Rural Life in the Back Creek Valley

Documentation of the Harris House (080-0294), Roanoke County, Virginia

PREPARED FOR:
Virginia Department of Transportation

PREPARED BY:
William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research
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VDOT Project No. 0221-080-108, PE101, C501
PPMS: 717
VDHR File No. 93-1625
WMCAR Project No. 03-09

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MAY 28, 2004
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following report was made possible by the cultural resource program of the Virginia Department of Transportation’s Environmental Division. Photographic documentation and initial archival research were completed in 1997 by architectural historian Kitty Houston of VDOT’s Salem District Office. David Lewes, of the William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research, completed further archival research, interviewed local residents, and took additional photographs in 2003.

The authors would like to express their thanks to several individuals who made this documentation possible. Our deepest gratitude goes to Horace and Lillian Harris. Both in 1997 and 2003, they provided key information about their house and family history over the course of several interviews, welcomed us graciously into their home, and allowed us to take dozens of photographs. We also are grateful to longtime neighbors of the Harrises in Back Creek. William Poage and his cousin Molly Coon took time for impromptu interviews in 2003 that illuminated the historical context of the Back Creek community. They also allowed photography of furniture crafted at Elijah Poage’s shop and transcription of parts of his account book.

We also would like to acknowledge Charlene D. Hutcheson, whose studies of local rural neighborhoods were a valuable source for understanding Back Creek’s history. She also emailed detailed responses to several questions about Back Creek. A history of the Harris family in the Roanoke area by Reverend Nelson Harris was another useful source. Reverend Harris shared further details about the history of the Back Creek area in a telephone interview.

Researching the documentary record of the Back Creek community was made easier by the staff at several repositories, including the Library of Virginia, The College of William and Mary’s Swem Library, the Roanoke Valley Historical Society, the Roanoke Public Library, and Roanoke County’s Clerk of Courts records office. Brenda Finley, librarian of the Virginia Room at the Roanoke Library, deserves special mention for her cheerful help.
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1 Harris family transactions in Elijah Poage’s account books
PROLOGUE

In 1876, a farmer in the Back Creek section of southern Roanoke County built a new house for his young family. John L. Harris’ wife Sarah already had borne five of their eight children, and the couple, now in their thirties, must have welcomed the new space. Even though the house was new, the design was old-fashioned and simple. Both the upper and lower floors had only two rooms apiece arranged in a “hall-parlor” plan, a popular design in this part of Virginia in the earliest days of European settlement during the late eighteenth century. With land and personal wealth almost exactly at the median of Roanoke’s agricultural population, Harris’ choice of design was appropriate—nothing elaborate, just dependable and familiar. The simplicity of the structure’s floor plan was echoed by the plain interior decor, with wide, undecorated boards covering the walls and ceiling and basic batten doors. Only the parlor mantel even hinted at extravagance, with a modest “sunburst” carving and turned pilasters. In 1893, a more mature and financially secure Harris built a Victorian-style gable-roofed addition, doubling the size of his house but retaining the original, subdued interior and exterior details (Figure 1). Since this addition, the family made only minor modifications to the structure. Essentially unchanged, the Harris House and surrounding outbuildings endured until the end of the twentieth century as witness to the first owners’ conservative architectural vision.

Figure 1. Harris House, looking southwest. Built in 1876, the core of the house follows a traditional, asymmetrical “hall-parlor” floor plan. Already in the late eighteenth century, this room configuration had begun to pass from favor in many parts of Virginia. Despite additions in 1893 and the 1950s, the hall-parlor section (left of the gable) remained as a rare, intact example of an earlier architectural form.
Traditionally, simple buildings like the Harris House have attracted little attention from architectural historians. Instead, their work has often focused on masterpieces of high style, usually public buildings or the elaborate dwellings of society’s upper classes. Over the last century, however, interest in “vernacular,” or folk architecture has grown along with a more “total” approach to social history, encompassing the everyday lives of all ethnic groups and classes (Stearns 1983:4–5). Folklorists and anthropologists also examine vernacular structures as artifacts that can help them unravel the past culture of common folk. As one folklorist implied, vernacular structures provide an alternative source to the more extensive written record left behind by the upper classes (Glassie 2000).

Virtually unchanged since its construction, the Harris House fits this description of an artifact that could be “read” for insights into the history of ordinary members of the Back Creek community in the late nineteenth century. This unmodified example of a late hall-parlor structure clearly had historical value. Therefore, when the widening of Route 221 along the edge of Harris property required removal of the house, architectural historians from the Virginia Department of Transportation recommended thorough documentation. This report presents the documentation through detailed description, sketches, and photographs of the house, outbuildings, and surrounding property. Along with the physical documentation, however, a historical narrative sets the farm structures in a regional and national context. Special attention is given to the family that built and lived in the house, their forebears and descendants, and their relationship to the surrounding landscape and community. Agricultural trends, building traditions, community and regional history, all combine to make sense of the historic structure within its landscape.

The Virginia Department of Transportation has sponsored and disseminated this report with the intent that it reach a broader audience, appealing to the general reader as well as architectural and historical specialists.

“...the study of vernacular architecture is an approach to the whole of the built world. It favors completeness, recognizes diversity, and seeks to use buildings in order to tell better versions of the human story.”

—Henry Glassie (2000:21)
INTRODUCTION

This report was written as part of the environmental clearance for the northern portion of Virginia Department of Transportation’s (VDOT) Route 221 widening corridor in southern Roanoke County. The northern portion extends from the vicinity of Colman Drive/Route 735 westward to the vicinity of Route 690; the existing two lanes will be widened to four lanes. The Roanoke 221 corridor widening is state funded. Section 10.1-1188B of the Code of Virginia directs the Secretaries of Transportation and Natural Resources to establish procedures to assess the environmental impacts of state-funded highway projects on natural and historic resources. The resulting procedures (1) provide for review and comment by the Department of Historic Resources on environmental impacts to historic properties resulting from highway projects; (2) require the VDOT to consider alternatives to avoid historic properties; and, (3) if historic properties cannot be avoided, require the VDOT to propose measures to minimize impact. For state environmental review, historic properties are defined as those that are listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places or the Virginia Landmarks Register.

The Harris House was determined eligible for the National Register/Virginia Landmarks Register as part of the environmental review for the northern portion of the Route 221 corridor widening, the only eligible property in that portion. The VDOT looked at alternatives to avoid the property, but the location of the creek east of the dwelling, across Route 221, limited avoidance measures. As a result, the VDOT signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Department of Historic Resources, committing to efforts to minimize impact to the Harris House. It was agreed that the VDOT would offer to pay the Harris family reasonable costs to move the house back on its residual lot, including new foundation, site work and mechanical upgrades. After much deliberation, the family decided to retain the house, dismantle it, and use some of the historic house material in a new replacement dwelling. At that point, the VDOT was obligated to document the house and outbuildings. The departments of Transportation and Historic Resources agreed that a publication, incorporating oral history, photographs, and architectural and historical context for the Harris House, and suitable for distribution to local public libraries, was the most appropriate method of documentation. This report has been written to fulfill that agreement.
Even in today’s more populated landscape, the location of the Harris House may seem separate from any particular community. Until VDOT acquired part of the property in 1997, the core of the old farmstead survived around the house footprint and remaining outbuildings on roughly 27 acres (now reduced to about 16 acres) (Figure 2). Still buffered by quiet open space and woods, the smaller property appears quite removed from any neighbors. A visit there today allows us to imagine the farm as it was in 1876—with vegetation masking the many suburban neighborhoods that have sprung up in this part of Roanoke County since the late 1950s. For today’s city or suburban-dwellers, with neighbors’ dwellings almost always visible from their own house, it is hard to grasp the Harris farm, seemingly an isolated refuge of woods and grassy hillside, as part of a community or neighborhood. Yet in the late nineteenth century, when most Americans still lived on farms, the concept of a rural neighborhood would have been commonplace.

Despite the more scattered distribution of people on the landscape at that time, the Harris farm was indeed very much part of a rural community, informally called Back Creek. Moving back from this tributary of the Roanoke River, we gain a better grasp of Back Creek as a distinct geographic setting. From an overlook along the Blue Ridge Parkway several hundred feet above the valley floor, we gaze northward onto a patchwork of pasture, woodland, and cultivated fields below (Figure 3). The high
vantage point allows us to see how the surrounding topography defines the Back Creek community. Wooded mountains rise quite sharply on the south and west, while rolling hills lead gradually upward to the more distant mountains on the north (Figure 4 and 5). Starting at the steep western, upstream end of the valley, marked by Bent Mountain, we can follow the gentle bends of Back Creek downstream to the east. We pass along Route 221 and arrive at the site of Poage's Mill, the social and commercial hub of the creek valley in the nineteenth century (Figure 6). Here in the late eighteenth century, Robert Poage erected a mill. Over the next hundred years, Robert Poage and then his son Elijah would grind flour and saw boards for nearby farmers at this mill and a replacement built further downstream (Figure 7). The scattering of houses and a church around a large dairy farm owned by Poage's descendants still has the feel of a rural community, though much diminished since its nineteenth-century heyday. Continuing east, the creek meanders sharply, and the steep sides of the valley draw in more tightly. An abrupt turn to the northeast brings us to the Harris farm, near the eastern end of the Back Creek community. A half mile beyond the Harris farm, the portion of Back Creek anchored by Poage's Mill ends. The southeastward turn marks an obvious boundary with other rural neighborhoods focused toward Cave Spring and Starkey, though the Back Creek watercourse flows another 16 miles until emptying into the Roanoke River.

By mentally peeling away the traces of both recent and ancient landscape use, we can describe the essential, natural features that cradle the human, cultural landscape of Back Creek. The valley floor ranges in elevation from 1,220 to 1,260 ft. above mean sea level. The sides of the valley rise steeply to elevations of more than 3,000 feet at the summit of the Blue Ridge between one and two miles to the south. The northern slopes ascend to more modest heights of 1,700 to 1,900 ft. on the ridges that separate the tributary stream valleys. Higher elevations up to 2,500 ft. are more than two miles to the northwest on Poor Mountain and Long Ridge. Beneath the soil of the Blue Ridge physiographic province lie igneous and metamorphic rocks dating back to Precambrian times more than a billion years ago. Weathering of this underlying bedrock has produced the clay-rich “colluvial” soils in stream valleys such as Back Creek. Between the steeply sloped sides of the valley (with more than 20 percent grade), the creek's more level floodplain is covered with alluvial soils (Ealy 1997). These fertile soil deposits have been carried into the valley by the Back Creek watercourse and tributary streams that flow into this section of the valley.

Local soils deserve further description here because of their importance to agriculture—historically the area's main livelihood and also the occupation of the first two owners of the Harris house. The entire creek valley to
Figure 3. View of the Back Creek valley from the Blue Ridge Parkway. Just visible from Poage's Mill Overlook on a misty morning, Back Creek valley presents a patchwork of fields and wooded areas. The pastoral scene is deceptive though, as many of the woods disguise suburban neighborhoods inhabited by residents who commute to the city of Roanoke.

Figure 4. Location of Back Creek valley (U.S. Geological Survey 1984).
Figure 5. Location of the Harris House (U.S. Geological Survey 1984).
Figure 6. View to the west along Route 221 toward the hamlet of Poage's Mill. The white house to the right of the road is the Old Poage Farm, built in 1860.

Figure 7. Poage’s Mill in ruinous condition shortly before floods razed the structure in the early twentieth century (Barrenger 1989:14). Built in the 1848, Elijah Poage’s sawmill and gristmill was the hub of the Back Creek community.
the confluence with the Roanoke River falls within one major soil “association” or group. Generally, the soils are very deep, well drained, and suited to pasture, cultivated crops, and orchards. Due to the area’s topography, however, much of the land has only moderate agricultural value. For highly productive cultivation, farmers are limited to the select, flatter areas along the valley bottom. Patches of relatively level soil can be found above the floodplain, but many steeper areas are suited only for orchards and pasture. For example, the reduced property acreage of the Harris farm consists of four similar soil types, with agricultural suitability determined mainly by slope. None are considered by modern soil scientists to be prime land for growing crops. The deep fine sandy loam has moderate organic content and good drainage, but is susceptible to erosion. The steepest of the four soil types (25–50%) also contains large amounts of stone. Still, the more gently sloped areas are considered acceptable for cultivation when using sound crop rotation (Ealy 1997). Though impossible to place the exact boundaries of John Harris’ larger late nineteenth-century property on a modern soil map, his land very likely included some superior soils near the old family homeplace on the south side of Back Creek along with the more mediocre soils near the house he built in 1876.
HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING

Regional Settlement

Although the Back Creek area lies within Virginia’s Blue Ridge physiographic province, historically it has been an extension of the Great Valley of Virginia (Figure 8). From the confluence of the Shenandoah River with the Potomac at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, the broad valley gradually rises to the southwest between the Blue Ridge Mountains on the east and the rugged ridge and valley topography of the Appalachian Highlands on the west. Averaging 20 to 25 miles in width, the Shenandoah Valley proper ends at the river’s headwaters near Lexington. The Great Valley, though steadily more confined, continues on (through Roanoke County) to East Tennessee (Wayland 1957:1). Since the earliest days of Britain’s claim to Virginia, the colony’s territory was limited by northern and southern boundaries from colonial neighbors, but, in theory, stretched westward to the distant ocean and thus included the Great Valley. In practice, though, the Blue Ridge presented a daunting obstacle for settlers from eastern Virginia seeking new land. Of course, the mountains could be crossed with some effort, but the area beyond remained isolated from the rest of Virginia because of the difficulty of building good roads across the mountains. The more practical path for immigration and trade stretched from southern Pennsylvania to the head of the Valley near present Roanoke. As a result, the early history of the Valley is a key to understanding settlement on the western slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Back Creek and indeed the whole of present Roanoke County.

The first land patents in the Valley were granted, not by the British crown, but by Thomas Lord Fairfax, the “proprietor” of the Northern Neck of Virginia (Figure 9). Land agents under the authority of the Northern Neck Proprietary issued patents to individual settlers as well as land speculators banking on the region’s further development. In 1664, Fairfax’s ancestor, Thomas Lord Culpeper, had received a vast tract encompassing the entire peninsula between the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers as a personal gift from Charles II in return for his political loyalty (O’Dell 1995:viii). Though Virginia’s colonial government contended that the Proprietary extended only as far west as the first falls of the Potomac River, Fairfax
Figure 9. Northern Neck Proprietary. In 1664, King Charles II granted the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers. In 1745 it consisted of more than 5 million acres controlled by a single person, Thomas Lord Fairfax. Before Virginia’s colonial government began granting lands west of the Blue Ridge mountains, settlers in the lower Valley were already receiving patents from Fairfax’s private land granting agency.

Figure 8. The Great Valley of Virginia. Even if some scholars consider modern Botetourt to be the southern-most Virginia county in the Great Valley (e.g., Koons and Hofstra 2000), Roanoke County historically has looked northeastward, rather than across the Blue Ridge, for its most immediate cultural and commercial contacts.
claimed land across the Shenandoah Valley up to the Potomac headwaters in present West Virginia (Fischer and Kelly 2000:85). By the mid-eighteenth century, most of the Proprietary lands east of the Blue Ridge had been granted, and Fairfax’s agents began laying claim to lands in the Valley. Alarmed by the rapid encroachment of the proprietary, Virginia’s royal governor William Gooch took steps to secure the crown’s interest in the future “bread basket of Virginia.” With limited resources to administer settlement, Gooch farmed the land-granting work out to a few men who would act as unofficial agents. In 1732, the colonial government authorized Jost Hite and Robert McKay, to sell up to 140,000 acres in tracts of no more than 1,000 acres for their own personal gain. To benefit from the land sales, Hite and McKay had to recruit a large number of settlers to this frontier area of the colony. In return, the colonial government benefitted from a “buffer” of settlement between the Piedmont of Virginia and the French who were pushing eastward from the Ohio Valley. At the same time, the colonial government gained control of the rich agricultural region in the Shenandoah Valley before rival land interests could claim it (Hofstra 1991:36–37).

Unlike the more heavily English and African ethnic makeup of eastern and Piedmont Virginia, the Valley’s population had a large proportion of German and Scots-Irish immigrants that Virginia’s land agents had lured from Pennsylvania; only a minority of early residents came from eastern Virginia. The northern immigrants carried with them many elements of their diverse ancestral European cultures. Religious diversity in the Valley was one of the most significant contrasts with the rest of Virginia. Into a colony whose official religion was the “Established” Anglican church came a host of religious denominations that would have been labeled dissenters in England or eastern Virginia. Scots-Irish settlers were mostly Presbyterians, while the Germans initially included Lutherans, Reformed, and Mennonites, then later Dunkers and United Brethren (Wayland 1957:79). These settlers also brought distinctive farming practices, settlement patterns, and architectural forms, making this a fascinating region for the work of cultural historians.

Over the last thirty years, one of the hot topics of historical research has been the interaction of these distinctive Valley ethnic groups (see Puglisi 1997:9–17). How much of their traditions did they retain once they were in the Valley living alongside other ethnic groups? And for how long? With increasing English settlement, the northern immigrants assimilated not only with the dominant, official culture, but also among themselves. Early historians may have overemphasized the “clannish” tendencies, especially of the Germans, due to focusing on a few atypical areas of the Valley. Certain enclaves in Page and Rockingham counties had very high propor-
WHO WERE THE SCOTS-IRISH?

Long before Catholic Irish immigrants came to this country fleeing the potato famine of 1849, throngs of “Scots-Irish” had already settled in America. The Scots-Irish were Protestants from the northern, Ulster province of Ireland, whose original homeland was the Scottish Lowlands across the Irish Sea (Figure 10). By the early seventeenth century, overpopulation and high rents had caused social upheaval in Lowland Scotland. Beginning in 1610 and continuing for a century, the English encouraged their immigration to Ulster in order to balance the native Catholic majority. Attracted by larger farms at lower prices available in Ulster (Chepesiuk 2000:48–49), the Scottish immigrants became highly successful in flax production and linen manufacture—to the extent of presenting a competitive threat to the English linen industry by the early eighteenth century. Parliament then passed laws that curtailed the profitability of the Ulster linen manufacture. Along with these economic restrictions came a series of natural disasters, epidemic disease among both people and livestock, and newly curtailed religious freedom. By the second decade of the eighteenth century, Ulster was in such upheaval that many Scots-Irish Presbyterian families decided to emigrate to the North American colonies to improve their lot (Kagey 1988:15–16).

Despite their large numbers—more than 250,000 had immigrated before the Revolution—Scots-Irish contributions to American culture are little known. The main reason is the group’s rapid assimilation. Unlike many German immigrants who maintained close ethnic identity through their churches, Scots-Irish Presbyterians soon joined English Americans in Methodist and Baptist congregations. Also, though initially recognizable, the Scots-Irish made no special effort to maintain a separate identity during the early years of the American Republic, often intermarrying with other ethnic groups (Chepesiuk 2000:137, 145).

Figure 10. Ulster and Lowland Scotland. Only a century after emigrating to northern Ireland from lowland Scotland in the seventeenth century, the “Scots-Irish” fled their adopted country by the thousands for better economic prospects and more religious freedom in the American colonies.
tions of Germans, and here separateness from other ethnic groups was indeed extreme. In these areas, books and newspapers were printed in German through the nineteenth century, and residents spoke a Valley German dialect until the late twentieth century (Wust 1969:155–158, 189). However, where a greater mix of ethnic groups was present in one community, they associated more freely. People of very different ethnic and religious backgrounds traded, interacted socially, even intermarried in many parts of the Valley (Hutcheson 1995; Jordan-Bychov 2003).

The Valley also distinguished itself from the rest of Virginia through its agricultural base, which in turn influenced how people settled the landscape and interacted. While eastern Virginia was dominated by tobacco until the late eighteenth century, the crop only caught on briefly in the Valley and in the Roanoke area. Instead, Valley agriculture was based on mixed farming, with special emphasis on wheat. This type of agriculture required early development of an infrastructure of mills and villages for the more complex agricultural economy than the tobacco culture present further east in the Piedmont and Tidewater regions. Concentrated settlement and frequent interaction also enabled local craftsmen to flourish (Rainer 2000:69–70). Mixed agriculture made the Valley less vulnerable to distant markets than the single cash crop economy east of the Blue Ridge. With the exception of difficulties during the Civil War and shortly after, the region’s agricultural economy remained prosperous and stable through the twentieth century (Koons and Hofstra 2000).

**Local Settlement History and Landscape**

For thousands of years before Europeans established farmsteads along Back Creek, Native Americans had ranged over the area. Paleoindians are the earliest known group that inhabited this region of North America, from about 12,000 to 8000 B.C. One of the hallmarks of their culture was the fluted spearpoint, an exquisitely crafted blade of chipped stone with a distinctive “flute” or long, thin flake removed from each side for binding to the spear shaft. Such spears were likely used for hunting now-extinct “mega” fauna such as mastodon that flourished in the cooler climate of that time. The Back Creek area was only a few miles from a prime hunting ground for these large animals. The city of Roanoke derived its earlier name, Big Lick, from the salt marshes that would have been a key feeding area for these big game. Although no direct archaeological evidence of the earliest Paleoindian groups has been found along Back Creek, the highly mobile hunter-gatherer bands probably combed the area for wild plants and smaller game while hunting for big game nearby.

Several small sites attest to native groups’ use of the Back Creek area during later prehistoric periods. Archaeological surveys have identified at