis,” *Social Forces* 53 (1974): 316.

<sup>5</sup> Shannon H. Wilson, “Lincoln’s Sons and Daughters: Berea College, Lincoln Memorial University, and the Myth of Unionist Appalachia, 1866-1910,” in *The Civil War in Appalachia*,

Calling the people of the mountains “Our Contemporary Ancestors,” Frost developed the theme of their backwards and stagnant condition. He wrote that highlanders “are living for all intents and purposes in the conditions of the colonial times!”<sup>6</sup> As late as 1979, this myth continued to influence Appalachian historians like Ronald Eller who wrote, “The relative isolation of Appalachian communities from the centralizing forces of the larger society sustained this democratic dream in the mountains long after the passing of the frontier.”<sup>7</sup> This characterization and overgeneralization of western North Carolinians created a romantic fascination with Appalachia and the rugged mountaineer as a present day representation of the pioneer spirit and culture.<sup>8</sup>

The second persistent misconception about western North Carolina is that it was predominantly Unionist before, during, and after the Civil War, while the rest of the South overwhelmingly supported the Confederacy. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Campbell wrote, “The Highland South was thrust like a Northern wedge into the heart of the Confederacy...”<sup>9</sup> Frost similarly argued that: “Appalachian America clave to the old flag. It was this old-fashioned loyalty which held Kentucky in the Union, made West Virginia ‘secede from secession,’ and performed prodigies of valor in east Tennessee, and even in the western Carolinas.”<sup>10</sup> While Unionism existed to a greater degree in the mountains than elsewhere in the South by the late

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*Collected Essays*, ed. Kenneth W. Noe and Shannon H. Wilson, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 250-251.

<sup>6</sup> William G. Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains, *Atlantic Monthly*, 83 (1899): 311.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald D. Eller, “Land and Family: A Historical View of Preindustrial Appalachia,” *Appalachian Journal* 6 (1979): 88.

<sup>8</sup> John Inscoe, “Guerrilla War and Remembrance,” *Appalachian Journal* 34 (2006): 3.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, *Southern Highlander*, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors,” 314.

stages of the Civil War, early historians and anthropologists attributed it to overgeneralized and inaccurate causes and exaggerated its degree.

This claim of a Unionist Appalachia remained contingent on the idea that slavery barely existed in mountains. Campbell wrote, “Generally speaking, there were few Negroes in the Highlands in early times.... They have never been become a factor in rural mountain life.”<sup>11</sup> While slavery existed in relatively smaller proportions in the mountain than it did in other regions within the South, it is simply not true that slavery never existed there. By denying the existence of slavery in the mountains, early historians could explain the presence of unionism in western North Carolina. The idea assumed that without slavery, highlanders had little to no stake in the cause and interests of the Confederacy and therefore maintained their Unionist beliefs.

These two stereotypes further assumed that mountain society was homogenous, consisting almost entirely of poor yeoman farmers living isolated and independent lives. These stereotypes created the foundation for the myth of a distinct mountain culture. However, more recent research suggests that early historians of the region perhaps improperly retrofitted more modern mountain culture to the antebellum period and the Civil War. Frost described Appalachia as relatively unchanged “for four and five generations,” yet this statement both ignores and discards the substantial and visible changes to society in the period leading up to and during the Civil War.

In reality, society in western North Carolina was never as independent, self-reliant, and backwards as these early histories suggested. Mountain society was not homogenous, nor was it predominantly Unionist during the Civil War. Instead, North Carolina as a whole was a dynamic society with a variety of social classes, a developing market economy, and diverse political

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<sup>11</sup> Campbell, *Southern Highlander*, 94.

views. Western North Carolina during the antebellum period and the Civil War showed a nuanced and sophisticated image of a dramatically changing society, displaying both similarities and differences from the rest of the state and south, which do not warrant the overgeneralizations that historians have traditionally given this region.

Studying either western North Carolina or the greater region of Appalachia during the antebellum period from varying perspectives, H. Blethen, Curtis Wood, John Inscoe, David Hsiung, and Martin Crawford became a new generation of historians to assess and then to cast doubt on the stereotypes associated with Appalachian society beginning in the late 1980s. Their research aimed to compare greater Appalachian society to society in the wider South. They found that while statistically different in some respects, this region held many of the same institutions and social classes typical of elsewhere in the South. Almost all mountain communities contained a political and economic elite, yeoman farmers, landless tenants, and slaves.<sup>12</sup> Every element of society operated within an interconnected and market-based system, as each class was dependent upon its community to some degree. At a minimum all highlanders required the services of professionals and craftsmen such as blacksmiths, millers, and tanners. These connections often extended beyond trade and labor relations to interactions in a social setting as well.<sup>13</sup> The character and size of various mountain community centers ranged from large commercial towns to small backwoods trading posts. However, these centers served as the foundation and point of connection for these communities, encouraging the development of and providing evidence for this diverse and interconnected society.<sup>14</sup> These historians have also

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<sup>12</sup> Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina, 2000), 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>14</sup> Tyler H. Blethen and Curtis W. Wood, "The Appalachian Frontier and the Southern Frontier: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Appalachian Studies Association* 3 (1991): 42.



recorded and analyzed the existence of slavery in the mountains. Making up 10.2 percent of the population across the region by 1860, slaves provided various kinds of labor across the region.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, slavery remained a fixture of most communities and contributed to the development of mountain society. The various historians that have begun to undermine earlier stereotypes about mountain culture in western North Carolina have all supported the conclusion that western North Carolina during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the region was a complex one composed of diverse individuals including slaves. To understand society in western North Carolina requires a sophisticated depiction beyond the sweeping generalizations attributed to it by early historians and popular culture.

Historians of Appalachia and Western North Carolina during the Civil War, who include John Inscoe, Gordon McKinney, Paul Escott, Kenneth Noe, and Shannon Wilson, have attempted to understand a more nuanced image than their predecessors of the Civil War and its impact on mountain politics, society, and economy. Their research has covered a range of topics crucial to this study, spanning from the secession crisis to the end of the war. In particular, John Inscoe discussed the extent and crippling impact of guerrilla war in Appalachia, providing insight into the region's destabilization.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Gordon McKinney's study of women in western North Carolina during the Civil War illuminated the importance of highlanders' appeals to Governor Zebulon Vance as a form of advocacy and an attempt to improve their condition.<sup>17</sup> Similar to conclusions made by historians of the antebellum period, the research of those studying the Civil War suggested that within western North Carolina existed a diverse and

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<sup>15</sup> John Inscoe, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, (Knoxville, T.N.: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 62.

<sup>16</sup> Inscoe, "Guerrilla War and Remembrance," 83-84.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon McKinney, "Women's Role in Civil War Western North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 69 (1992): 45

complex spectrum of experiences that also deserves a more sophisticated position beyond Frost's generalization that "Appalachia America clave to the old flag."<sup>18</sup>

While the internal civil war within western North Carolina has been well documented, the individual and communal motivations and the causes of this destabilization are still debated by contemporary historians. Bands of deserters, guerrilla warfare, starvation, impressment of goods into Confederate service, conscription, deprivation of various necessities and other issues plagued the region and provided evidence of a highly unstable and dysfunctional society. In 1982 Historian Paul Kruman laid out class antagonisms as a common theory explaining the destabilization of the North Carolina home front. This theory suggested that the conscription law and exemptions from the draft for masters owning more than twenty or more slaves turned the Confederate cause into a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight" and thus created widespread disaffection which destabilized the region.<sup>19</sup> In their comparison of the Revolutionary War and Civil War home fronts, Paul Escott and Jeffrey Crow, building off the ideas first laid out by historian Frank Owsley, have alternatively suggested that the centralizing efforts of the Confederacy destroyed highlanders' previous autonomy and therefore led to widespread disaffection against the Confederacy that destabilized the region.<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Sarris has argued that localized loyalties trumped all others motivations for Appalachian citizens. The stresses of Civil War then stripped away other overshadowing loyalties to the Confederacy, to the state, or

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<sup>18</sup> Frost, "Our Contemporary Ancestors," 314.

<sup>19</sup> Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina 1836-1865*, (Baton Rouge, L.A.: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 242.

<sup>20</sup> Paul D. Escott and Jeffrey J. Crow, "The Social Order and Violent Disorder: An analysis of North Carolina in the Revolution and the Civil War," *The Journal of Southern History* 52 (1986): 375; Frank L. Owsley, *State Rights in the Confederacy*, (Chicago, I.L.: The University of Chicago Press, 1925), 4.

anything else, causing different communities to turn on each other, destabilizing the mountains.<sup>21</sup> Similar to Sarris's conclusion, Ralph Mann suggested underlying loyalties to local communities and the destabilizing conditions on the home front served as a greater pull for desertion than the push of disaffection from the Confederacy.<sup>22</sup> Historian Gordon McKinney has written that anti-Confederate sentiments that destabilized the region were "simply a reaction to the growing demands of the war itself."<sup>23</sup> These arguments have been used to explain the motivations and causes for the widespread destabilization of western North Carolina during the Civil War. However, their answers are neither entirely sufficient nor sophisticated enough to encompass the diverse range of experiences of all individuals across the region.

This paper seeks to both reinforce and build upon many of the ideas previously argued by recent historians who have attempted to challenge stereotypes typically associated with Appalachian society during the Civil War era. To recognize the degree of truth and the origins of these stereotypes requires an understanding of the nature and degree of political, economic, and social connectedness of mountain communities far before writers, historians, and anthropologists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries began to develop these generalizations. This study has also limited its focus to western North Carolina, a sub-region of both Appalachia and the state of North Carolina. While western North Carolina shared historical, cultural, economic, political, and social connections with both larger regions, it maintained characteristics and conditions during the antebellum period and Civil War that made it distinct, beyond its location and geographic features. Throughout the antebellum period and the Civil War highlanders in western

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan D. Sarris, "An Execution in Lumpkin County: Localized Loyalties in North Georgia's Civil War," in Noe and Wilson, *The Civil War in Appalachia*, 132.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Mann, "Ezekiel Counts's Sand Lick Company: Civil War and Localism in the Mountain South," in Noe and Wilson, *The Civil War in Appalachia*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> McKinney, "Women's Role in Civil War Western North Carolina," 38.

North Carolina inhabited a unique position within the political landscape of the larger state.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the political culture, parties, and politicians within mountain communities were also markedly different from elsewhere in North Carolina. During the Civil War, no major military campaigns or refugee crisis disturbed the region until the final months of the war. Furthermore, guerrilla warfare, economic problems, and other effects of the war remained contained within the region, causing the region to collapse on itself. As a result of these distinctive conditions, western North Carolina stands as a valuable case study of community life on the home front during the Civil War and a relevant object of study for this paper.

Most historians of both Appalachia and western North Carolina during this period used the Civil War as a point of punctuation to either end or begin their studies.<sup>25</sup> Historians that limited their study of Appalachian society to the antebellum period ignored the Civil War as a factor or period that may have potentially helped to shape Appalachian stereotypes. Alternatively, those studying only the Civil War's effect on the Appalachian home front tended to distort the image of society during the antebellum period by observing it through the exclusive lens of the Civil War and the sectional issues associated with it. This limited focus caused historians to ignore or underemphasize critical elements of continuity that persisted across both time periods that sectional issues or problems typically associated with war overshadowed. Studying these two periods together enables historians to gain a fuller narrative picture.

While this paper aims to confront many Appalachian stereotypes attributed to this time period, due to time and space constraints the focus has necessarily narrowed to concentrate on mountain elites as a class, including how they functioned as an integrated element of society. Loosely defined as those that held both economic advantage and political and social influence,

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<sup>24</sup> Kruman, *Parties and Politics*, 180.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

elites assumed a leadership role in their mountain communities that facilitated connectedness with other classes and served as a mouthpiece for their communities to the outside world. Therefore, the experiences, relative status, and condition of individual elite families at any given point in time during the Civil War era reflected the state of their communities at that time as well. Their correspondence as well as their documented political, social, and economic actions help historians today piece together a coherent image of mountain society as a whole across time and location. While other studies have used mountain elites to analyze mountain politics, economics, slave ownership, or social interactions as separate aspects, this study plans to integrate all these components more holistically by studying the experiences and political, economic, and social actions of several elite families over both the antebellum period and the Civil War. This more holistic approach enables the historian to better judge the general interconnectedness of mountain communities.

Using either published primary sources or the private collections housed in archives at the State Library of North Carolina, Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina at Asheville, and Appalachian State University I have pieced together the narratives of five elite families and placed them within their historical context. Incorporating the economic, social, and political aspects of their lives over the course the antebellum period and the Civil War, I holistically analyzed mountain elites as an element within their community.

However, to use this more holistic perspective to study western North Carolina requires establishing definitions of certain crucial terms such as “community.” David Hsiung, who in 1997 published a study of mountain communities in eastern Tennessee during the antebellum period, pointed out that the term “community” can refer to a variety of aspects of mountain life

and society, which could include territory, social structures, mutuality, emotional bonds, and a network of social relations.<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of this study, community can be considered a fairly flexible concept in regard to geography, referring to the localized networks of social interactions, business, and politics that connected a geographically contained population. People of different classes and walks of life viewed their world differently and therefore held different subjective definitions of their own community. As this paper focuses on mountain elites, the term community refers to each family's network of localized interactions and connections within the mountains. While differing world views and the attendant definitions of community may serve as a limitation of studying mountain society through the experience of only one class, the wide range of mountain elites' political, economic, and social experiences and the variety of their interactions with all other classes makes elites a valuable subject of study by which to judge mountain communities more generally.

With a working and flexible definition of mountain communities, this project requires a method of judging the vitality and the degree of integration of these communities. "Connectedness" refers to the strength and the degree of the social, political, and economic integration and interconnection between individuals within a community. With a standard by which to judge mountain communities, the historian can then track either a community's development or its disintegration. The development of connectedness was observable in a variety of ways in western North Carolina during the antebellum period and the Civil War. These included the strengthening of social institutions like family networks and transportation infrastructure, the expansion of economic connections like increased trade and business relations, and growing political support, debate, and advocacy of further integration in the form of internal

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<sup>26</sup> David C. Hsiung, *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains: Exploring the Origins of Appalachian Stereotypes*, (Lexington, K.Y.: The University of Kentucky, 1997), 6.

improvements. Furthermore, the strengthening of government institutions aimed at helping to build community and the prevalence of law and order served as crucial elements in the development of connectedness. Conversely, the decline or disintegration of connectedness was observable through the breaking down of these institutions, networks, and associations. The failing economic system, pervasive anarchy, political ineffectiveness, active and passive resistance to the existing system, and the breakdown of relationships between and within classes served as indicators of this disintegration. Collapse represented the absence of connectedness and a society composed almost entirely of inward facing individuals without concern for their community or its institutions.

Using this framework to judge mountain communities, this paper argues that society in western North Carolina did not remain stagnant and “backwards” over the course of its Civil War era history as the stereotypes of Appalachia suggest. Instead, mountain society incrementally developed its connectedness until roughly 1862 when the stresses and privations of the Civil War caused a rapid disintegration of those connections, which in turn resulted in total collapse. While a coherent culture may have begun to develop over the first part of this trend, the Civil War unraveled any connectedness that may have eventually resembled a culture, suggesting the bonds that held mountain community together were relatively fragile or even non-existent. Therefore the romanticized idea of a mountain culture rooted in the Civil War era that embodies the commonly associated stereotypes is simply a myth.

### **The Gash Family as a Template**

The narrative of western North Carolina’s Gash family during the antebellum period and the Civil War serves as a framework by which historians can measure and judge the experiences

of other mountain elites in North Carolina. These other narratives both conform to and stray from the Gash family's template. While the conditions, location, degree of affluence, social network, political views, occupation, and nuances of certain communities varied from one elite family to another, certain common themes run across each family's narrative to reinforce this framework. These narratives combine each family's social, political, and economic experiences, attitudes, and decision-making over both the antebellum period and the Civil War. The sheer volume of archival resources make these coherent narratives possible and numerous secondary sources place each family within an established historical context. While each family's story differs, they display a range of experiences that represent or indicate the experiences of people in western North Carolina more generally. The author aims to make more sophisticated and nuanced judgments of each community in order to avoid the misrepresentation and overgeneralization that have contributed to the various stereotypes of Appalachia in the first place.

Manuscripts and archival research on the Gash Family suggest two distinct trends that can be applied to other elite families. First, during the antebellum period, the Gash family maintained a position of power and economic advantage over their community. They not only maintained a vibrant social life with other elite families as a means of augmenting their influence, but they also spawned a highly integrated and interconnected relationship with individuals of other classes. They served as the political voice and economic resource for all components of mountain society. The Gash family's overall impact served to strengthen and grow mountain society, as it emerged and developed an economic and political position within the greater region and state.

The second distinct trend emerged within the first years of the Civil War. By 1862, as the stresses and sufferings of Civil War intensified, the decline and disintegration of mountain



society became readily apparent. Often despite the elites' best efforts, the interdependence and development that had defined mountain society before the war stopped and then reversed as various social and governmental institutions broke down. As a result, the Gash family and many other elites turned inward, prioritizing self-interest and survival over decisions and considerations that would strengthen their communities. Almost all classes and components of highland society suffered from this disintegration, including elites who had devoted most of their efforts through the antebellum period and much of the Civil War to building their individual influence and developing their mountain communities. Overtime the Gash family simultaneously contributed to the unraveling of their community's connectedness and attempted to delay its eventual collapse, illustrating the nature and intricacies of mountain society's disintegration. The Gash family narrative suggests that while a distinct and coherent culture may have begun to emerge as North Carolina's mountain communities developed over the antebellum period, the rapid reversal of this trend and the disintegration of mountain society during the Civil War demonstrated the febleness of such a culture in this region.

Spread across North Carolina's Transylvania, Henderson, and Buncombe counties, the Gash family maintained a level of social life, economic advantage, and political leadership characteristic of mountain elites. Historian Paul Escott has defined elites in North Carolina as those who held certain economic advantages within their communities and wielded political power.<sup>27</sup> However, mountain elites require a more nuanced and specific definition. Elites often descended from the region's earliest white settlers that arrived in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and whose

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<sup>27</sup> Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 4.

settlement provided a groundwork and head start for subsequent generations.<sup>28</sup> Typically, mountain elites began as small merchants who ambitiously worked within their communities to gain wealth and power, thereby ascending to a higher level of wealth and influence. Qualifications such as land ownership, slaves, or family ties served as common characteristics of the mountain elites but were not necessarily required to achieve affluence or elevated social status. Throughout the antebellum period, ambitious middle-class business owners and yeomen often achieved acceptance as members of the state's mountain elites by gaining both wealth and position, demonstrating a more flexible social dynamic within the mountains as compared with the more rigid aristocratic planter system associated with much of the South.

Martin Alley Gash, an English immigrant and indentured servant, settled in western North Carolina after gaining his freedom in 1769.<sup>29</sup> He founded a homestead on the Swannanoa River south of Asheville in Buncombe County and became one of the region's first settlers. These early settlers did not belong to an aristocracy or plantation-based tradition, but instead developed their wealth from the bottom up, often through farming and small business ventures.<sup>30</sup> Their business enterprise, whether running a general store, driving livestock to larger regional market centers, or renting real estate to tenant farmers, propelled certain families to positions among the elite.<sup>31</sup> Martin Gash's son, John Gash, opened a general store in 1798. His ninth son, Leander S. Gash, born in 1813, in turn expanded the business.<sup>32</sup> Leander Gash then moved the store's location to a place along the French Broad River in Henderson County near Brevard,

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<sup>28</sup> Gene Wilhelm, "Folk Settlements in the Blue Ridge Mountains," *Appalachian Journal* 5(1978): 207.

<sup>29</sup> Otto H. Olsen and Ellen Z. McGrew, "Prelude to Reconstruction: The Correspondence of State Senator Leander Sams Gash, 1866-1867: Part I: Introduction," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 60 (1983): 38.

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelm, "Folk Settlements in the Blue Ridge Mountains," 238.

<sup>31</sup> Blethen and Wood, "The Appalachian Frontier," 41.

<sup>32</sup> Olsen and McGrew, "Prelude to Reconstruction," 38.

North Carolina, in the early 1840s. Gash's store in the 1840s and 1850s sold a wide variety of locally procured products from the mountain communities of Claytonville and Brevard, including "hams, venison, hides and feathers, chestnuts, chestnut bark, apples, cabbages, wild honey and mountain herbs," which he then traded to larger markets in South Carolina.<sup>33</sup> His brother, Martin Gash, became postmaster in the area beginning in 1836, which Leander then took over in 1842.<sup>34</sup> The economic, governmental, and social services Gash provided to his community demonstrated the existence of an emerging interconnected society. Furthermore, the Gash family's actions over the long course of the antebellum period exemplified an ambitious and entrepreneurial spirit that both augmented the family's individual wealth and facilitated developments for their entire community.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Leander Gash amassed greater and greater wealth, becoming one of the most affluent citizens of Henderson County. The 1860 census recorded that Gash owned 13 slaves and his personal property amounted to \$15,000.<sup>35</sup> He owned over 2,000 acres and had improved 160 acres of that land for agriculture.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, he owned numerous horses, cows, sheep, and pigs, which contributed to the revenues generated from his general store. Despite owning numerous slaves, the Gash family, like most of the elite families in western North Carolina, did not derive their wealth entirely from slave-driven plantation agriculture that prevailed in other regions of the South. John Inscoc's research on slavery in the mountains notes that from data of the ten largest slave-owners in each of the twenty mountain

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<sup>33</sup> Leanders S. Gash as quoted in Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Olsen and McGrew, "Prelude to Reconstruction," 40.

<sup>35</sup> "Leander S. Gash, 1860 Federal Census and Slave Schedules," *Ancestry Library*, (Accessed March 18, 2015), <http://trees.ancestrylibrary.com/tree/74226650/person/30290884046>.

<sup>36</sup> Olsen and McGrew, "Prelude to Reconstruction," 40.

counties, only three percent utilized their slaves for agriculture alone.<sup>37</sup> Frederick Law Olmstead, the reknown 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape architect, made observations of slavery in the mountains on his journey through western North Carolina in 1853 that appeared consistent with slavery practices of the Gash family and most mountain masters: “Of the people who get their living entirely by agriculture,” Olmstead wrote, “few own negroes; the slaveholders being chiefly professional men, shop-keepers, and men in office, who... give a divided attention to farming.”<sup>38</sup> Masters utilized their slaves in a diverse range of jobs beyond farming. Of the highlanders that owned slaves, 68 percent utilized this form of labor for mercantile purposes, 32 percent engaged their slaves in their various businesses, and 24 percent used their slaves for either mining or real estate.<sup>39</sup> The wide variety of purposes of slavery demonstrated the remarkable adaptability of slavery as an institution outside the plantation South and the uniqueness of the mountain’s economic system.

As slave-owning members of the mountain elite, the Gash family undermines certain historical and public notions regarding the existence of slaves within the mountain that continues to persist into the present. The Gash family’s story runs contrary to the popular notion that slavery existed and remained profitable only when applied to a large-scale cash crops like cotton, which never grew to a great extent in western North Carolina.<sup>40</sup> Slavery and slave-ownership significantly shaped mountain society during the antebellum period and sectional crisis. While slightly over ten percent of the white population within the region owned slaves in 1860, Historian John Inscoe asserts that slavery was just as entrenched in the mountains as in the rest

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<sup>37</sup> Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Law Olmstead, *Journey in the Back Country, In the Winter of 1853-1854*, (New York, N.Y.: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1907), 253.

<sup>39</sup> Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

of the South.<sup>41</sup> Reinforcing this point, 93.7 percent of state legislators in western North Carolina were slave owners, falsely implying that all political elites vehemently advocated for sectional issues, like the spread of slavery in the territories, the renewal of the slave trade, and secession.<sup>42</sup> While the high percentage of slave-owning political elites seems to indicate that their yeoman constituents elected mountain political elites in order to preserve slavery, the reality is that their votes were tied to other platforms and issues. Still, while many notable mountain elites like Senator Thomas Clingman and Zebulon Vance never owned slaves, abolitionist beliefs were exceptionally rare and were almost always drowned out or quieted by the entrenched white supremacy that pervaded western North Carolina.

The Gash family's ambitious spirit served to expand their political power and social position within mountain society during the antebellum period. The Gash family maintained an active social life with other prominent families, a custom that consistently paralleled the experience of almost all mountain elites during the antebellum period. While their economic and political relationships boosted these social connections, friendly-letter writing and intermarriage between elite families cemented these ties and family networks. In 1841, Leander S. Gash married Margaret Adeline, the great-granddaughter of Waightstill Avery, one of western North Carolina's earliest and most prominent settlers, who had helped draft the North Carolina State Constitution in 1776 and had served as a leader in the state militia during the American Revolution.<sup>43</sup> This connection significantly increased the family's social status and reinforced familial connections with the most prominent families throughout western North Carolina,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 125; William Waighstill Lenoir to Governor Zebulon Vance, January 7, 1861, in ed. Frontis W. Johnston, *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance, Vol. 1, 1843-1862*, (Raleigh, N.C.: State Department of Archives and History, 1963), 80-81.

<sup>43</sup> Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 119.

including the Patterson and Lenoir families, whose stories will be discussed later. The vibrant social network between elite families allowed families like the Gashes to expand their leadership, which would eventually help to grow and improve their communities.

Leander Gash used his economic advantages and social connections to launch a political career. Most highlanders but particularly elites expressed discontent over the issue of isolation, as various forms of infrastructure, like good roads and railroads, were slow to move westward. In response to their expressions of discontent, highlanders and the state created nine new western counties in the 25 years prior to the Civil War.<sup>44</sup> This placed residents operating on remote farms closer to a county seat, which served as many highlanders' connection to mail, news, and economic activity outside their county and region. Gash's general store and post office served a substantial portion of yeoman families living on the western periphery of Henderson County and provided them with resources and a connection to the world outside the immediate region. To further combat their relative isolation, Gash led a movement to have a new county partitioned from Henderson County, for which he wrote numerous letters to friends in Asheville and Raleigh that advocated for this change. In 1861 the state of North Carolina added Transylvania County, for which Gash donated 50 acres to create the new county seat in Brevard.<sup>45</sup> Gash was then appointed to the position of justice of the peace and served on the county court. Gash's political actions during this period represented a movement to improve and build mountain society. While the actions of the mountain elites during the antebellum period certainly served their own personal interests and aspirations, they simultaneously worked to create economic benefits for their community, social opportunities for more isolated residents, and greater political

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>45</sup> Olsen and McGrew, "Prelude to Reconstruction," 40-41.

representation for many members of society. Gash's political efforts represented the development of greater connectedness for both himself and his entire community.

Mountain elites committed to developing their communities often focused their political efforts on internal improvements. In the gubernatorial election of 1854, R. B. Scott of Macon County suggested that "the main hinge upon which the votes of the western counties... will turn is the position the two candidates take respecting Internal Improvements and especially the Central Roads extension west."<sup>46</sup> During the 1830s and 1840s the mountains had served as a stronghold of Whig Party support in the state. As the Whig platform of state-sponsored internal improvements widely appealed to western North Carolinians, the party aggressively pursued the development of infrastructure in their region. The young lawyer and dedicated Whig, Augustus Merrimon, enthusiastically discussed a newly proposed railroad at a Whig Party meeting in January 1854: "I think this central Road ought to extend to the extreme Western limits of the state, so as to connect with Chattanooga and secure the great South West Trade...."<sup>47</sup> Leander Gash was no exception to this trend towards Whig support, naming his first child Henry Clay Gash after the famous Whig politician.<sup>48</sup> Gash's father, John Gash, had advocated for and benefited from the creation of one of the region's largest internal improvement projects, the Buncombe Turnpike.<sup>49</sup> This route served as a major artery of trade, connecting Asheville in Buncombe County to Hendersonville in Henderson County and then extending further South to even larger markets like Spartanburg, South Carolina.

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<sup>46</sup> Insoe, *Mountain Masters*, 152.

<sup>47</sup> A.S. Merrimon as quoted in Edited by A. R. Newsome, "The A. S. Merrimon Journal," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 8 (1931): 323.

<sup>48</sup> Olsen and McGrew, "Prelude to Reconstruction," 41.

<sup>49</sup> Insoe, *Mountain Masters*, 154-155.

The widespread appeal of internal improvements created a great deal of political homogeneity during this period. While the North Carolina State Constitution had property-holder qualifications for voters that were not removed until 1857, there were particularly high percentages of property owners in the western counties due to a higher concentration of landownership compared to the eastern part of the state and thus a high percentage of voters.<sup>50</sup> Approximately 80 percent of the white adult male population of the region could vote, making political life, parties, and activism important aspects of the highlander identity.<sup>51</sup> When a larger number of voters combined with the relative political homogeneity, the mountains became a potent force of Whig support. While discussing state politics of the late 1840s Thomas Clingman, then a Whig state senator, observed, “As a party, we are beaten in the central and eastern parts of the state, the West, by its heavy majorities, neutralizes and overcomes the partial success of our opponents, and gives us the control of the State.”<sup>52</sup> Western Whig power augmented the influence of families like the Gashes during this period. With this power political, mountain elites could better advocate for themselves and their communities in order to further develop connectedness.

However, as the political climate of the state changed and sectional issues intensified, partisan debates dividing mountain elites became more pronounced.<sup>53</sup> The Whig stronghold in the mountains began to unravel in the early 1850s as various party loyalties shifted and the Whig party nationally began to fade. Between 1840 and 1850, the Whig party’s percentage of the vote

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<sup>50</sup> Robin E. Baker, “Class Conflict and Political Upheaval: The Transformation of North Carolina Politics During the Civil War,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 69 (1992): 149.

<sup>51</sup> Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 285.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas E. Jeffrey, “‘Thunder from the Mountains’: Thomas Lanier Clingman and the End of Whig Supremacy in North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 56 (1979): 368.

<sup>53</sup> Kruman, *Parties and Politics*, xiii-xiv.



for Governor dropped 9.5 percent, falling another 12.2 percent between 1850 and 1860.<sup>54</sup> Thomas Clingman, a former Whig state senator from Buncombe County illustrated this shifting of the political climate, when he reinvented himself as a Democrat and one of the loudest proponents of sectional issues.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, internal improvements remained a platform of mountain elites even as party loyalties shifted. In the North Carolina senate from 1860 to 1861, 69.4 percent of Whig/Conservative Party politicians and 58 percent of Democratic Party politicians voted for legislation expanding state sponsored infrastructure.<sup>56</sup> As politics began to unravel with the growing sectional crisis at the end of the antebellum period, highlanders of both parties remained committed to internal improvements, often prioritizing internal improvements over sectional issues. Nevertheless, a fracturing political system began to slowly undermine the mountains' development and political power.

The secession crisis, which dominated the discussion in mountain politics from 1860 into the spring of 1861, represented a period of confusion and division for elite families that foreshadowed the eventual disintegration of society in western North Carolina. Nevertheless, despite these political disruptions, mountain society continued to function, as its governmental institutions, its social connections, and its economic interactions remained intact. While mountain politics continued to focus on internal improvements, the issue of secession began to create fractures among elites. While some elites, like the Whig turned Democrat Senator Thomas Lanier Clingman, supported secession as the platform that “sufficiently protects southern rights

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<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey, ““Thunder from the Mountains,”” 369.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>56</sup> Kruman, *Parties and Politics*, 192.

and interests,”<sup>57</sup> others followed the conservative party, representing the remnants of the dying Whig Party, and the emerging pro-Unionist leader, Zebulon Baird Vance. As a Unionist, Leander Gash supported Vance throughout the crisis, urging other elites and the local community to take a moderate and sober stance toward the issue of secession.<sup>58</sup> A large degree of political debate engulfed the mountains during this period, suggesting that highlanders generally had a stronger resistance than others communities to the general political trends of the wider South. Historian Paul Kruman notes that many historians made the assumption that the mountains of western North Carolina, like the Border States, were simply less obsessively committed to the institution of slavery.<sup>59</sup> However, slaves composed 10.2 percent of the mountains’ population, suggesting that it was most likely as entrenched as elsewhere.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the persistence of a two-party system composed of both Whigs and Democrats in western North Carolina encouraged a level of political debate that did not exist in more politically homogenous parts of the South.<sup>61</sup>

Gash may have been powerless to prevent the subsequent secession of North Carolina and declaration of war against the Union, but his political beliefs were only muted temporarily. His political position reflected the changing conditions in his community over the course of the war. Gash eventually spoke loudly and passionately for a cessation of violence, a transition that mirrored the views of many in his community. Looking retrospectively at the secession crisis, Leander Gash wrote to the newly elected Governor Vance in 1863, “Thousands believe in their hearts that there was no use in breaking up the old government and that Secession was wrong in

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Lanier Clingman as quoted in Thomas E. Jeffrey, “‘Thunder from the Mountains’: Thomas Lanier Clingman and the End of Whig Supremacy in North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 56 (1979): 367.

<sup>58</sup> Olsen and McGrew, “Prelude to Reconstruction,” 41.

<sup>59</sup> Kruman, *Parties and Politics*, 180.

<sup>60</sup> Insoe, *Mountain Masters*, 62.

<sup>61</sup> Kruman, *Parties and Politics*, 181.

the beginning and can hardly be made right by fighting.”<sup>62</sup> Early political division and disillusionment among mountain elites foreshadowed the eventual divisions and disintegration within mountain society.

However, an initial enthusiasm for the war effort took hold of the entire state, for which the mountains were no exception. While Gash remained relatively quiet in the period immediately following the war, many elites took leadership in the process of mobilizing the region for war, raising regiments and contributing to the war effort in any way possible.<sup>63</sup> About seven percent of the population of western North Carolina enlisted in the Confederate Army by the fall of 1861, roughly 2 percent more than the enlistment rate of the state as a whole.<sup>64</sup> Highlanders of all classes enlisted enthusiastically and in large numbers, creating the image of a widely pro-Confederate, homogenous, and unified society that temporarily disguised the emerging fractures that had begun to develop during secession crisis. The military mobilization of the mountains for the Confederacy undermines the stereotype of a dominantly Unionist Appalachia.

During and immediately following the secession crisis, Gash continued his economic practices, upheld his political responsibilities, and maintained his social connections, determined to keep society functioning normally. Leander Gash maintained his general store and postmaster position and paid his taxes to the new Confederate government, while his son, Thomas Gash, and cousins, Harvey, Martin, and Julius Gash, enlisted as officers in the 7<sup>th</sup> Confederate Cavalry

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<sup>62</sup> L. S. Gash to Zebulon B. Vance, June 1, 1863, reel 3, McKinney and McMurry, *Vance Papers* as quoted in Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 152.

<sup>63</sup> Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 260.

Battalion in September 1862.<sup>65</sup> A cousin of Leander Gash, C. P. Gash, described the situation following secession in Henderson County as one that both continued to function normally but one also impacted by the large number of enlistments: “I didn’t like much to see all the boys go off but I know it that it couldn’t be helpt.... We cannot talk or think of anything but war.”<sup>66</sup> As male highlanders enlisted and departed the mountains in large numbers, the rapidly decreasing manpower during this period began to weaken mountain communities’ ability to function and caused an eventual disintegration of mountain society.<sup>67</sup> The Gash family, like many elites were carried by external forces into Civil War, regardless of whether they had advocated secession or not.

The year 1862 marked a transition from an increasingly interconnected mountain society during the antebellum period to one that rapidly disintegrated under the changing conditions of war. As this second period from 1862 to the end of the war progressed, elites and their communities increasingly suffered various deprivations and endured numerous hardships. Elites, like the Gash family, not only suffered from the typical losses associated with war, such as the death and capture of their family members, but they also endured challenges connected exclusively to communities in western North Carolina. Speculators made necessities like salt or shoes inaccessible to most citizens and paramilitary groups on both sides impressed or requisitioned what resources the highlanders did have. Elites nearly starved alongside other classes, as their influence within and outside western North Carolina could keep their

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<sup>65</sup> Olsen and McGrew, “Prelude to Reconstruction,” 42; Captain Julius Gash to Mary Gash, December 2, 1862, Mary Gash Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>66</sup> C. P. Gash to Mary A. Gash, June 22, 1861, Mary Gash Papers, North Carolina District of Archives and History (NCDAH) as quoted in Christopher M. Watford, *The Civil War in North Carolina: Soldiers’ and Civilians’ Letters and Diaries, 1861-1865, The Mountains*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 14.

<sup>67</sup> Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism*, (Baton Rouge, L.A.: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 109.

communities neither fed nor functioning. Unionist guerrillas often referred to as “tories” by Confederate-sympathizers battled with the Confederate home guard, the force tasked with defending mountain communities. The guerrilla fighting and violence committed by both sides combined with corrupt and excessively abusive measures like impressment of goods conducted by the home guard intensified the rate at which society collapsed. The Gash family narrative, as constructed from various archival resources, illuminates the dire conditions that developed within western North Carolina in the later part of the war. Society and its institutions eventually ceased functioning under these conditions, causing elites and other classes to turn inward and pursue their self-interest at the expense of their communities.

The stresses of war undermined the political influence and economic advantages the Gash family had held during the antebellum period and early in the war. The Gash family and other elites attempted to use their influence to maintain and even continue developing the connectedness of their communities. They attempted to maintain as normal a way of life as possible, they advocated for support from networks both inside and outside the mountains, and they attempted to salvage their social and political institutions. However, they were powerless to significantly alter this trend towards total disintegration of their community, as guerrilla violence, a failing economy, and a breakdown of the relationships between classes brought about its collapse. Eventually, considerations for the Gash family’s individual survival superseded any consideration towards saving their communities from inevitable breakdown.

The Gash family’s correspondence demonstrated these progressively worsening conditions in western North Carolina. In January 1862 Mary Gash, a niece of Leander Gash, described to her aunt the burdens of war as difficult and inconvenient, but not yet desperate and hopeless. She wrote, “I think the people will have to do their own spinning and weaving... the

looms seem to be busy.”<sup>68</sup> In February 1862, Thomas Patton, Leander Gash’s brother in-law remarked, “as for shoes, we must do without as it is impossible to get them.”<sup>69</sup> In June 1863, Leander Gash petitioned Governor Vance for the exemptions from Confederate service of several crucial members of the community: “Millers, Blacksmiths & All other exempts are dragged into [the Confederate home guard],” he wrote, which “hardly renders much valuable service to anybody.”<sup>70</sup> Gash’s petition to Vance represents an effort made by an elite member of the community to salvage the dysfunctional and worsening situation. Various necessities and services became nearly impossible to obtain in mountain communities for everyone, including the elites. Furthermore, inflation from the Confederate government and speculators controlling the supply of food and other goods caused prices to skyrocket, making certain necessities inaccessible to the entire community, including in many cases the elites.<sup>71</sup>

Scarcities of clothing, shoes, and metalwork eventually gave way to fears of a dwindling food supply, turning what had been inconveniences into a desperate scramble for remaining resources. While the Gash family’s correspondence only occasionally mentioned the issue, almost every mountain community was plagued by a scarcity of salt, a resource that could not be found naturally within the region.<sup>72</sup> As highlanders needed salt for preserving meats, the state appointed a county agent that helped distribute and control the supply.<sup>73</sup> However, in 1863, Leander Gash noted that the county agent had speculated on the salt, driving it to three times its

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<sup>68</sup> Mary Gash to Aunt Love, January 4, 1862, Mary Gash and Family Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas W. Patton to Harriet Kerr Patton, February 12, 1862, James W. Patton Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SHC) as quoted in Watford, *The Civil War in North Carolina*, 38.

<sup>70</sup> L. S. Gash to Zebulon B. Vance, June 1, 1863, reel 3, McKinney and McMurry, *Vance Papers* as quoted in Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 172.

<sup>71</sup> Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 175.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>73</sup> Dykeman, *The French Broad*, 55.

price before the war.<sup>74</sup> Salt had served as a resource that had linked all members of mountain communities to the increasingly interconnected market economy of the antebellum period. The inability of both elites and poor yeoman farmers to obtain salt represented one of the stresses of Civil War that combined to bring about the disintegration of mountain communities. The salt works in Saltville, Virginia, provided most of the salt in the area, yet the steadily worsening conditions of the war and the drain of resources towards military campaigns and elsewhere left the mountains neglected and desperate for salt.<sup>75</sup> As this point of connection for mountain communities disappeared, fewer aspects of life served to unite mountain communities, thus scarcities served as a symptom of the weakening society. In many cases the scarcity of salt became so desperate that it provoked raids, guerrilla violence, and even the infamous Shelton Laurel Massacre, in which the Confederate home guard executed fifteen poor farmers and their family members in Madison County as revenge for raiding a Confederate storehouse for salt.<sup>76</sup> While a scarcity of salt plagued much of the Confederacy, a failing system of roads and general neglect from Confederate distributors left the mountains more starved for salt than other regions.<sup>77</sup>

In his correspondence with Governor Vance in 1863, Leander Gash suggested that Vance disband the Confederate home guard as the approaching starvation was a more pressing issue than ineffectively enforcing conscription: "It is important for all men to be nursing their little stock and the little food to winter them on and preparing for another crop."<sup>78</sup> The Gash family's neighbor in Henderson County, Maryann Arrowood, pleaded to Governor Vance to aid their

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<sup>74</sup> McKinney, "Women's Role in Civil War Western North Carolina," 47.

<sup>75</sup> Horton Cooper, *History of Avery County*, (Asheville, NC: Biltmore Press, 1964), 37.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>77</sup> Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 173, 235.

<sup>78</sup> L. S. Gash to Governor Zebulon B. Vance, December 25, 1863, reel 21, McKinney and McMurry, *Vance Papers*, Appalachian State Archives (ASA).

starving community: “There will have to be something done for us or we will all perish to death.”<sup>79</sup> Elites like Leander Gash and Maryann Arrowood attempted to speak for and support their communities through these difficult times by petitioning the governor. However, the conditions of war subjected highlanders of all classes to such tremendous hardships and suffering that caused the bonds of community to eventually unravel. Like scarcities, high rates of desertion from the Confederate army also served both as a symptom of a weakening Confederacy and a cause of disintegration in mountain communities. Desertion had a particularly destabilizing influence in western North Carolina, as individuals and bands of deserters attempted to hide out in the isolated mountain terrain, draining resources and provoking guerrilla violence. Captain Julius Gash on September 5, 1863, explained, “My company has about gone up too! All deserted or at home without leave. Twenty-five men of our Regt started home about a week ago, but were nearly all apprehended!” He continued, “I’ll swear men have deserted my company who I had the most implicit confidence in and men too who had been for near twelve months good soldiers as I thought was in the Confederate Army.”<sup>80</sup> Gash served as an officer in the 64<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Regiment, a company composed of men from several mountain counties.<sup>81</sup> Having formed relatively late in the summer of 1862, many of the men had joined reluctantly and under the threat of conscription, which later led to unusually high rates of desertion in Gash’s regiment. Deserters from within the region and outside sought shelter in the remote mountain wilderness, stealing resources from mostly defenseless mountain communities when they needed it and exacerbating the already difficult conditions within western North

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<sup>79</sup> Maryann Arrowood to Zebulon B. Vance, November 26, 1863, reel 20, McKinney and McMurry, *Vance Papers* as quoted in Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 169.

<sup>80</sup> Captain Julius Gash to “Colonel,” September 5, 1863, Mary Gash and Family Paper, NCDAH.

<sup>81</sup> Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 116-117.



Carolina. As the war progressed, desertion rates continued to increase, corresponding to an increasingly difficult situation on the home front in western North Carolina. Julius Gash's brother Harvey Gash, serving in the 65<sup>th</sup> North Carolina, observed similar patterns of desertion in his regiment: "I believe the majority is in favor of going home. Some of our officers have held up that they are going too."<sup>82</sup> Harvey Gash observed that desertion and disaffection with the war stemmed from most elements of society, as even officers' commitment to the war began to wane. These desertions represented fractures both from within and between classes, indicating a declining connectedness for mountain society.

Deserters attempting to survive in the mountains encountered and provoked a hostile reaction from much of the community including elites and the Confederate home guard. These deserters often banded together with bushwackers and Tories. While Tories were Unionist sympathizing outlaws, William Albert Wilson, a highlander who vividly described the guerrilla warfare in the mountains of North Carolina, defined bushwackers as "men who profess to be neutral and refuse to join either side, openly, but as individuals, or in small bands, using ambush tactics, attack, kill or plunder the homes of those unable to defend themselves."<sup>83</sup> In March 1863, Hattie Gash described to Mary Gash an altercation taking place several miles from her home, in which bands of deserters attempted to steal horses from a local farm. The incident resulted in a shootout and the subsequent death of the farm's owners.<sup>84</sup> Stories of elusive guerrilla groups close to home heightened fears and bred distrust in the government's ability to protect highlanders. Harvey Gash, serving just over the border in east Tennessee, described similar

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<sup>82</sup> Harvey Y. Gash to Father, February 8, 1864, Gash Family Letters, NCDAH as quoted in Watford, *The Civil War in North Carolina*, 148.

<sup>83</sup> William Albert Wilson as quoted in Inscoe, "Guerrilla War and Remembrance," 83.

<sup>84</sup> Hattie Patton Gash to Mary Gash, March 30, 1863, Mary A. Gash and Family Papers, NCDAH.

guerrilla violence: “Our boys have been bushwacked suddenly. Some of our company was killed.... I suppose our men shot three or four of the bushwackers and hung two and left them there.”<sup>85</sup> The strain and violence caused by bushwackers and deserters accelerated the disintegration of mountain communities.

Like so many families involved in the Civil War, the Gash family experienced their share of typical hardships associated with warfare. Union forces captured Leander Gash’s son, Thomas, in June 1863, Harvey Gash a year later, and Martin Gash in July 1864.<sup>86</sup> Martin then died in Union captivity in Point Lookout, Maryland, later that month. These hardships amplified disillusionment with the Confederate government among elites and other classes alike. When combined with the brutish conditions specific to the home front in western North Carolina, individual elite families turned inward, making decisions to pursue their personal interests at the expense of the communities they had previously attempted to build.

Despite paying taxes to the Confederate government, maintaining his general store, and serving as postmaster for Transylvania County, Leander Gash grew disillusioned with the Confederate government, causing a personal transition from building the interconnectedness of his community to pursuing his individual interests. While others in his family maintained their support to the Confederacy, Leander Gash’s loyalty waivered heavily. In September 1863, Captain Julius Gash, a cousin of Leander Gash, wrote, “I am strong in the faith that we are destined to be victorious in the pending battle.” Julius then expressed disgust at deserters who lacked his patriotism: “Confound a man who is void enough of principle to desert his country.”<sup>87</sup> By 1863 Leander had taken a stance that alienated him from his steadfastly pro-Confederate

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<sup>85</sup> Harvey Gash to Father, February 8, 1864, Gash Family Letters, NCDAH as quoted in Watford, *The Civil War in North Carolina*, 148.

<sup>86</sup> Watford, *The Civil War in North Carolina*, 151, 171, 179.

<sup>87</sup> Captain Julius Gash to “Colonel,” September 5, 1863, Mary Gash and Family Paper, NCDAH.

relatives. While family-unity served as a fundamental building block for the connectedness of mountain communities, Gash's alienation from his family represented a dramatic breakdown of important social connections. In a series of letters to Governor Vance, Gash expressed the futility of continuing the war effort: "I am in favor of Peace on the best terms that can be had and at the earliest day we can get it."<sup>88</sup> He continued, "the longer the fight is continued and kept up the more and harder the difficulties to settle; that the South could have got a better settlement at the end of the first year of the war than can be had now." In another letter he argued that if the war continued, the growing widespread disillusionment would only further destabilize society: "They [the poor] will either desert to the enemy or will mutinize and demand an equal share of the property in the Confederacy. Our rulers are blind to their own dangers."<sup>89</sup> Gash's stance against the Confederacy demonstrated how elites in this second part of the war had begun making decisions that represented their individual interests over promoting a unified and connected society. These types of decisions manifested themselves differently for other elites depending on their own individual situations. Some elites fled the mountains to find a more stable society in central North Carolina while others resorted to personally defending their property and assets. Gash's strong and vocal anti-Confederate sentiment represented both an effort to save his crumbling society and an acceptance of the Confederacy's disintegrated state in western North Carolina.

Gash's political views and decisions alienated him from other elites and much of his community, demonstrating the extent to which mountain society had divided and how Gash's decisions represented the pursuit of self instead of a more coherent and connected community.

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<sup>88</sup> L.S. Gash to Zebulon Vance, September 7, 1863, in ed. Joe A. Mobley, *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance, Vol. 2, 1863*, (Raleigh, N.C.: Division of Archives and History, 1995), 273.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, September 24, 1863, in *Ibid.*, 285.

Gash's views isolated him from other elites, including his own family, who had continued to support the Confederacy. Furthermore, Gash alienated himself from sources of Confederate power. In September 1863, Gash complained to Governor Vance that a "kinky headed scoundrel... who draws his wages from the state" continually harassed and threatened to arrest him.<sup>90</sup> A year later, John Hyman, an advisor to Vance, publicly branded Gash a traitor to the Confederacy.<sup>91</sup> As a result, a pro-Confederate man assaulted Gash with a cane on the street in Brevard, North Carolina, in the fall of 1864. These events, in which a formerly respected political and social leader was harassed and publicly beaten, suggest the degree to which society had devolved into an anarchic state.

The history of the Gash family from the antebellum period to the end of the Civil War represents two trends that express the relative connectedness of their community. The first trend was the growth during the antebellum years of an interconnected society with elites assuming a critical leadership role. The second trend could be characterized as the rapid unraveling of those connections under the stresses of war. Increasingly, elites like the Gash family pursued individual actions that both accepted or contributed to their communities' disintegrating state.

### **The Patterson Family**

The narrative of the Patterson family of Caldwell County shares numerous parallels with the framework laid out by the Gash family's experience. Like the Gash family, the Pattersons contributed to and promoted the development of their community in western North Carolina during the antebellum period. They wielded political power and economic advantages over their local community, using their leadership to develop the connectedness of their society. Just as the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>91</sup> Olsen and McGrew, "Prelude to Reconstruction," 43.

Gash family's narrative demonstrated, the Pattersons experienced the rapid disintegration of their society over the course of the Civil War, at first attempting to slow its collapse but ultimately accepting its fate and turning their gaze and decision-making inward.

During the antebellum period, the Patterson family served as entrepreneurial and industrious members of the elite in the mountain region's Caldwell County, maintaining an economic and political leadership position within their community that drove it towards market-oriented interdependence and interconnection. While still in the same class of mountain elites as the Gash family, the Pattersons maintained an even more established level of social status and cast a wider net of economic and political influence that extended all the way to the state capital in Raleigh. The family's status extended back to Edmund Jones, a merchant and son-in-law of the Revolutionary War hero General William Lenoir. In addition, Jones owned substantial swaths of land and served as a state legislator for Caldwell County until 1838.<sup>92</sup> In 1820, Samuel Finley Patterson, the son-in-law of Edmund Jones, started a general store in Wilkesboro of Wilkes County and eventually began a small cotton factory in 1848 in the county seat of Lenoir, the first industrial enterprise to open in Caldwell County.<sup>93</sup> In 1860, census records show that Patterson owned 36 slaves, but the combined value of his real estate and slaves was only slightly over half of the value of his personal estate, suggesting that for the Pattersons, wealth and status were not entirely derived from land and slave ownership.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, as he grew little to no cotton himself, Patterson's utilized his slaves for a variety of purposes beyond agricultural pursuits that included working in his cotton factory and general store and maintaining his estate.

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<sup>92</sup> "Biographical Information," Jones and Patterson Family Papers, 1777-1933, SHC, (accessed February 1, 2015), [http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/j/Jones\\_and\\_Patterson\\_Family.html](http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/j/Jones_and_Patterson_Family.html).

<sup>93</sup> "Biography Samuel Finley Patterson," NCPedia, (Accessed March 3, 2015), <http://ncpedia.org/biography/patterson-samuel-finley>.

<sup>94</sup> 1860 Census Data as compiled in Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 266.

Patterson's slave practices appeared consistent with the purposes and type of slavery that existed within the mountains, as cotton or other cash-crop agriculture was generally unsuccessful. However, being one of the largest slave-owners in western North Carolina in 1860, Samuel Finley Patterson felt at least some connection to the pro-slavery values of the wider South. Many of the family's actions represented an effort to augment their personal wealth and individual status, following the paradigm of the plantation-based southern gentry.<sup>95</sup> However, many of the family's actions and leadership positions within society during the antebellum period represented an effort to develop the connectedness of their own mountain community and the uniqueness of the highlander way of life.

Rufus Lenoir Patterson, the son of Samuel Finley Patterson, followed his father's legacy and further cemented the Patterson family's position among the elites of western North Carolina. Raised and educated in Caldwell County, Rufus Patterson left the mountains to study at the University of North Carolina, graduating in 1851. He then began a business career that continued through the 1850s, managing a general store, a paper mill, and a gristmill in the commercial center of Salem in Forsyth County, just outside the mountains.<sup>96</sup> During the antebellum period, Salem provided mountain elites in Wilkes, Burke, and Caldwell Counties a center to develop their business and a social network in the world beyond the mountains. In an effort to raise his social standing further, Patterson married the daughter of Governor John M. Morehead and chaired the Forsyth County Court from 1855 to 1860. In addition to Patterson's strategic marriage to the Governor's daughter, he and the rest of the family proved highly connected to a vibrant social network that linked together the families of other elites. The Pattersons had marriage and familial ties to the Gash, Lenoir, Fries, Avery, and Jones families. In addition, they

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<sup>95</sup> Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 4.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

kept correspondence and close friendships with members of the elite both within and outside of the mountains.<sup>97</sup> These connections boosted the Pattersons' considerable status and were also fundamental in creating a strong network of leaders that could bring substantial change to their communities during the antebellum period.

The Patterson family also held various political leadership positions in their county and across the state, using their influence to develop the connectedness of their community. Samuel Patterson began his own political career serving in the state legislature of North Carolina, first in various clerkships, starting in 1821, and eventually as chief clerk of the state legislature in 1835.<sup>98</sup> He then held the position of treasurer of North Carolina from 1835 to 1837 under Governor Richard Spaight. In 1840, Patterson ran for a seat in the state legislature, using his connection to Edmund Jones to gain support from other elites and the lower classes.<sup>99</sup> Samuel Patterson ran as a Whig Party candidate, focusing on using government to sponsor internal improvements and infrastructure within the mountains. During his time in office he chaired a committee on internal improvements and sponsored a bill that chartered the North Carolina Railroad Company to connect the western part of the state to large commercial centers outside of the mountains.<sup>100</sup> Samuel Patterson's political career during the antebellum period represented an effort to build and grow western North Carolina.

As the secession crisis intensified the Patterson family continued to assume a political role within their community. Forsyth County elected Rufus Patterson to serve as a secessionist and Democratic Party delegate to a proposed North Carolina Convention to discuss the possibility of secession in February 1861, demonstrating the extent to which the community

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<sup>97</sup> Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 118.

<sup>98</sup> "Biography Samuel Finley Patterson," NCPedia.

<sup>99</sup> Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 124.

<sup>100</sup> "Biography Samuel Finley Patterson," NCPedia.

considered Patterson part of the political mountain elite.<sup>101</sup> While initially against secession, Samuel F. Patterson soon supported his son and upheld the importance of holding the convention to discuss the issue, stressing his desire to maintain the relevance of North Carolina in the trends engulfing the wider South: “As most of the slave states yet in the Union were either holding or proposing to hold conventions... I could not see how N.C. could stand still with either honor or safety.”<sup>102</sup> Samuel Patterson like many elites waived over the most politically advantageous course of action for themselves and their communities during this confusing and disruptive period. Mountain elites remained divided over the questions of secession and whether to even hold a convention to discuss the issue, as many anti-secessionists feared that holding a convention would inevitably draw the state into war. These political divisions foreshadowed deeper rifts that would arise between elites and within their communities as society unraveled during the Civil War.

Contrary to the political views and efforts of the Patterson family, a majority of 1,409 to 286 in Forsyth County voted not to join the convention and to remain at least temporarily in the Union. The results in Forsyth appeared more skewed towards Unionism than was true of voting patterns across the state, as 54,781 to 36,341 voted to remain in the Union.<sup>103</sup> However, this vote appeared consistent with most mountain counties, as every county with the exception of Burke voted both not to hold the convention and to elect a Unionist delegate to fight against secession. The persistence of the Whig Party, whose name had been changed to the Conservative Party in the late 1850s, explains this dominantly Unionist outcome. The mountains had been a center of

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<sup>101</sup> “Biographical Information,” Jones and Patterson Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

<sup>102</sup> Samuel F. Patterson to Rufus L. Patterson, March 16, 1861, Jones and Patterson Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>103</sup> Kruman, *Parties and Politics*, 276-277.



control for the Whig party during the 1830s and 1840s, but had fallen apart during the 1850s. However, an enthusiasm for the Whig platforms of internal improvements remained strong in the mountains through the session crisis, manifesting itself through the conservative party and charismatic leaders like Zebulon Vance.

After this small defeat for his political career, Rufus Patterson returned to the mountains of Caldwell County in order to focus on his business.<sup>104</sup> Despite the outcome of the vote in February of 1861, the outbreak of war in the following months would nevertheless launch North Carolina into war with enthusiasm. These debates and divisions were muted or hidden beneath a temporary exterior of near-complete support for the Confederacy in the period immediately following the start of the war, as highlanders, like the people across the South, felt caught up in the enthusiasm of independence and war.

The family's wealth and influence did not spare them from the destructive hardships of the Civil War, nor did it spare the connectedness of the communities they had worked to create. The community in Caldwell County endured struggles and difficult conditions similar to those encountered by the Gash family's community in Henderson and Transylvania Counties. The destructive hardships, privations, and stresses of the Civil War eventually drove the Pattersons to pursue the most individually advantageous course. Their actions and decisions eventually alienated them from their communities and other elite families, indicating the disintegration of mountain society. By the end of the war, the Patterson family prioritized their personal safety, the security and stability of their assets, and a desire to maintain their social status, eventually abandoning any effort to save their collapsing society.

Rufus Patterson and his father Samuel Patterson weathered the Civil War from their

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<sup>104</sup> "Biography Rufus Lenoir Patterson," NCPedia, (Accessed March 9, 2015), <http://ncpedia.org/biography/patterson-rufus-lenoir>.

estate called Palmyra along the Yadkin River in Caldwell County. Rufus Patterson's first wife, the daughter of Governor Morehead, died of disease in 1862. In 1864 he married Mary Fries Patterson, the daughter of a prominent Salem merchant and his future business partner, suggesting that Patterson still pursued advantageous social connections with other elites in an attempt to maintain his status even under the rapidly unraveling system. However, their affluence had created other personal issues for the Pattersons. In December of 1864, Rufus Patterson wrote, "I deem it best to be constantly on the lookout. Our negros need watching."<sup>105</sup> Slave-owning mountain elites had the additional concern that their slaves were growing restless and more defiant as the war progressed. Issues concerning their security and personal property often superseded efforts or considerations aimed at maintaining the capacity for mountain society to continue functioning as it had during the antebellum period.

Caldwell County saw large numbers of deserters and other anti-Confederate elements, which served to destabilize the region, threaten individual families' safety and undermine Confederate institutions. In June 1864, Rufus's new wife, Mary, described to her mother one incident linked to the dangerous situation developing near home: "They are not regular yankees, but a band of about 400 deserters, tories, bushwackers, and some yankees."<sup>106</sup> She then explained, "They came across the mountains, it is said they left their homes in the Piedmont, marched across the country very quietly, crossed the river at night and surprised Camp Vance at daybreak, burned the camp, and carried off as much bacon as they wanted and destroyed the rest."<sup>107</sup> Not only had guerrilla groups easily outmaneuvered the marginally effective

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<sup>105</sup> Rufus L. Patterson to Father Samuel F. Patterson, Dec. 8, 1864, Jones and Patterson Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>106</sup> Mary Fries Patterson to Mother, June 30, 1864, Patterson Family Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>107</sup> Camp Vance served as a base for the Confederate Home Guard and site for training and recruitment of Confederate soldiers conscripted in the Mountains. It was located in Burke

Confederate home guard, but the silence, organization, motivations, and success of “tories” and “bushwackers” bewildered and further terrified the Pattersons and many of the elites in western North Carolina. Mary Patterson and other elites denied the idea that such disruptive forces could have originated from within their own mountain communities, blaming the outside for their troubles at home. In reality, these deserters and bushwackers were composed of poor men who originated from both mountain society and the world beyond, suggesting that elements of mountain communities that had originally cooperated harmoniously during the antebellum period were now alienated and hostile to one another.<sup>108</sup> Large and successful bands of armed deserters and Unionists indicated the breakdown of mountain society itself, as a functioning society at a minimum maintains a government capable of protecting its people from violence.

The undermanned Caldwell County home guard, tasked with defending the home front from numerous destabilizing forces, became increasingly ineffective against unpredictable and destructive guerrilla groups that existed at large throughout the region. The Patterson family relied upon the home guard for their security and continued to loosely support the Confederacy, believing it both to be the best and perhaps only protection of their interests and assets. J. W. Fries wrote to his brother-in-law Rufus Patterson in August 1864, “The home guard of this country are all out hunting deserters. I understand Col. Masten has orders to stay out until all are caught.... Some 5 or 6 deserters were brought in today, and we are in hopes the county will soon be free of them entirely.”<sup>109</sup> However, Patterson doubted the effectiveness of the home guard upon which his family’s safety and assets depended. Discussing the strength of tory guerrillas he wrote in February 1865, “There are some 75 to 80 of them. Most of them are bad men effectively

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County, bordering Caldwell County, Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 134.

<sup>108</sup> Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 106-107.

<sup>109</sup> J.W. Fries to Rufus S. Patterson, August 21, 1864, Patterson Family Papers, NCDAH.

armed and thoroughly acquainted with the mountain passes.”<sup>110</sup> He then commented on the meager strength and effectiveness of the home guard: “A company of 40 men lately raised [is] our only protection.”<sup>111</sup> The stresses of Civil War had created a dangerous inner civil war in western North Carolina between guerrillas and Confederate home guard that contributed to the disintegration of mountain communities.

By late in the war, the Pattersons began to acknowledge and accept the collapsing state of their community, as the connectedness and relationships that had developed during the antebellum period had almost completely degraded. In February 1865, Patterson worried, “Women and children may be greatly frightened and possibly exposed to violence.... We are almost entirely open to their free looting expeditions.”<sup>112</sup> Patterson observed increasingly dangerous threats made by Unionist guerrillas closer to home: “About three months ago they commenced their depredation by the murder in the most hurtful manner of an aged citizen. Since then they have regularly engaged in robbing and shooting southern citizens living on John’s River shore, 10 miles from here.”<sup>113</sup> Tory bands acted with increased aggression and impunity as their organization and number grew and the home guard’s strength dwindled. Referring to the situation two years earlier, Patterson wrote in early 1865, “At the time they were too few in number, and there were still too many men loyal to the south, in our midst to give them opportunities to wreak their vengeance.”<sup>114</sup> Patterson had observed and experienced the rapid decline and disintegration of his society, whose institutions and ability to provide security had finally failed to prevent anarchic forces from prevailing.

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<sup>110</sup> Rufus L. Patterson to L. Me. Fries, February 1865, Patterson Family Papers, NCDAH

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

Having acknowledged the near total collapse of their mountain community in Caldwell County and aware that the internal conflict could continue indefinitely, the Patterson family made one final attempt to restore some order. Rufus Patterson urged his father, “I pray you may compromise matters in our county.... By all means stop the cavalry & let all honest men come home.”<sup>115</sup> Compromising with the guerrillas appeared to be the only remaining option for the Patterson family to save their community, demonstrating the extent to which anarchic forces had destroyed the influence of the previously powerful elites. On April 22, 1865 Samuel Patterson led a committee that abandoned the wishes and platform of the nearly defunct Confederate and state governments and issued an open compromise to the guerrillas:

That no further effort be made to enforce the conscription law in the county; that the said recusant conscripts and others be permitted to return quietly to their homes and pursue their lawful occupations unmolested; that restitution of all captured or stolen property be made as far as possible, by both parties and that both parties shall hereafter demean themselves as quiet, orderly citizens.<sup>116</sup>

The proclamation represented both a capitulation by elites that the Confederacy had failed and an acknowledgement that the mountain society’s institutions had collapsed to such an extent that only a desperate plea could begin to resolve the instability.

When Stoneman’s raid, the only organized Union military campaign through western North Carolina, reached Rufus Patterson’s cotton factory and home in Caldwell County in the spring of 1865, the federal troops burned it to the ground.<sup>117</sup> General George Stoneman’s cavalry acted in a concerted effort with General William Tecumseh Sherman’s campaign through Georgia and the Carolinas to disrupt any remaining Confederate infrastructure deep within Confederate territory. Criss-crossing western North Carolina and Virginia, Stoneman’s troops

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<sup>115</sup> Rufus L. Patterson to Samuel F. Patterson, March 4, 1865, Jones and Patterson Papers, SHC.

<sup>116</sup> Caldwell County Proclamation, April 22, 1865, as quoted in Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 79.

<sup>117</sup> McKinney and Inscoe, *The Heart of Appalachia*, 245.

raided almost every major commercial center within the region, destroying railroads, the last remnants of the Confederate home guard, and the mountain's only remaining supply of salt in Saltville, Virginia.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, this military incursion inflicted a heightened level of fear. As a result, Patterson fled with his family out of the mountains to his former home in Salem, North Carolina. Patterson believed his family would be safest outside the mountains, where there were fewer depredations by guerrilla groups, intact government institutions, and strong familial connections. Rufus Patterson, waited out the war at the home of Henry W. Fries, his brother-in-law and future business partner.<sup>119</sup> The Pattersons' position and wealth offered them a far more substantial safety net to insure against complete destruction than the protections available to other classes. However, their safety required abandoning their mountain community altogether. As former leaders and the spokesmen of their community, the Patterson family's flight from the mountains represented the complete disintegration of connectedness and accordingly the collapse of their beloved mountain society.

### **The Lenoir Family**

The Lenoir family's narrative during the antebellum period and the Civil War reveals two clear trends. The first trend consists of the Lenoir family growing and building the interconnectedness of their community during the antebellum period. The second trend, beginning after the first year of the Civil War, demonstrates the rapid disintegration of mountain society despite the Lenoir family's best efforts to preserve it. The family eventually acknowledged or accepted the collapse of their community and turned inward, pursuing their individual interests and survival.

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 234, 243.

Like the Pattersons, the Lenoirs stood as one of the most affluent families in Caldwell County. As was characteristic of elites during the antebellum period, the Lenoirs maintained a vibrant social life, political power and economic resources. The Lenoirs held strong kinship and economic ties to the most powerful elite families of western North Carolina, including the Patterson family, the Gash family, and the Avery family. General William Lenoir, was a prominent early settler in the region and considered a hero for his instrumental role at the battle of Kings Mountain in 1780, a victory during the American Revolution that historians often considered to be a turning point in the war.<sup>120</sup> Following the Revolution, Lenoir built a large farm called Fort Defiance, outside the town of Lenoir (named for himself) in Caldwell County. His two sons, William and Thomas, married the two daughters of General Waightstill Avery, one of the most powerful elites in neighboring Burke County. This linkage represented the strategic alliance of the two most powerful and recognizable family names in western North Carolina during the antebellum period. General Lenoir's daughter married Edmund Jones, whose daughter married Samuel Finley Patterson, again displaying the family's deep familial connections to other elites.<sup>121</sup> This social network had the dual effect of augmenting the family's individual status while also boosting their political and economic influence, which the Lenoir's in turn used to strengthen and develop their communities through internal improvements, strengthening government institutions, politically representing their community and developing economic relationships with all elements of society.

General William Lenoir and the generations of Lenoirs following him held political power that extended across their communities, region and state. General Lenoir held various political positions within the state of North Carolina, serving as the speaker of the North Carolina

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<sup>120</sup> "Biographical Information," The Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

State Senate from 1790 to 1795 and continuing to hold a position as a state senator until the 1820s. While his sons would not have the same political legacy, they would focus their attention at home and grow the family's fortune throughout the antebellum period.

Thomas Lenoir, the second son of General William Lenoir, expanded the family's economic advantage by acquiring large tracts of land, both to develop but also as a stable means of investing extra capital.<sup>122</sup> Thomas and later his son, Walter Waightstill Lenoir rented a large portion of this land to tenant farmers, supplying the family with much of their yearly income.<sup>123</sup> This source of revenue later proved problematic under the destabilizing circumstances of the Civil War. While the archival resources do not indicate whether the relationship between the Lenoirs and their tenants was mutually beneficial or exploitative, it nevertheless demonstrated the existence of an interconnected market economy to which the Lenoirs and other elements of society were fundamentally linked.

Like many mountain elites, the Lenoir family owned slaves, connecting them at some level to the identity of elites in the wider South. By 1860, Thomas Lenoir owned 65 slaves, making him the twelfth largest slave-owner in the entire region and the largest in Caldwell County.<sup>124</sup> However, slave-owning families like the Lenoirs began to question the adaptability of slavery to the mountain region. Thomas Lenoir died in 1861, leaving a large inheritance and numerous slaves to his son Walter Waightstill Lenoir. In 1864, Walter wrote to his sister Sade, reflecting on his slave ownership across the antebellum period and the Civil War, "You know that I had made up my mind before the war that I would not be again a slave owner, not from doubt that it was right for the people of the South in this age to continue to own their slaves, but

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<sup>122</sup> Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 68.

<sup>123</sup> W. W. Lenoir to Mother, April 20, 1863, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>124</sup> Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 265.



because I prefer to avoid the troubles and worry of owning them.”<sup>125</sup> Walter Lenoir’s white supremacist attitude contributed to his belief in the justice of slavery and connected him to southern traditions, yet his practical entrepreneurial impulses drove him away from the practice. Walter Lenoir’s opinion reflected the relationship to slavery of many mountain elites, as they felt drawn to both the slavery-driven traditions of the wider South and to their brand of mountain entrepreneurship. As a product of their geographic condition, each elite family adapted their commercial interests to localized economic conditions and systems. Generally, in the antebellum period, this entrepreneurship resulted in investment in local infrastructure and government institutions that developed the connectedness of their community.

During the antebellum period the Lenoir family participated within the larger mountain society, working and operating with individuals in other classes. Their economic and political positions encouraged elites like them to connect and cooperate in a mutually dependent relationship with other components of society. Both Lenoirs and many of their constituent yeoman farmers in the mountains favored internal improvements as a means of increasing trade and developing mountain society. In 1848 Thomas Lenoir and his son William Avery Lenoir petitioned Governor William A. Graham to build a turnpike through Caldwell and Ashe County, writing, “[it will] open an entirely new and much more direct channel of communication between our state, on one side, and East Tennessee, Western Virginia, and Kentucky on the other.”<sup>126</sup> A North Carolina state law required all citizens to work on public infrastructure projects for a specified amount of time every year. In 1851, William Avery Lenoir described in his diary an experience in which he worked on a state road-building project with individuals from all classes.

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<sup>125</sup> W. W. Lenoir to Aunt Sade, March 27, 1864, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Lenoir to William A. Graham, June 27, 1848, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC as quoted in Insoe, *Mountain Masters*, 158.

His status as a member of the elite placed him in a leadership position on the project: “I worked hard among them, spoke mildly but with firmness and convinced many by various reasons of the importance of the work...”<sup>127</sup> His diary entry suggested that mountain elites commanded the obedience if not the support of yeoman farmers during the antebellum period. Therefore, elites and yeoman farmers existed in a cooperative but hierarchal relationship. Elites who sought political office remained responsive and connected to their yeoman constituents as they relied on yeoman farmers for their political support. While developmentally behind the far older and more established eastern part of North Carolina, the mountain region and its economic system thrived and grew substantially during the antebellum period.

As the secession crisis escalated, the Lenoir family became increasingly engaged in the political debate. Despite their slave ownership and entrenched white supremacist attitudes, this aspect of their identity did not dominate their politics. Through the winter and spring of 1861 Walter Waightstill Lenoir, the grandson of General William Lenoir and the son of Thomas Lenoir, advocated for the preservation of the Union and supported Zebulon Vance’s Unionist platform. Lenoir and Vance, as dear friends and members of the elite, maintained a close correspondence during the dramatic months preceding the start of the Civil War. Lenoir explained to Vance the extent to which he agreed with sectional issues and committed himself to slavery’s preservation: “I stand out as stoutly as any southern man ought for full justice from the north as an indispensable condition to union with the north.... I am utterly opposed to reopening the slave trade... and have no desire to engage in the silly project of trying in vain to carry slavery into the west and Mexico.” However, he then elaborated his strong Unionist beliefs, arguing that secession would “abandon to wrong-doers our vast and increasing national wealth,

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<sup>127</sup> William A. Lenoir Diary, February 15, 1851, Thomas A. Lenoir Papers, Duke Special Collections (DSC).

our magnificent capitol and public buildings, our archives, our soul stirring national traditions, our army, and our proud flag.”<sup>128</sup> Behind Lenoir’s idealistic appeal for Unionism resided a fear of the destruction and social disintegration that war would bring. Walter Lenoir’s beliefs contrasted with those of his relatives, the Pattersons, who supported the secession movement. These political fractures served as an early indicator of the social unraveling that would eventually come.

Under the stresses of the Civil War, the Lenoir family advocated for and attempted to save their disintegrating society but eventually chose to pursue the most individually advantageous course of action at their community’s expense. Despite advocating for Unionism throughout the secession crisis, the Lenoir family, like many western North Carolinians, followed their state into the Confederacy. The battle of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861 and President Abraham Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops three days later, provoked a nearly unanimous response from highlanders in favor of the Confederacy. In the months that followed the declaration of secession, mountain society appeared politically homogenous. As members of the elite, the Lenoirs obtained privileged positions as officers within the Confederate Army. Walter Waightstill Lenoir served as a captain in Zebulon Vance’s regiment, also called the 37<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry. His brother, Thomas Isaac Lenoir, who lived not far from the Tennessee-North Carolina border, served as a captain for the 25<sup>th</sup> North Carolina, and worked to organize a company drawn from the community near his home.<sup>129</sup> Like most of western North Carolina, the Lenoir family temporarily put behind them their previous Unionism and participated in the initial euphoria that pervaded the region in the first months of the war.

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<sup>128</sup> W. W. Lenoir to Zebulon Baird Vance, January 7, 1861, in Johnston, *The Papers of Zebulon Vance*, 80-81.

<sup>129</sup> Captain William Waightstill Lenoir to Brother Thomas Isaac Lenoir, September 6, 1862, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; Inscoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 78.

The war unfortunately brought the Lenoirs considerable suffering and sacrifice. The family's early correspondence during the war was relatively light-hearted. Thomas Isaac Lenoir worried about the state of his business while he was away and in January of 1862, his wife, Lizzie Lenoir wrote back to him concerning the small sacrifices she had to make: "I have just finished making one of my home-spun dresses... all say it is very pretty and of course I think so."<sup>130</sup> In July 1862 Sarah Lenoir, a cousin of William A. Lenoir, wrote from her home in Morgantown in Burke County, "Morgantown must be the safest place in the whole Confederacy."<sup>131</sup> However, as the war progressed the Lenoir family's correspondence turned increasingly desperate, as even the wealthiest elites felt the burdens and grim realities of the struggling home front. Lizzie Lenoir's sister-in-law, Sarah Leonora Lenoir, wrote to her in October 1862, "It seems that we are to learn to do without clothes and shoes if the war continues."<sup>132</sup> A year later, in October 1863, a friend complained to Sally Lenoir, "I thought we were coming to a plentiful country but we haven't bought a chicken ever since we have been here."<sup>133</sup> Even those with means, connections, and options, the elites could not always obtain certain necessities in western North Carolina, facing issues that that already plagued the other social classes.

Physical hardships and scars of war also became realities for the family. After receiving three bullet wounds during the Second Battle of Bull Run in August 1862, Walter Waightstill

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<sup>130</sup> Lizzie Lenoir to Thomas Isaac Lenoir, January 8, 1862, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; T. I. Lenoir to W. W. Lenoir, July 2, 1861, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>131</sup> Sarah J. Lenoir to Annie Lenoir, July 10, 1862, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC as quoted in Insoe and McKinney, *The Heart of Confedera Appalachia*, 5.

<sup>132</sup> Sarah Leonora Lenoir to Lizzie Lenoir, October 3, 1862, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>133</sup> Mary E. Charles to Sally Lenoir, October 7, 1863, Thomas Lenoir Sr. Papers, DSC.

Lenoir had his leg amputated just below the knee.<sup>134</sup> Lenoir then received a discharge from the army and returned home to Fort Defiance where he lamented, “I find myself disappointed upon inquiring as [to] the efficiency of the artificial legs, and will have to make up my mind to be a worse cripple than I had hoped for.”<sup>135</sup> While these sorts of hardships were commonly associated with war and affected people across the North and South, when combined with economic hardships, disintegrating government and guerrilla warfare that especially affected communities in western North Carolina, they bred a degree of disillusionment greater than what existed outside the mountain region and in better-connected and established commercial centers.

By June 1862, The Lenoirs, like highlanders across all classes, felt their farms and businesses suffer from a lack of manpower and poor growing conditions: “Our farming operations are very much behind. The corn is very small. Wheat and oats look like being very little account.”<sup>136</sup> In April 1863, Walter Waightstill Lenoir’s uncle, Joseph Caldwell Norwood wrote of his neighbor, “I don’t know where he is to get bread and meat for my family this summer. I have about 200 bu. [bushels] corn less than I usually have this season of the year....”<sup>137</sup> As the Lenoir family derived a significant portion of their income from tenant farmers, they became increasingly vulnerable to the sufferings of the lower classes. A lack of manpower prevented these small tenant farmers from paying their rents, as mountain agriculture necessitated labor-intensive fieldwork.<sup>138</sup> After returning home to western North Carolina from the army in the Fall of 1862 due to his amputated leg, Walter Lenoir wrote to his mother of the vulnerable financial situation that a lack of manpower had exacerbated: “my tenants will be

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<sup>134</sup> Reverend William Norwood to Lizzie Lenoir, September 26, 1862, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>135</sup> Walter W. Lenoir to Thomas Isaac Lenoir, February 11, 1863, Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Rufus Theodore Lenoir to Walter Waightstill Lenoir, June 2, 1862, Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Joseph Norwood to W. W. Lenoir, March 6, 1863, Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 14.

nearly all women and children, so that I will not be able to depend on my rents for another year's provisions."<sup>139</sup> However, he then explained that he was in the process of adapting his own land to more efficiently and successfully grow food: "But I hope I will be tolerably independent by that time, at least so far as something to eat is concerned."<sup>140</sup> In attempting to convert his farm into a more subsistence-based enterprise, Walter Lenoir removed himself to some extent from the interconnected market system that he had helped to create and that had flourished during the antebellum period. The scarcity of food served as a common concern for even the wealthiest families in the region as poor infrastructure and a collapsing local government left the region increasingly isolated from aid and from the attention of those in power elsewhere.

While not usually shared equally, the same hardships and scarcities faced by other members of their community now impacted the Lenoirs. In particular, a scarcity of salt burdened all classes in Caldwell County. As early June 1862 Rufus Theodore Lenoir wrote, "Wagons return with but little salt from the works."<sup>141</sup> Similarly, John Bennings, a trader who supplied the local community in Caldwell County, informed the Lenoirs that on his last trip in January 1863 to obtain salt, "we have not got half of the last purchase" and could only hope that "the balance of it is hauled to the Country."<sup>142</sup> The impossibility for even the wealthiest families to obtain certain necessities like salt illustrated the rapidly worsening conditions of the home front in western North Carolina. Furthermore, the scarcity of salt within the Lenoir family's community represented the disintegration of basic economic connections that had linked all components of society to the market system until the first years of the Civil War.

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<sup>139</sup> W. W. Lenoir to Mother (Selena Avery Lenoir), April 20, 1863, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Rufus Theodore Lenoir to W. W. Lenoir, June 2, 1862, Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> J. A. Bennings to Lenoir Family of East Fork of the Pigeon, January 14, 1863, Ibid.

In the war's final years, a scarcity of resources became a fixed aspect of life for the Lenoir family. However, the political instability and violence that threatened their assets and their security also became a pressing concern. This lack of resources often served to heighten the instability, as some highlanders turned to violence to obtain these resources. In August 1863, the Walter Lenoir's cousin Joseph Norwood observed the quickly destabilizing situation in the county directly to the north: "They have a terrible state of things upon the Tennessee line particularly in Watauga. There is a land of Robbers and outlaws who are constantly plundering the people in the night...."<sup>143</sup> Norwood's letter to Walter served to only heighten the Lenoir family's distress as Norwood described an event in which raiders of mysterious motives and loyalties violently murdered a family friend who had been a fellow member of the Caldwell County elite.<sup>144</sup> In September 1863, Lizzie Lenoir wrote to Rufus Lenoir, describing the death of a member of the home guard three miles from her house near the border of Tennessee: "When they got near the Tories, the woman, who was guiding them began to sing and they found there were eight or ten instead of three. They shot at the man that was nearest them three times, killed the third time, he has left a wife and eight children destitute of almost everything."<sup>145</sup> While violence and fear entered the region in growing waves over the course of the war, organized military incursions slowly became a more pressing concern, as Confederate and Union troops battled in nearby eastern Tennessee. This issue caused Lizzie Lenoir to write in the fall of 1863, "It is a gloomy time indeed. The Yanks are getting pretty near home now."<sup>146</sup> However, Walter Lenoir did not worry too much about a major military campaign through the region to forage and

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<sup>143</sup> Joseph Norwood to W.W. Lenoir, August 13, 1863, *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Lizzie Lenoir to Rufus Theodore Lenoir, September 21, 1862, Thomas Lenoir Sr. Papers, DSC.

<sup>146</sup> Lizzie Lenoir to Mother, October 26, 1863, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

raid their meager resources. As he wrote in January 1864, “Our best protection will be our poverty and bad roads, which will make it cheaper for them to buy their grain and beef in the North West than steal them here.”<sup>147</sup> Walter Lenoir’s assertion suggested that conditions in western North Carolina were particularly terrible. While his assumption may have quelled some fear of Union occupation for highlanders, the prevalence of violence from guerrilla bands and Tories close to home certainly added to their desperation.

Like the Patterson family, The Lenoir family’s fear reached a climax as Stoneman’s Raid approached Fort Defiance and Caldwell County in early April 1865. Fortunately for the Lenoirs, however, Stoneman’s troops did not destroy most of the Lenoir’s assets.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, the raid did annihilate most of the remaining Confederate infrastructure and home guard in Caldwell County. As a result, elites like the Lenoirs attempted to guard their assets themselves and to maintain their own security. Joseph Norwood, living in the town of Lenoir, wrote to Walter Waightstill Lenoir following Stoneman’s raid, “I have been serving on guard... every third night, and have been as much as two weeks without taking off my clothes. We are in danger constantly.”<sup>149</sup> As the mountain community crumbled by the end of the war, the security provided by the home guard also vanished. The Lenoirs’ previous wealth and resources could only provide them limited protection, causing the family to take their security into their own hands. The family turned inward, distrustful of the community they had help to develop during the antebellum period. Tired of constant fear and privations from endless guerrilla warfare, in early 1865 Walter Waightstill Lenoir described the “low ebb” in “the morality and virtue of

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<sup>147</sup> Walter W. Lenoir to Selina Avery Lenoir, January 15, 1864, *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> McKinney and Inscoe, *The Heart of the Confederacy*, 245.

<sup>149</sup> Joseph Norwood as quoted in *Ibid.*, 251.



some of my white neighbors.”<sup>150</sup> He believed yeoman farmers in his community were carrying out class-based social justice against him and fellow members of the elites. He described their actions as “the exhibition of a malicious and disappointed feeling towards those who they were weak enough to believe would be brought to their own level.”<sup>151</sup> Lenoir demonstrated a contempt for a significant portion of his own community by the end of the war. His alienation from and verbal hostility towards other classes and members of his own society contrasts the economic and political connections he maintained with his community during the antebellum period. The war not only destroyed their society, but it also turned society against itself, demonstrating the tenuous nature of the mountain culture in western North Carolina during the Civil War.

### **The Bell Family**

The Bell family’s location, their individual circumstances, and the conditions within their community before and during the war provided a slightly different image of mountain elites than the Gashes, Pattersons, and Lenoirs. The Bells’ more remote and less developed location in the far western corner of North Carolina created a different community and lifestyle for elites. However, the Bell family’s story nevertheless adheres to the framework, as both the trends observed with the other three families, spanning the antebellum period to the end of the Civil War, are distinctly visible for the Bells. As elites, the Bells worked to develop the connectedness of their community during the antebellum period and early in the war. As their community disintegrated under the pressures and depredations of Civil War, the Bell family first attempted

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<sup>150</sup> W. W. Lenoir to Sarah J. Lenoir, January 2, 1865, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC as quoted in Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 89.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

to save their mountain community, but eventually pursued the most individually advantageous course of action, often at the expense of any social or community consideration. Like most elites, the Bells demonstrated an early entrepreneurial drive to develop themselves and their community, a commitment to the Confederacy despite significant war weariness, political and social leadership within their community and within the Confederate military, hardship brought on by conditions on the home front, and insecurity exacerbated by the disintegrating social and political instability.

While archival sources contain only traces of information on the Bell family's life before the war, what information is available adheres to the framework and trends laid out by the other families. Alfred W. Bell and his wife Mary Bell moved to Franklin, the county seat of Macon County, from northern Georgia a year before the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>152</sup> For Alfred Bell, the move to Franklin was a return home, as his father Benjamin Bell had helped to found Franklin in 1828 and served as the county's first sheriff. Upon arriving, Alfred Bell started a dentistry practice and purchased a substantial portion of land.<sup>153</sup> Macon County, resting deep within the mountains and far from most urban centers or rich river valleys, demonstrated less commercial and urbanized development than many of the other counties studied in this paper. Small farmers owning less than fifty acres comprised 60 percent of the population, and the largest town of the county in which the Bells lived consisted of less than 150 residents.<sup>154</sup> This fostered an elite with many of the same characteristics exhibited by elites in Caldwell, Burke, and Buncombe counties but often on a relatively smaller scale. Macon County elites, like the

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<sup>152</sup> Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance*, 146.

<sup>153</sup> McKinney and Inscoe, *The Heart of the Confederacy*, 17, 184.

<sup>154</sup> Inscoe, *Race, War, and Remembrance*, 147.

Bells, held both position and wealth within their communities, but lacked statewide political connections and economic influence beyond their county or region.

Alfred Bell and his wife Mary exhibited an entrepreneurial spirit common to many mountain elites. Bell supplemented the income from his dentistry practice by renting out his land to tenant farmers. Unlike the Gashes, the Pattersons and the Lenoirs, the Bells rarely owned slaves but instead occasionally hired several from other owners when their own farm required extra labor.<sup>155</sup> While the Civil War and a lack of manpower forced the Bells to alter their business practices, the Bells demonstrated remarkable adaptability to the changing economic conditions and thus managed to survive the war mostly economically intact. Mary Bell's business intuition proved invaluable for navigating the rapidly destabilizing economic system while Alfred Bell served the Confederacy. Despite an extreme deficit in manpower throughout the region, Mary continued to utilize and profit from the few available tenants and laborers.<sup>156</sup> In addition, Mary traded and bartered with many of the desperate yeoman families, acquiring numerous clients who owed her all sorts of food and goods, ranging from hams to chickens to apples.<sup>157</sup> While this economic relationship may have been exploitative, the Bell family's wealth gap relative to their community was much less than the economic divides enjoyed by the Lenoirs or Pattersons and their communities, suggesting that these economic relationships were most likely cooperative. Mary also attempted to convert her farm into something more subsistence-based to protect against the region's growing instability by acquiring a sow and expanding her acreage. This transition towards subsistence-based agriculture represented a step away from the market-based system that they had participated in and helped to build during the antebellum

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<sup>155</sup> Inscoc and Mckinney, *The Heart of the Confederacy*, 17.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>157</sup> Mary Bell to A. W. Bell, April 15, 1864, Alfred W. Bell Papers, DSC.

period. In April 1864 Mary proudly described the various work she had done to ensure the farm continued operating and wrote, “We can all eat hearty and that is all you can brag on.”<sup>158</sup> While the Bells’ economic survival through the war did not represent the experience of most highlanders, they nevertheless suffered and endured many of the other stresses of war.

In the wake of North Carolina’s secession, the Bell family embraced the new Confederate system as a means of augmenting their influence and developing the connectedness of their community. Bell enthusiastically supported and contributed to the war effort. In particular, in November 1861, he led the effort to raise a company in Macon County, demonstrating the leadership role he played within his community.<sup>159</sup> This action represented an attempt by Bell to build his influence as well as to develop a strong and united community. Alfred Bell obtained a position as an officer in the 39<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry regiment, rising to the rank of captain.

By August 1862, Alfred Bell began to show early signs of war weariness, yet his Confederate patriotism had not appeared to wane. This period represented a turning point in Bell’s attitude towards the war. He wrote, “I am tired of this war and am ready for them to recognize us a free people, but not until then am I willing for peace.”<sup>160</sup> At the battle of Murfreesboro (Stones River) on January 1, 1863, the 39<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry endured heavy fighting and high losses.<sup>161</sup> The regiment lost its two most senior officers, placing Bell temporarily in command of the entire regiment. The event at least demonstrated Bell’s continued commitment to the Confederacy, despite his growing personal war weariness.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., April 22, 1864, Ibid., as quoted in Inscoc, *Race War and Remembrance*, 161.

<sup>159</sup> Inscoc and McKinney, *The Heart of the Confederacy*, 79.

<sup>160</sup> A. W. Bell to Mary Bell, August 27, 1862, Alfred W. Bell Papers, DSC.

<sup>161</sup> “History of the 39<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry Regiment,” (accessed February 16, 2015), <http://thomaslegion.net/39thnorthcarolinainfantryregiment.html>.

While Bell himself remained steadfastly pro-Confederate, other members of his community demonstrated a weakening commitment to the Confederacy. The Bell family's allegiance to the Confederacy, particularly strong during the first years of the war, separated them from some of their neighbors, who refused to enlist and later avoided conscription. In March 1862, Mary Bell expressed frustration over the apathy of many highlanders for the Confederate cause and the war: "It makes us very mad to see other women enjoying themselves with their husbands and ours gone."<sup>162</sup> Later that spring, the Confederacy enacted the conscription act, to which Mary Bell responded, "[The Conscription Act] will take some who ought to go... whilst some will be left behind still who ought to go."<sup>163</sup> Mary Bell's Confederate loyalty remained strong through the spring of 1862, yet she questioned the loyalty of some in her community and doubted the Confederacy's ability to enforce its centralizing initiatives. Apathy for the Confederacy eventually evolved into anti-Confederate sentiment among all classes in mountain society. However, anti-Confederate sentiment often affected the lower classes first and those who had involved themselves in the Confederacy's development last. The Bell family maintained their loyalty to the Confederacy far longer than many in their community as a means of preserving the existing social and political system they had helped to create – they in fact had the most to lose.

By 1863, Bell continued to advocate for his family and community on the home front, aiming to stop the lawlessness and disintegration within his community. Bell's wife Mary and others living throughout western North Carolina endured the abusive economic practices of speculators. A merchant named H. W. Nolen had relocated from Massachusetts to Macon

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<sup>162</sup> Mary Bell to A. W. Bell, March 5, 1862, Alfred W. Bell Papers, DSC.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., April 28, 1862, Ibid.

County in the years preceding the war.<sup>164</sup> Nolen claimed exemption from Confederate service on account of his position as postmaster, and then used his freedom from military service to buy up leather, brandy, and other resources desired and needed by highlanders in the area.<sup>165</sup> Swollen with supplies, Nolen then charged highlanders excessively high prices for his goods, often times violating legal price ceilings set by the state. On behalf of the angered citizens of Franklin, Alfred Bell petitioned Governor Vance to have these abusive practices ended and Nolen punished. On February 23, 1863, he wrote, “it is evident from the high prices that he is cahring [charging] twice the percent allowed by law.... He bought up all the leather he could, made it into shoes & sold it to the citizens and soldiers at high figures – they being compelled to buy.”<sup>166</sup> After explaining the specific issue, Bell continued “He has been engaged in, extortioning upon the poor wives of soldiers by selling them shoes at astonishing rates.... It does not look right that this Yankee pet should be permitted to extortion and amass a fortune off of those who are defending our rights....”<sup>167</sup> Extortion became a common hardship that further strained the mountain communities that already struggled for subsistence. Controlling products that many families desperately needed, speculators made life for the struggling families impossibly difficult and exacerbated strife within mountain communities. These communities and merchant-consumer relationships had thrived economically in an integrated and interconnected system during the antebellum period, but had begun to degrade as individualized self-interest increasingly dominated highlander’s decision-making processes at the expense of other considerations. Nolen’s actions alienated him from members of all components of mountain society, demonstrating the breakdown of connections that bound the community. Bell’s appeal to

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<sup>164</sup> McKinney and Inscoe, *Heart of the Confederacy*, 175.

<sup>165</sup> A. W. Bell to Governor Zebulon Vance, February 23, 1863, Alfred W. Bell Papers, DSC.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

Vance on behalf of his community represented his continued attempt to advocate for his community, even as it disintegrated under the stresses of war.

Appealing to Governor Vance, often for highly specific and nuanced issues, served as a common way by which both members of the elite and literate members of lower classes could advocate on their own behalf in an attempt to slow the disintegration of connectedness of their community.<sup>168</sup> Appealing to Governor Vance became a legal and often more reliable means of advocating for oneself amidst the political turmoil in western North Carolina than trying to affect change through personal action or through a crippled Confederate system. Vance emerged as a symbol of aid and dependability that contrasted with the collapsing and corrupt local systems of government. While outwardly for advancing the Confederate cause, Governor Vance firmly maintained that he held an obligation to serve the people of North Carolina first. Thus, people appealed to Governor Vance for help with a wide range of issues that often expressed disaffection for the Confederacy. In a letter to Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, Vance wrote in February 1864, “The files of my office are filled up with the unavailing complaints of outraged citizens to who redress is impossible. Though the noise of their natural murmurs is set down to disloyalty... I make no threat.”<sup>169</sup> Highlanders of all classes, including Bell, appealed to Vance as a legal alternative to desertion and vigilante justice and as a means of saving the connectedness of their communities.

News of the slowly disintegrating home front disturbed Bell and most of his regiment, as they felt powerless to protect their assets and families from destabilizing and violent elements that pervaded the mountains. These destabilizing elements came from and operated within the

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<sup>168</sup> McKinney, “Women’s Role in Civil War Western North Carolina,” 43.

<sup>169</sup> Governor Zebulon Baird Vance to President Jefferson Davis, February 9, 1864 in *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, ed. John G. Barrett and W. Buck Years (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 2002), 288.

region, consisting of draft-dodgers, deserters, and Unionist sympathizers. However, in this early stage of the war, these forces remained unconnected to the organized Union army, operating far away. In August 1862, Bell, theorized that “from the looks of the country” the Union Army would not “want a footing here for it[‘s] broken and quite a poverty Stricken place.”<sup>170</sup> This assertion suggested that the stresses of Civil War have already begun to reduce the region to poverty, especially compared with the historically wealthier regions of the cotton-south. While federal troops did not present an immediate threat to the Bells, Captain Bell and the soldiers under his command expressed anxiety and anger at the presence of violent guerrillas and Tories operating within their county. Bell wrote in January 1862, “My boys are on their heads to go” home to defend their families.<sup>171</sup> This common sentiment transcended class as both elites and the poor yeoman farmers similarly worried about worsening conditions on the home front. The situation devolved as the war progressed, and by 1864 Bell, fighting for the Confederate Army of Tennessee, felt deep concern for his home far away. He wrote to Mary Bell, “I seen in the Mobile Paper... that Yanks made a raid into Macon [County], but Thomases Indians bush wacked them so that they turned back 20 miles below Franklin....”<sup>172</sup> While this news must have comforted Bell, he worried about the likelihood of raids, instructing his wife, “You had better spread my clothes out in a feather bed, for fear of additional raid....I have plenty of clothing so don’t trouble yourself about me.”<sup>173</sup> Bell decided that the safest course of action for his

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<sup>170</sup> A. W. Bell to Mary Bell, December 10, 1862, Alfred W. Bell Papers, DSC.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., January 30, 1862.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., February 25, 1864; William Holland Thomas, a prominent white member of the Eastern Band of Cherokees and a member of the political elites in the region, recruited and organized a Confederate regiment, known as Thomas’s Legion. The Legion consisted of a mixture of Cherokee and white companies that served as the principal home guard of south western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee, Insoce and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 110.

<sup>173</sup> A. W. Bell to Mary Bell, July 1, 1864, Alfred W. Bell Papers, DSC.



undefended family was to give the hungry and violent raiders the clothing and food they desired. These sorts of measures represented the stresses of war and the grim reality for those of all classes.

As early 1862, Bell's letters to his wife recorded the degree of disaffection and desertion that existed among his troops. As his regiment and company were composed of individuals from Bell's own local area, their impulses and decisions indicated the health and connectedness of his own community. Historian Peter Bearman argues that units composed of men from the same local communities ironically had the highest desertion rates, as disaffection within their community and on the front drove men in these companies to desert together.<sup>174</sup> Bell's company exhibited this trend, as men in his company deserted in droves together as the war progressed. Bell wrote to his wife Mary in December 1862 that his "Regiment has nearly all gone some deserted some furloughed some sick there is but 90 men for duty in the regt now...."<sup>175</sup> He also noted that the Confederate home guard had rounded up twenty deserters near his home in Macon County, including six from his own company. High rates of desertion of men from Bell's own company not only exacerbated the problems of guerrilla violence and instability on the home front, but it also indirectly indicated the disintegration of connectedness in his local community.

Bell appeared motivated by the same impulses to return home as the men under his command. He intimated to his wife in March 1864, "I could resign and go but the boys don't want me to leave the Co. I would hate to be conscripted...."<sup>176</sup> In July of that year, Bell wrote again, "I am almost frantic to get home but there is no chance until after this fight is over then I

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<sup>174</sup> Peter S. Bearman, "Desertion as Localism: Army Unit Solidarity and Group Norms in the U.S. Civil War," *Social Forces* 70 (1991): 325, 337.

<sup>175</sup> A. W. Bell to Mary Bell, December 10, 1862, Alfred W. Bell Papers, DSC.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, March 31, 1864.

shall try with all the scheming that I can bring to bear.”<sup>177</sup> The “fight” Bell wrote about may have referred to the broader war or specifically the Battle of Atlanta in which he was about to participate. Regardless, the sentiment he expressed suggested a growing disillusionment with the war and even possibly the Confederate cause. Bell’s economic advantages may have afforded his family greater comfort and security throughout the war, but his rank also held personal limitations. Bell could not abandon his position as officer because of the stigma and reputation surrounding desertion for his class. Beyond mere survival and self-preservation, other elites demonstrated similar motivations to Bell, as he described another officer in his regiment wrestling with the same burden: “He speaks of resigning but I doubt it as the prospects are now very favorable for him to be promoted...”<sup>178</sup> Bell then made the distinction between the elites in the officer core and those of lower classes writing, “Most have gone already and they most all say they are going.”<sup>179</sup> Individual social and economic advancement and security guided the Bell family’s decisions throughout the war. However, through much of the war these actions and efforts also aided the development of connectedness in their communities. However, Bell’s growing disillusionment and efforts to relinquish his position as an officer no longer served to develop his community, representing the pursuit of their self-interest with less consideration for their society.

In the spring of 1864 Bell appealed to Governor Vance again. Bell and much of his company requested from Vance a transfer to the home guard, which would allow them to be located closer to home and to protect their families and property: “We have petitioned Governor

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., July 1, 1864.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., August 23, 1864.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

Vance to get us to Western NC to defend our homes which I hope will suc[c]eed.”<sup>180</sup> A month later, in May 1864, Bell still held out hope that Vance would intervene on his behalf, but perhaps due to the sheer volume of requests, appeals, and petitions to the Governor’s office or perhaps simply because Vance felt Bell and his men were needed at the front, Bell’s request for transfer home was never answered.

While appealing to Governor Vance proved ineffective for Bell, he contemplated several other legally viable options that would place him closer to home, while maintaining his status as a member of the elite. Bell reflected on one opportunity offered to him in July 1864 by Colonel James Bryan, who had served alongside Bell in the 39<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry and had since resigned his officer’s commission: “while we was camped in Atlanta [he] come out to see me he has the appointment of buying cattle in Western NC North Ga. E. Tenn &c for the army on his own hoof and has offer[e]d me a position as soon as I resign.”<sup>181</sup> Bell had also considered other options: “Should this fail I reckon I should have to join [William H] Thomas, [James] Henry [North Carolina Home Guards] or Young either would keep me near home...”<sup>182</sup> Bell considered numerous possibilities that allowed him to pursue his personal interest within the collapsing Confederate system. His desire to return home superseded almost all other considerations including the Confederate cause, his military duty, and his local community. While he considered these options, he remained with the Confederate army until March 2, 1865, when he finally returned home to Franklin.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., April 8, 1864.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., July 27, 1864.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> “Alfred Bell,” U.S., Civil War Soldiers Records and Profiles, 1861-1865, Ancestry Library, (accessed February 22, 2015).

The Bell family narrative demonstrated a transition in the conditions within a mountain community and a shift in individual mindsets. Macon County, where the Bells lived, was generally a pro-Confederate, healthy, and interconnected society during the antebellum period and early in the Civil War. However, the stresses of the Civil War brought guerrilla violence, caused fellow members of the elite to extort and deprive their community of various necessities, and fostered widespread disillusionment with the old Confederate regime. These privations unraveled the connectedness of the Bell's community. The mindset of individual families, including the Bells, over the course of the antebellum period and Civil War reflected this transition. As leaders in their community, the Bells initially dedicated themselves to building and preserving their community and maintained a commitment to the Confederacy. However, by the end of the war, the Bells pursued their individual self-interest often without regard for the disintegrating Confederate system and their local community, demonstrating the same breakdown observed across western North Carolina.

### **The Cowles Family**

The experience of the Cowles Family of Wilkes County before and during the Civil War again indicates two distinct trends within their narrative. Before 1862, the Cowles family developed the network or connectedness of their community. After 1862, under the privations and stresses of war, the Cowles family failed to prevent and even contributed to the breakdown of their society. The family remained particularly notable not only for its wealth and power but also for its committed Unionist beliefs. Calvin Cowles and many of his relatives served as the region's most outspoken anti-secessionists during the antebellum period and through the secession crisis. As the war progressed, the family's beliefs became slightly more muted and

they managed within a Confederate system, navigating the confusing mix of allegiances and loyalties that characterized mountain society. The Cowles family maintained a vibrant and healthy relationship with their community and with members of lower classes during the antebellum period, but that relationship eventually unraveled during the Civil War, as mountain society disintegrated, motivations turned inward, and elites' actions increasingly served only individual their self-interests.

Josiah Cowles, Calvin Cowles's father, settled in Hamptonville of Yadkin County in the foothills directly to the east of Wilkes County after emigrating from Connecticut in 1815.<sup>184</sup> In 1844 he moved his family to Wilkesboro in Wilkes County to start a general store and trading post for the growing mountain community there. Throughout the antebellum period, Josiah Cowles acquired wealth first as a tinsmith and then as a merchant, trading in numerous types of goods. Like many mountain elites, prior to 1844 Cowles created a presence for himself in local politics, serving as the justice of the peace and on the county court in Surry County, directly to the northwest of Wilkes County.<sup>185</sup> While in office, Cowles remained a proponent of Whig politics and internal improvements for the western region. Josiah Cowles's economic and political career during the antebellum period demonstrates a commitment to developing the communities in which he lived.

Similarly, Calvin J. Cowles demonstrated a commitment to strengthening the interconnectedness of mountain society. By advancing his own social position, Cowles believed he could also increase his ability to advocate for and serve his community. Cowles married the daughter of William Woods Holden, another outspoken Unionist member of the elite, whose

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<sup>184</sup> "Biography Calvin Josiah Cowles," NCpedia, (Accessed February 22, 2015), [www.ncpedia.org/biography/cowles-calvin-josiah](http://www.ncpedia.org/biography/cowles-calvin-josiah).

<sup>185</sup> "Biography Josiah Cowles," NCpedia, (Accessed February 22, 2015), [www.Ncpedia.org/biography/cowls-josiah](http://www.Ncpedia.org/biography/cowls-josiah).

political beliefs aligned with his.<sup>186</sup> Intermarriage between the Cowles family and other powerful elites represented an effort to boost their own status within and beyond their own community.

Calvin Cowles inherited his father's entrepreneurial drive, amassing a fortune for himself. He dealt in a wide variety of economic pursuits including trading ginseng to northern markets, running a general store, growing his farm, speculating on real estate, renting to tenant farmers, acquiring slaves and sponsoring railroad development.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, starting in 1852, Cowles also received an appointment as postmaster, serving to connect his mountain community to the region and the country beyond the mountains.<sup>188</sup> Cowles purchased fourteen thousand acres of land scattered throughout western North Carolina, which the 1860 census valued at 20,000 dollars.<sup>189</sup> He then rented the land to tenants and developed a large portion for himself. Unlike many of the elites whose economic and political interests connected them with southern urban centers, Cowles's business focused him northward.<sup>190</sup> From his location in northwestern North Carolina, the trading networks and transportation routes made northern markets more accessible. Throughout the antebellum period Cowles and other merchants in the northern counties of Wilkes, Watauga, Ashe, and Alleghany travelled to northern cities like Washington and Philadelphia on business. By the time of the session crisis, Cowles had become Wilkes County's second largest slaveholder and perhaps its wealthiest resident, owning between 20 and 30 slaves in 1860. Tied both to his local community and the larger United States, Cowles inhabited a tricky political position as the Southern political landscape shifted and the Whig

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<sup>186</sup> Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 199.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 67.

<sup>188</sup> "Calvin J Cowles in U.S., Appointments of U.S. Postmasters, 1832-1971," Ancestry Library, (Accessed February 25, 2015).

<sup>189</sup> Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 6; "Calvin Cowles in the 1860 United States Federal Census, Wilkes County," Ancestry Library, (Accessed February 25, 2015).

<sup>190</sup> Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*, 247.

party declined in the 1850s. However, these factors prompted him to strongly advocate for the continued existence of the Union as the secession crisis unfolded.

Like many elites, Cowles focused his political attention on the issue of internal improvements for the western region throughout the antebellum period, desiring better infrastructure in the form of roads and eventually railroads. Cowles expressed frustration over the issue of the region's isolation, as various forms of infrastructure were slow to move westward. His position as postmaster not only represented an effort to strengthen social and government institutions, but also indicated that Cowles relied upon strong infrastructure to serve his community in this role. Therefore, Cowles, like his father, demonstrated the family's commitment to internal improvements that would boost the economic vibrancy of their community. A Whig pamphlet found in Calvin Cowles's archival collection entitled, "Equal Taxation, Injustice Done to the West by Governor Ellis," and dated April 17, 1859, railed against the secessionist politics of Governor John W. Ellis and the lack of infrastructure in the western region. The pamphlet perceived a divide between eastern and western parts of the state and expressed frustration over the unequal development of internal improvements: "The East is rather indebted to the West for a large proportion of the Railroads in the State....Of the 684 miles of railroads completed in the State, 480 miles are East of Raleigh, and only 204 miles West of Raleigh."<sup>191</sup> The pamphlet went to describe Governor Ellis's condemnation of the Whig party's campaign for internal improvement in the west: "[Governor Ellis] then went into a long argument to show that the [internal improvement] measure was peculiarly Western in its origin and that that plank in the platform of the Opposition was made of Mountain-Oak, and that it

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<sup>191</sup> "Equal Taxation, Injustice Done to the west by Governor Ellis," April 17, 1859, Calvin J. Cowles Papers, NCDAH, 5.

would result in pecuniary injury to the East.”<sup>192</sup> As an easterner and a representative of the plantation elites in other parts of the state, Governor Ellis’s political beliefs conflicted with the intentions and goals of many highlanders, most notably those highlanders with a desire for internal improvements. This pamphlet indicates a level of consciousness regarding differences between mountain communities and the highlander identity from society elsewhere in the South. While this highlander identity did not resemble the mountain culture associated with stereotypes of highlanders as backwards and individualistic, it may have suggested the idea that mountain society was notably distinct from elsewhere in the South.

Cowles and many of those in his county vigorously opposed secession. Cowles had invested heavily in slaves, yet he fought vehemently against secession, suggesting that a commitment to southern traditions did not dominate his politics. Cowles asked in 1860, “Do you think the interest of the negro requires so great a sacrifice?”<sup>193</sup> His ancestral and economic ties to the North may have more strongly influenced him politically against disunion, than his identity as a southerner.

Cowles’s community in Wilkes County transitioned dramatically during the spring of 1861. Discussing the secession winter, Cowles wrote in December 1860, “Public sentiment here amongst the rank & file is decidedly averse to extreme measures.”<sup>194</sup> However, as states in the upper south began to join the Confederacy in April 1861, highlanders proved susceptible to trends developing far beyond the mountains. James Gwyn, a fellow member of the Wilkes County elite, wrote that by May 1861, in his community “most everybody now [is] for the

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>193</sup> Calvin J. Cowles to friend, December 11, 1860, Calvin J. Cowles Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>194</sup> Calvin J. Cowles to S. W. Roosevelt, December 10, 1860, Calvin J. Cowles Papers, NCDAH.



South.”<sup>195</sup> In June 1861, Cowles’s brother Josiah Cowles wrote to him, explaining his own personal change in political views: “I was as strong a Union man as any in the state up to the time [of] Lincoln’s proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers. I then saw that the South had either to submit to abject vassalage or assert her rights at the point of the sword.”<sup>196</sup> However, Calvin Cowles remained steadfastly Unionist, despairing that “War sets upon me like a nightmare... with all enterprises falling to the ground.”<sup>197</sup> Cowles may have held a love of the Union, but he also foresaw economic collapse that war would bring to western North Carolina. By continuing to advocate for Unionism while most of mountain society and even his family appeared pro-Confederate, Calvin Cowles grew more alienated from his community. The secession crisis and the dramatic transition of political views stimulated political divisions within mountain communities, foreshadowing a widespread disintegration of connectedness.

As early as the fall of 1861, the war created for Calvin Cowles some economic and political difficulties. He claimed an exemption from military service through his position as postmaster and his crippled leg allowed him to remain on the home front. However, Cowles’ large business, his trade with the North, and the stability of his immense property was threatened by the onset of war. In September 1861, a surveyor working for Cowles wrote, “I am sorry to inform you that I have not had the opportunity of surveying it yet owing to the fact, as you know that our difficulties with the north has frustrated and deranged all kinds of business, even of the most private character.”<sup>198</sup> The war also required Cowles to partially mute his strong political beliefs in order to conduct business with all groups as smoothly as possible. That same month,

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<sup>195</sup> James Gwyn Diary, vol. 4, entry for May 1, 1861, James Gwyn Papers, SHC.

<sup>196</sup> Josiah Cowles to Calvin J. Cowles, June 3, 1861, Calvin J. Cowles Papers, NCDAH quoted in McKinney and Inscoe, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 56.

<sup>197</sup> Calvin J. Cowles, June 1861 as quoted in “Biography Calvin Josiah Cowles,” NCpedia, (Accessed February 22, 2015), [www.ncpedia.org/biography/cowles-calvin-josiah](http://www.ncpedia.org/biography/cowles-calvin-josiah).

<sup>198</sup> W. W. Ashburn to Calvin Cowles, September 23, 1861, Calvin J. Cowles Papers, NCDAH.

his father warned him, “There is great trouble in store for all of us... and it is best for every one to preserve silence on the political affairs of the day.... I beseech you to be very careful of what you say.”<sup>199</sup> Nevertheless, Cowles stubbornly continued to uphold his Unionist beliefs, alienating him from pro-Confederate members of his community and from his own family. Furthermore, Cowles faced difficulties from his tenants, whose struggles affected him financially. He received numerous letters from tenants, explaining that they could not pay rent on the land. Thorton Prossit, a tenant on Cowles’s land, complained of the perpetual lack of salt and that he barely had resources to feed his livestock, making his experience particularly difficult and his options limited.<sup>200</sup> The difficulties brought on by the Civil War and by the delicate and worsening circumstances within his community plagued Cowles, whose wealth and resources could not spare him financial trouble nor substantially influence the deteriorating situation.

Throughout the war Cowles passively undermined the Confederacy. His actions represented individual self-interest rather than an attempt to develop his community. Cowles had served as postmaster for Wilkes County during the antebellum period and continued to do so through much of the Civil War. However, he refused to cooperate with the centralizing efforts of the Confederacy. In June 1862 Cowles received an official letter from the Post Office Department Appointment Bureau of the Confederate States of America:

A petition has been forwarded praying for your removal on this ground. Among the evidences of the charged disaffection it is asserted that you have refused to aid in the effort to raise an artillery company giving as a reason that it was useless to continue the struggle against our invaders. I desire to have from you a full and satisfactory explanation, so that I may feel certain of the loyalty of the postmaster at Wilkesboro.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Josiah Cowles to Calvin Coles, September 12, 1863, Cowles Papers, NCDAH.

<sup>200</sup> Thorton Prossit to Calvin J. Cowles, September 5, 1862, Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Post Office Department Appointment Bureau to Calvin Cowles, June 12, 1862, Ibid.

This letter indicated that Cowles was in fact undermining the war effort and the government's ability to function. As many in his community continued to support and fight for the Confederacy, Cowles's resistance reinforced the idea that by 1862 highlanders began to pursue their individual interests without regard to preserving the existing institutions, and thus contributed to the disintegration of communities. Almost a year later Cowles received another letter from the Post Office Department with a blank official loyalty oath document, explaining that "no response has been received" from the previous three oaths sent to him.<sup>202</sup> The Confederate Post Office Department eventually removed Cowles from his position as postmaster sometime in the spring of 1863. His actions as postmaster demonstrated Cowles' transition from muted discontent early in the conflict to passive resistance as the war continued.

Cowles also subscribed to the *North Carolina Standard*, an anti-war newspaper, edited by his father-in-law William Woods Holden that spoke for Unionists and anti-Confederates throughout North Carolina. Its mission statement claimed, "It would boldly expose and resist every tendency towards the concentration of power in the hands of the few at the expense of the many."<sup>203</sup> The *Standard* represented the efforts of Unionist-leaning elites to express their discontent with the Confederate Government and its institutions. Cowles's vocalized opinions most likely alienated him from his family and from those in his community that had contributed to the war effort and continued to support the Confederacy. His subscription to the *Standard* represented another way in which he resisted the Confederacy and potentially aided in the disintegration of connectedness his society.

The Cowles family suffered heavily throughout the Civil War. The family experienced the loss of Calvin Cowles's half-brother, Lieutenant Miles Melmoth, who died fighting in the

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., February 3, 1863.

<sup>203</sup> *North Carolina Standard* subscription, Calvin J. Cowles Papers, NCDAH.

38<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry at the Battle of Mechanicsville in June 1862.<sup>204</sup> Guerrilla warfare and a gang of deserters known as the Hamby gang continued to harass Cowles's community in Wilkesboro through the May 1865.<sup>205</sup> Cowles also experienced a severe economic blow to many of his assets, due in a large part to the struggling condition of his tenants. In May 1865 he had to personally travel all the way to Charlotte, North Carolina to bring back necessities like manufactured tools that were in high demand to both his family and what remained of his community. The roads and networks of trade he had previously relied upon had all but collapsed, making his journey exceedingly difficult.<sup>206</sup> Despite his previous wealth and position, he had only one horse healthy enough to make the journey to Charlotte and supposedly needed to borrow fifteen dollars from another member of the local elite in Wilkesboro.<sup>207</sup> This arduous journey illustrated the destruction of the Civil War and represented an attempt by Cowles to slow the disintegration of connectedness and salvage his community. Despite these efforts, Cowles turned inward, alienated from his neighbors and family by the confusing mixture of politically hostile beliefs that had taken root within western North Carolina.

The relentless pursuit of self-interest characterized the decisions and experiences of the Cowles family, as their society collapsed under the stresses of war. Calvin Cowles's Unionist beliefs alienated him from much of his community and even his family who continued to support the Confederacy, demonstrating how a previously connected society had become divided. His actions also subverted the Confederacy, symbolizing Cowles's personal transition from helping to develop the world he inhabited towards undermining the government and its institutions'

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<sup>204</sup> "Biography Calvin Josiah Cowles," NCpedia, (Accessed February 22, 2015), [www.ncpedia.org/biography/cowles-calvin-josiah](http://www.ncpedia.org/biography/cowles-calvin-josiah).

<sup>205</sup> H. A. Eller, "Recollections of Bushwacker Rule," Paul E. Hubbell Papers, NCDAH, 6-7.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

ability to function. Cowles's position as both a Unionist and a member of the mountain elite further disproves the idea that mountain elites acted as a homogenous group. The Civil War destroyed the mountain economy and divided his community, causing Cowles to turn inward, no longer aiming to preserve the existing Confederate system.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of the antebellum period and the Civil War, mountain communities in North Carolina were in a constant state of change. From the antebellum period until 1862, mountain communities developed incrementally, building greater and greater connectedness between and among social classes. Social and political institutions maintained the rule-of-law, provided basic services for their communities, and facilitated the growth of infrastructure. A rapidly growing and improving network of roads allowed for greater economic and social connections among all components of mountain communities. An ever-expanding market-system integrated all classes and individuals into the economy. At the vanguard of this change were mountain elites, who provided valuable economic services and spoke politically for their community. Furthermore, elites played an instrumental role in advocating, supporting, and representing their communities in local and state politics. As mountain elites interacted with and integrated themselves into all components of mountain society, their relative condition and experience reflected those of their community as a whole. Just as each elite family prospered and thrived during the antebellum period, so did the community to which they belonged.

The degree of connectedness that characterized mountain communities just before the Civil War suggested that mountain society would soon fully integrate economically and politically with the wider South and eventually the Confederacy, particularly as railroad

networks developed on either side of the Appalachian Mountains. As many highlanders already maintained connections to commercial and social centers outside of the mountains during the antebellum period, the introduction of railroads to the region would have only accelerated western North Carolina's development. Urbanization and a fuller and more readily accessible network of economic, political, and social connections appeared on the cusp of arrival in the mountain region. Similarly, up-and-coming political elites like Thomas Clingman, Zebulon Vance, and the elite families analyzed in this paper, represented a powerful voice and a vibrant political future for mountain communities. However, the Civil War interrupted and delayed these developments by decades, not reaching the region until the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>208</sup>

The Civil War intruded and disrupted society in western North Carolina beginning in 1862. In the span of a few years, the war caused the disintegration of connections that had been built over several decades. The force the war exerted on mountain society deprived highlanders of resources and plagued them with violence and guerrilla warfare. The effects of the war manifested themselves in the breakdown of connectedness and eventually total collapse. While the war was a force that came from outside, its effects were very much contained and felt within the region. Therefore the type and form of war that existed within western North Carolina, deep within the Confederacy and far from the frontlines of military campaigns, was considerably different from almost everywhere else in the Confederacy. Many highlanders held a direct stake in the conflict and most supported the Confederacy in the initial period following secession. However, the disintegration of mountain communities coincided with a confusing web of hostile political positions and loyalties. As a contained conflict, the war caused mountain communities

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<sup>208</sup> Inscoc and McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 280.

to turn on themselves and subsequently caused individual families to withdraw inward out of self-preservation.

Life within western North Carolina ultimately devolved into a struggle for survival. The war brought previously unimaginable hardships and privations to all components of society. The political, social, and economic connections that had served as the foundation of mountain communities before the war no longer seemed relevant or possible to many highlanders. Transportation infrastructure virtually vanished, inhibiting social and economic connections within communities and from those communities to the world outside. The scarcity of resources became so desperate that communities became distrustful and even resorted to violence to acquire certain necessities. Economic connections in the form of trade and business broke down as the basic market system could neither provide nor distribute resources to those who needed them. The local, state, and Confederate governments could not provide basic services nor could they maintain the rule-of-law, similarly indicating a breakdown. Clashes between Unionists and those still loyal to the Confederacy caused economic strains and a pervasive fear among all classes. Family members and neighbors fought against each other, driven to violence out of pure desperation. The dire conditions and desperation found within the manuscript collections and correspondence of several elite families during the war indicated just how strong and stable these community connections had been before the war and how completely they had disintegrated.

These trends countered the idea that mountain society remained stagnant and fixed during the Civil War era in the rudimentary pioneer stage of development. Highlanders were neither dominantly Unionist nor homogenous in race or class. The common stereotypes of highlanders as backward, homogenous, individualistic, stagnant, and pioneer-like originate from outsiders, early histories, and popular representations and not from the actual experiences of the

highlanders themselves. These overgeneralizations have contributed to the assumption of a distinct, coherent, and strong mountain culture associated with these stereotypes. They do not reflect the history of the region.

So how did highlanders view themselves? And did their view of themselves contrast with outsiders' views of the mountain communities? The highlander identity during the antebellum period and the Civil War was complex. It was both distinct from and similar to the identity of people living outside the mountains. To some extent, highlanders thought of themselves as Southerners. The degree of slave ownership and the widespread support for the Confederacy following the declaration of secession emphasized the Southern aspect of their identity. Furthermore, with the exception of individuals like Calvin Cowles, mountain elites economically and socially connected themselves and their communities to the more developed commercial centers of the wider South, reinforcing this linkage and identification with the South.

However, within the highland identity was an acknowledgement that mountain life was different from life elsewhere within North Carolina and the wider South. The extent to which infrastructure and commercial centers had developed in the mountains was visibly behind the rest of the South. While a vibrant and thriving market-system existed during the antebellum period, its form and social structure were significantly different from what existed in the plantation South. Elites provided economic services on a small scale and small farmers composed the basic building blocks of mountain life. Politically, the mountain region appeared markedly distinct. Highlanders maintained a steady and unbending belief in the importance of internal improvements regardless of which party they supported at the end of the antebellum period. Westerners had dominated state politics during the 1830s and 1840s, and their widespread support for the Whig party in the region produced heavy western majorities.



However, as the Whig party disappeared and much of the South became dominantly Democrat in the 1850s and early 1860s, highlanders maintained a degree of bipartisan political debate that separated the region from the politics that characterized the rest of the state and the South. Furthermore, each community maintained an individual identity, shaped by the terrain, location, degree of connectedness, and the highlanders within it.

The highlander's self-image combined southern, western, and community-oriented identities, contributing to the idea that society in western North Carolina was truly unique. This distinctive identity suggested that something that could be called "mountain culture" did exist, but it only tenuously resembled the idea of a mountain culture embodied in the stereotypes attributed to it by outsiders and early historians. The Civil War identified another aspect of this mountain culture, its feebleness. The Civil War rapidly unraveled all the connections in western North Carolina that had formed in the previous several decades. The war ripped apart mountain communities and with it destroyed some of the true highlander identity. It is this collapsed and inward facing society that remained at the end of the Civil War, and which outsiders, early histories, and popular representations inaccurately retrofitted upon the people and mountain culture of Western North Carolina.

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