

**Figure 11. Contact-period Native American sites in Roanoke County. Although there is no evidence of early contact between explorers and Native Americans in the Back Creek area, two major sites from this “protohistoric” period are located near the major trading paths to the north.**

least five small camps and other traces of human activity dating as far back as 5,000 years, or the beginning of the Late Archaic period (Jones 1998:7). Climate change and possible overhunting had eliminated the largest game animals. With the warmer, temperate climate, forest vegetation changed from the spruces and hemlocks we now associate with northern states like Wisconsin to a mix of oak and hickory. Nuts and acorns became an important food source, while the more modern fauna with which we are familiar today provided meat. In the immediate area of the Back Creek community, small bands of hunters left behind stone tools and debris from toolmaking

during their seasonal trips to their hunting grounds in the stream valley. The transition to the Woodland stage of prehistory is marked by the manufacture of ceramic pottery. The presence of pottery on local archaeological sites indicates a more sedentary lifestyle. Cumbrous to transport, the vessels would have been used on longer-term sites where whole families gathered to collect and process food. Short-term camps, used when hunting game or collecting stone for toolmaking, would contain the same types of stone artifacts found during the Archaic, but identifiable styles of knives and spearpoints distinguish these artifacts through time. One prehistoric site in Back Creek dates to the very last prehistoric period prior to the arrival of European settlers. By the Late Woodland period, Native Americans had developed the bow and arrow, and more significantly grew domesticated plants in small gardens cleared from the forest. By this time, native groups occupied villages and homesteads much longer than any sites from the earlier periods, only shifting to make new garden plots on fresh soils.

European contact with local native groups may have occurred in the area of present Roanoke County as early as the 1670s. Two seventeenth-century Native American archaeological sites excavated just north of the Back Creek area, yielded artifacts of obvious European origin (Barber et al. 2003; Klatka and Klein 1993) (Figure 11). While some of these items may have passed along Native trade networks from the English settlers in the Tidewater region, they also could represent traces of early English exploration of current Roanoke County. Some historians believe the Roanoke-Salem area to be the location of Totero town, a native village visited by explorers Thomas Batts and Robert Fallam in 1671 (Alvord and Bidgood 1912). Although an alternate site for Totero has been proposed further west in Montgomery County, archaeological findings suggest Europeans were at least passing near the area by the late seventeenth century.

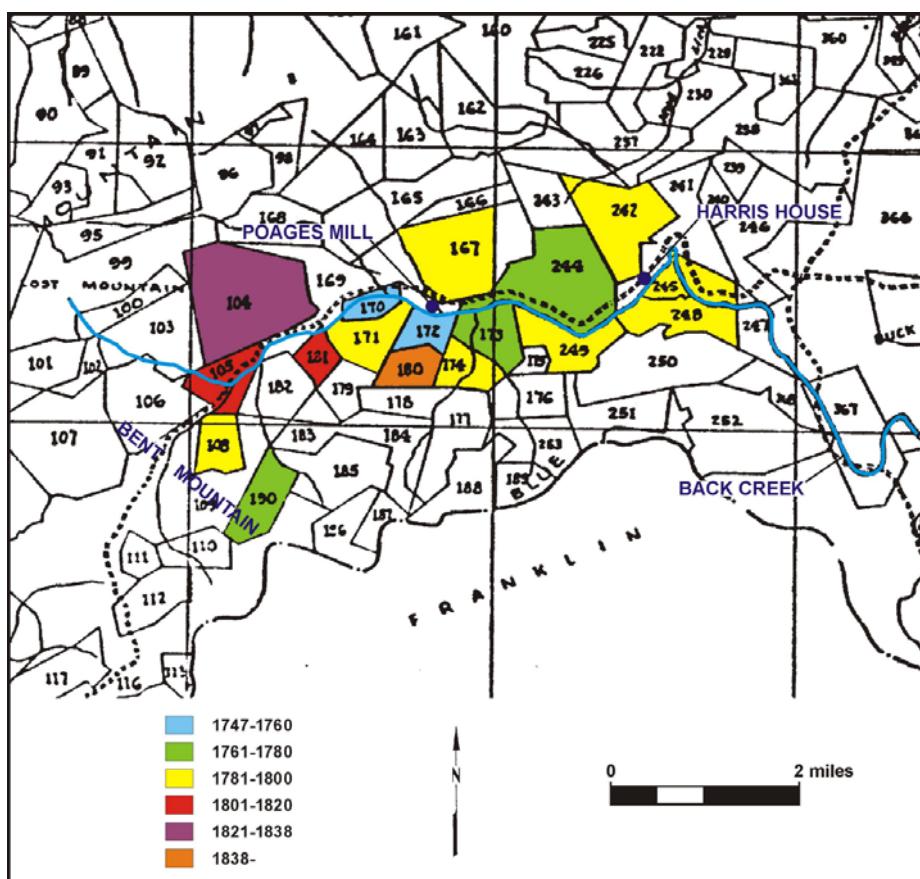
More specific evidence locates explorers in the Roanoke area by 1726. Thomas Marlin and John Salling, ventured up the Shenandoah Valley from Winchester, Virginia, and crossed into the forested country around Roanoke (Jack and Jacobs 1912:9–10). While Salling fell captive to local Cherokee Indians and then traveled with various native groups as far as the Gulf of Mexico, Marlin returned to the lower Valley and reportedly lured a first wave of settlers and land speculators to the Roanoke area. Six years later, Salling was ransomed and made his way to Williamsburg, where he too piqued the interest of pioneers to western Virginia (Writers' Program 1942:35).

The earliest evidence of settlement along Back Creek comes from an account told to a local historian in the early twentieth century. The elderly James Heckman had heard the story from his grandfather, who could have been old enough to remember events of the late eighteenth century. According to Heckman, four hunters from Pennsylvania known only by their surnames, Heckman, Willett, Martin, and Webster, entered the Back Creek valley about 1740. Impressed by the area's game and the fertile land along the creek, the group returned with their families to settle permanently. Though Heckman traveled further, settling in present Franklin County, the three other families built cabins between Poage's Mill and Bent Mountain (Jack and Jacobs 1912:73). These may have been the first settlers in the Back Creek area, but no written records document their presence, perhaps an indication that they made no claims to their land through the colonial government.

Shortly after these families arrived from Pennsylvania, the first patents were issued for land in current Roanoke County. According to a map of early land patent locations within Roanoke County, the earliest grant for the Back Creek community was issued to Robert Poage, Jr., in 1747 for 150 acres of rich bottomlands near the creek (Writer's Program 1942:end-papers). (Poage's father was also an early local settler, to the north along Catawba Creek.) In 1754, James McGavock claimed another early patent just west of the Poage tract. Apart from two large tracts claimed in the period 1761–1780, though, the bulk of patents range from 1781 to 1800; one patent behind the creek-front patents dates as late as 1847 (Figure 12). Despite limited land claims, there must have been more than a handful of residents in the area during the late eighteenth century. In 1772, Robert Poage, along with Leonard Huff and James Keachery, "viewed" or scouted a road from some point along Back Creek to the top of Bent Mountain. The following year the Botetourt County court took prompt action, commissioning road surveyors and ordering that a road be built (Kagey 1988:32).

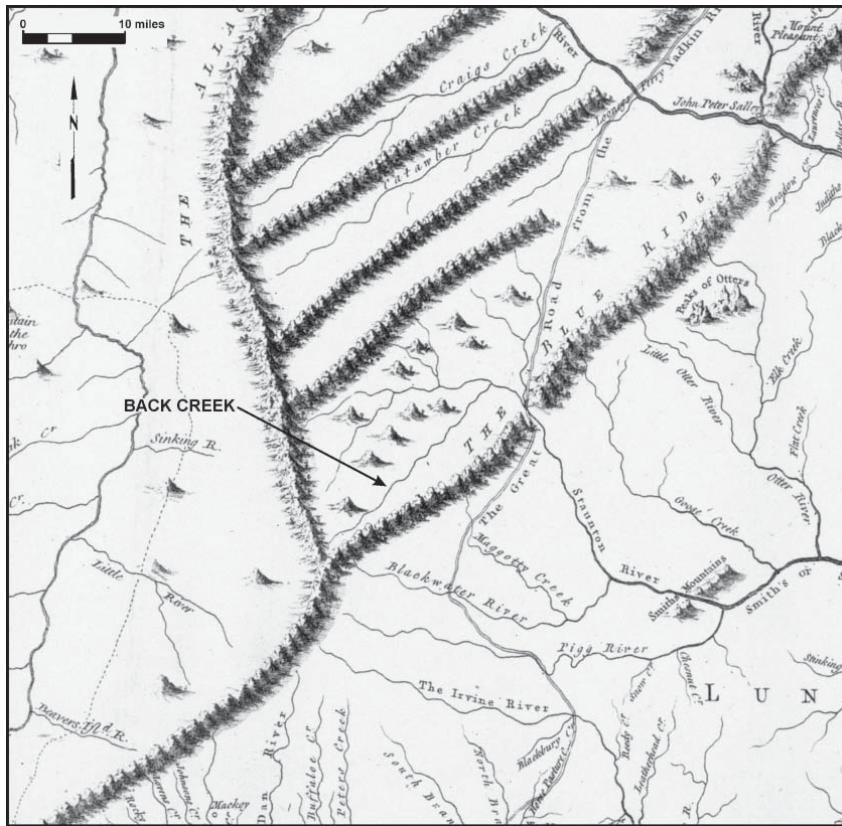
Once settlement began in the Valley, the colonial government established counties with local governments and courts. At first, from 1734 to 1743, the vast territory of Orange County extended west beyond the Blue Ridge to encompass the entire Valley, including present Roanoke County. Just as had occurred to the east in Tidewater Virginia, smaller counties were formed as settlement intensified in frontier areas. A large enough population situated beyond a day's horseback ride from the courthouse could usually convince the government in Williamsburg to carve out a new county to serve their needs. Accordingly, in the 1740s, the Valley was divided into Frederick and Augusta counties. By 1770, growing population dictated another division, as Botetourt County was created from Augusta County to serve the upper Valley and parts beyond to the southwest (Doran 1987:20–23, 26–27). By the first decades of the nineteenth century, there was a sizable population in the southern section of Botetourt county. In 1830, local residents began petitioning for a new county there in the face of strong opposition from interests in Fincastle, the county seat. Finally, in 1838, the General Assembly created Roanoke County, which the legislators defined topographically, “the whole or nearly the whole of it being washed by the Roanoke [River] or its tributaries” (Jack and Jacobs 1912:6–7).

**Figure 12. Land patents along Back Creek (based on Writer's Program 1942:endpapers).**



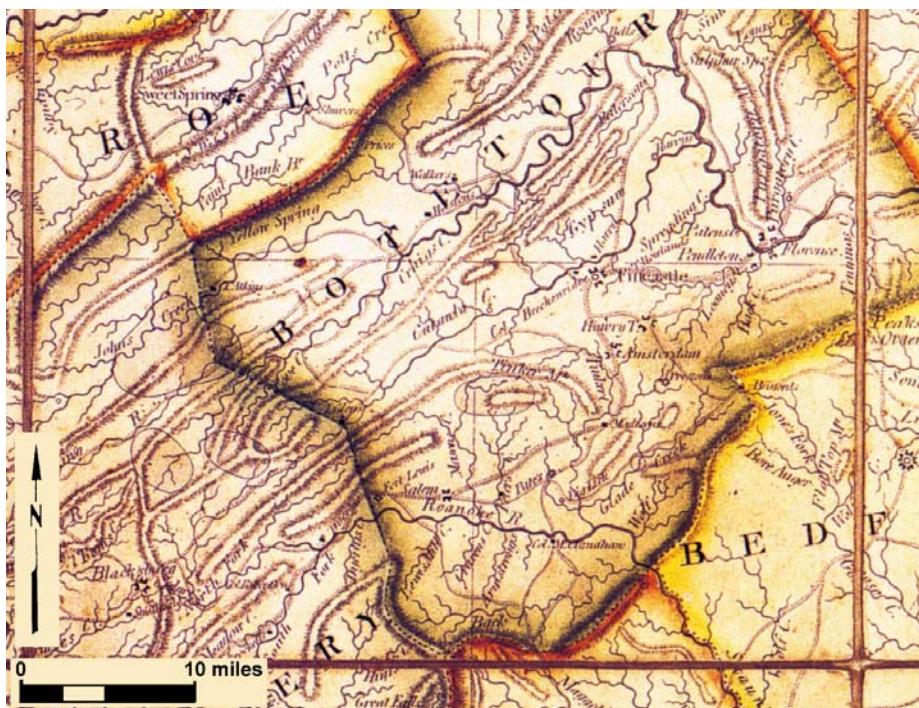
Except for the pair of mid-eighteenth-century patents by Poage and McGavock, settlement in the Back Creek community lagged behind other parts of the county, such as the Catawba valley to the north. In the 1750s, European settlers heading west to Tennessee followed an old Indian trail along Catawba Creek. Traffic along the trail led to earlier settlement there than in the more isolated Back Creek area. Even along the Catawba, settlement was slowed by the French and Indian War until the early 1770s (Klatka and Kern 1994:9). The mid-eighteenth-century Fry-Jefferson map shows the “Great Road from Yadkin River” passing through the gap in the Blue

**Figure 13. Back Creek vicinity in the mid-eighteenth century (Fry-Jefferson 1751).**

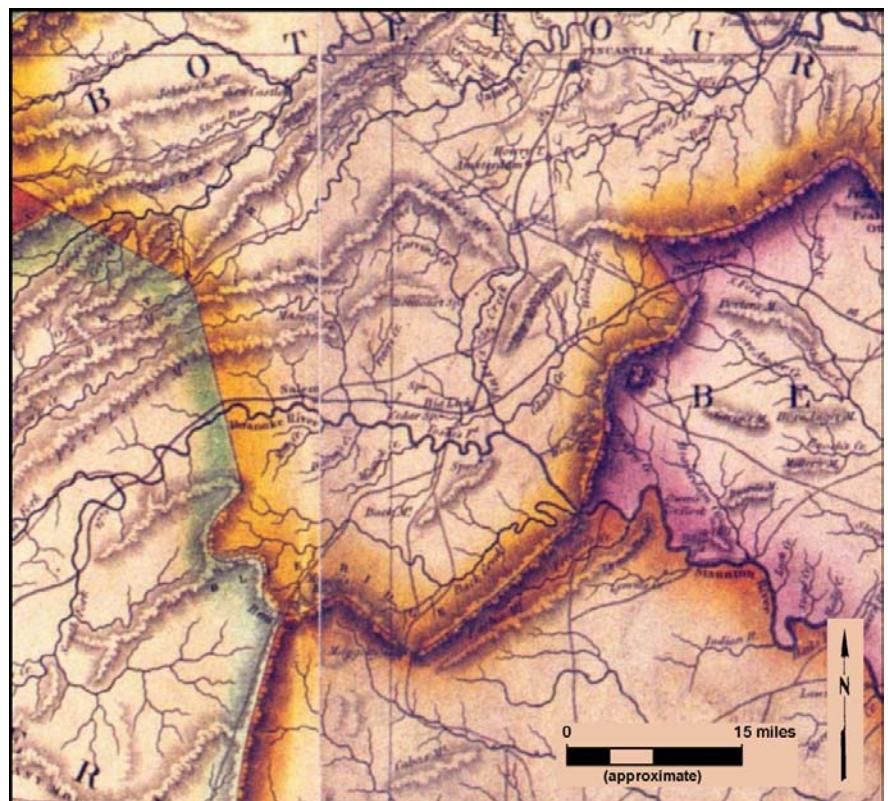


Ridge where the Roanoke (Staunton) River cuts through (Fry and Jefferson 1751) (Figure 13). Back Creek empties into the Roanoke just west of this gap, but is not labeled on the map. On the other hand, better known and more settled Catawba Creek is labeled even though there is no indication of the trail along the waterway.

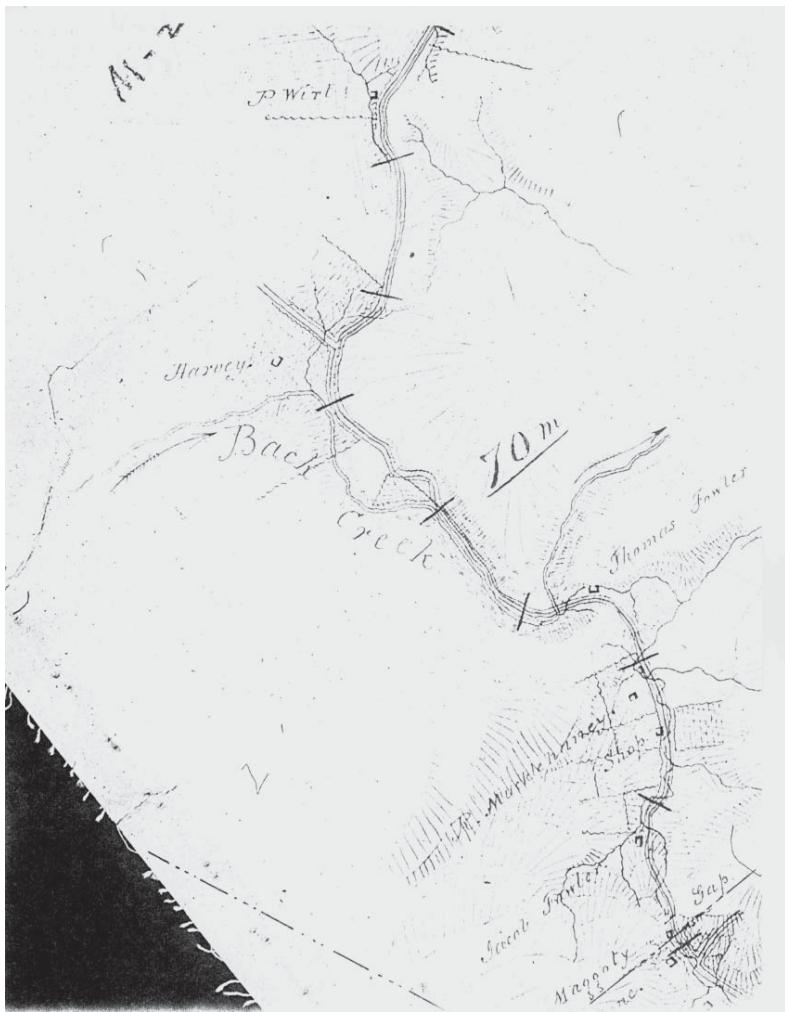
Increasingly accurate maps of Virginia began to appear in the early nineteenth century. Due to the scale of the existing maps for this area, however, there were still few details shown near Back Creek. The first of Virginia's state maps was made under the direction of Bishop James Madison (a cousin of the president) in 1807, when Roanoke was still part of Botetourt County (Stephenson and McKee 2000:120). Several villages, including Salem, and even a few prominent dwellings appear but most activity is north of Back Creek (Figure 14). In fact, only the house of a "Col. McClanahan" is shown south of the Roanoke River. The road network is more elaborate than appears on the earlier Fry-Jefferson map, and a new road appears crossing northward into Botetourt County near the Back Creek area. A side road branches off to the west just north of the creek. Based on the presence of these nearby roads, settlers evidently were more numerous at this time, but our sense of the cultural landscape is hampered by the scale of the map. A more carefully surveyed state-funded map of Virginia made in 1827 has the same limitations (B&Ae 1827) (Figure 15).



**Figure 14.** Scattered early nineteenth-century settlement in the area of present Roanoke County (Madison 1807).



**Figure 15.** Early nineteenth-century road network near Back Creek (Baye 1827).



**Figure 16. Sketch from surveyor's notebook for Pittsylvania, Franklin, and Botetourt Turnpike (Crozet 1838). In the year Roanoke County was formed, this portion of the Back Creek Valley (just east of the location of the Harris House) already was quite densely settled. Along the approximately 1.5-mile stretch of planned turnpike route illustrated here, Crozet plotted at least nine structures.**

To ensure the accuracy of the 1827 state map, Herman Baye and John Wood drafted more detailed maps of 102 Virginia counties, including Botetourt from which Roanoke was created in 1838. Surveyed in 1821, Wood's Botetourt map shows only selective detail (Summers 1970:208–209). Though several villages, mills, taverns, and other features appear north of the Roanoke River, the southern tip of the county is virtually blank. According to land grants and other information available shortly after 1821, we know that settlers had already claimed land near Back Creek. The residents of this portion of the county were apparently not numerous enough for Wood to show any landmarks.

With so many early cartographers ignoring the Back Creek area on their large-scale maps, a broader search was needed for a graphic representation of early settlement in the Back Creek area. For parts of Virginia with few early maps, there is often a chance of finding a fairly detailed drawing in the Board of Public Works papers. Beginning in the early nineteenth

century, surveyors drafted detailed sketches of the landscape through which canal-, railroad-, and road-building enterprises planned to carry out their projects. While surveying a route for the Pittsylvania, Franklin, and Botetourt Turnpike in 1838, engineer Claudius Crozet passed along the Back Creek valley. A sketch from his survey notebook depicts the landscape a few miles east of the Harris family's early homeplace (Crozet 1838) (Figure 16). Even though Roanoke County had just been created that year from a portion of Botetourt County, a rural community was already well established. On the page illustrating the proposed turnpike route along Back Creek, Crozet represented at least nine structures, including a "shop," probably belonging to a blacksmith. He also noted the names of at least five property owners. Along the turnpike and the Back Creek bottomlands, rectangular outlines indicate several agricultural fields.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, Crozet's sketch is the only detailed depiction of the area. We have to wait until the Civil War

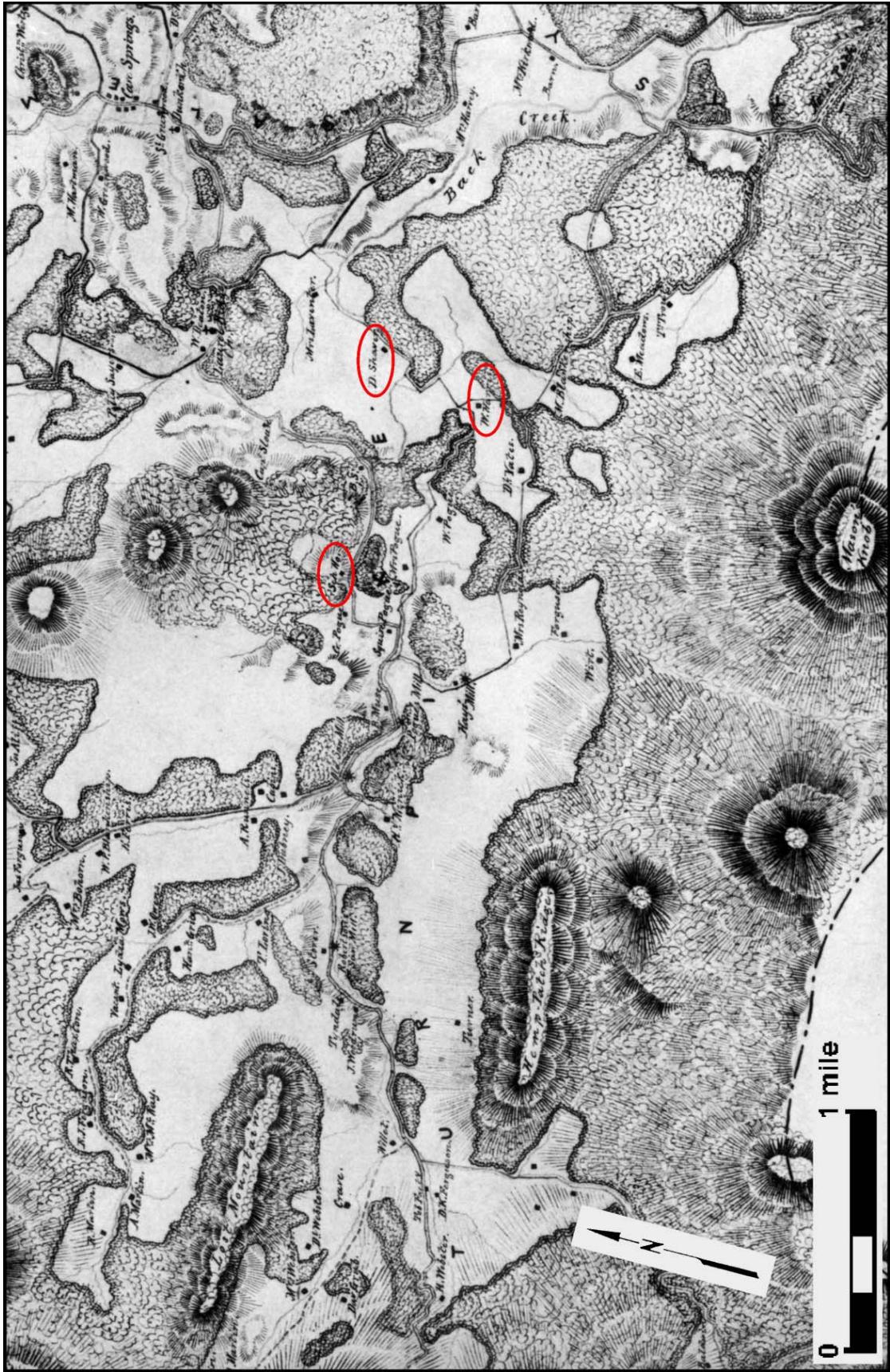
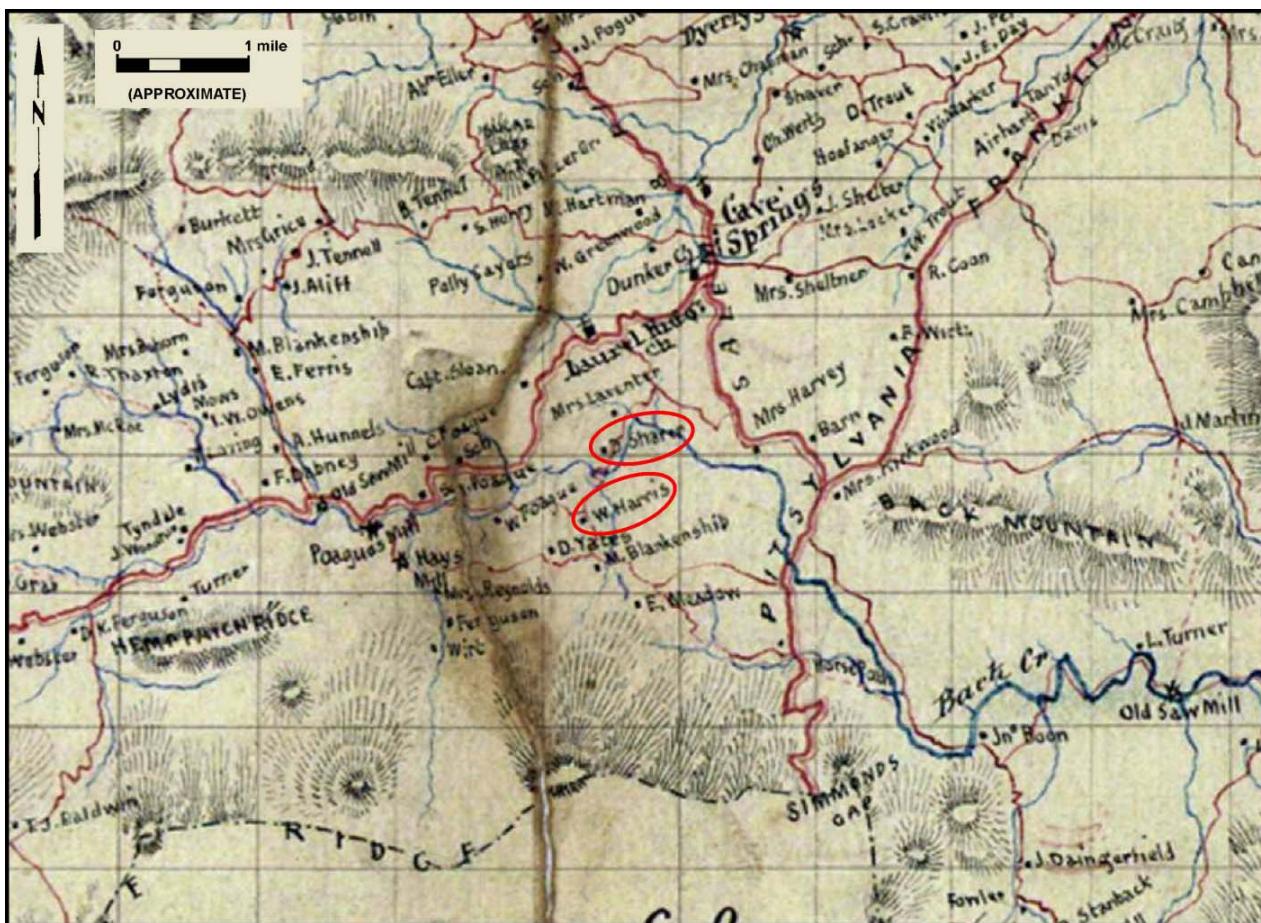


Figure 17. Detail of Confederate engineer's map of Roanoke County (lizard 1864). William Harris' property appears southwest of the location of the house later built by John Harris in 1876. Here the latter property is labeled "D. Shaver."



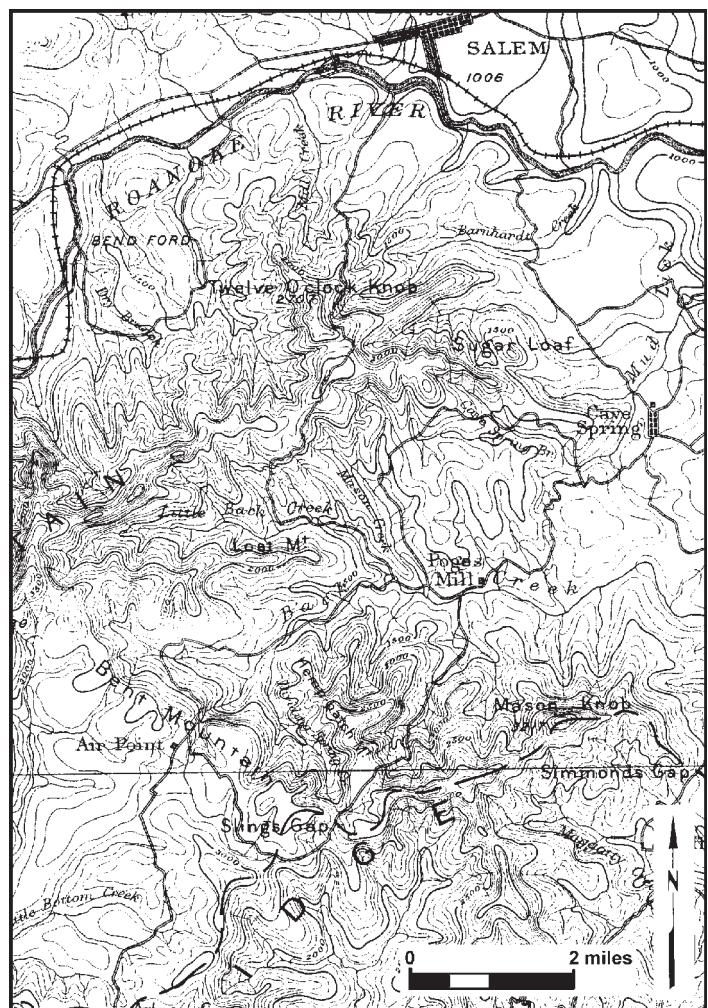
**Figure 18. Manuscript map of Roanoke County (Anonymous 1865).** The location of the present Harris House property is labeled D. Shaver. The earlier Harris homeplace, owned by John L. Harris' father William Harris, was south of Back Creek.

for maps of similar quality encompassing Back Creek. As a crucial element of the war effort, the opposing armies maintained topographic engineers' offices that produced hundreds of maps of varying scale covering different parts of Virginia. With little military action in Roanoke County, Union engineers never felt the need to map the area. Unlike their Union counterparts, Confederate cartographers took a more systematic approach, producing detailed maps for almost every county of the state not already occupied by the enemy. Lieutenant Walter Izard (1864) surveyed a detailed map of Roanoke County that covered two large sheets (Figure 17). Izard's printed map may have been based on an early version of an anonymous manuscript map of the county, inked in color (Anonymous 1865) (Figure 18). From these maps, we have the first clear picture of the entire Back Creek landscape in the nineteenth century. By this time, the Bent Mountain Turnpike made its way from Poage's Mill over the rugged peak southwest toward Alleghany Springs in Montgomery County. This "first class" road through Poage's Mill also connected to the village of Cave Springs about 3.5 miles to the northeast. Izard's representation of wooded areas is useful for understanding land use at the time. Much of the creek's flood-

plain and the base of the mountain slopes are open, probably consisting of cultivated fields or pasture. Several patches of woods remain along the creek and main roadway, and the whole area is surrounded by forested mountains. The map also illustrates the community anchored by Elijah Poage's mill. Besides a slightly more dense concentration of residential structures around the mill, a handful of other labeled buildings mark the mill as a focal point. Just south of Poage's mill, a mill owned by a Hays operated on a tributary of Back Creek. Just upstream from "Squire" Poage's mill stood the "Old Saw Mill" built by his father Robert. Less than a mile further up the creek was Robertson's sawmill. The community also was served by a blacksmith shop ("B.S." northeast of Squire Poage's place) and a small school later known as Grisso's Gate (Peters 1974:6; William Poage, personal communication 2003). Despite these amenities, Poage's Mill lacked a church. Perhaps the population was too small, or at least the size of any single denomination was not sufficient to afford its own church building. Back Creek residents had to travel at least 2.5 miles to Laurel Ridge Church (a union chapel used by various denominations) or still farther to the Dunker Church near Cave Springs.

By the late nineteenth century, the Back Creek area was shown on the precise topographic maps of the U.S. Geological Survey (Figure 19). Unfortunately, the only quadrangle prior to the 1950s is the less detailed 30-minute version—too small to show the individual structures in a scattered rural community. The representation of major roadways is useful though. In 1890, when the Christiansburg quadrangle was produced, the main thoroughfare leading out of Poage's Mill toward Cave Spring was the predecessor of Poage Valley Road. If a road following the path of present Route 221 was in use, it was too minor to merit illustration on this large-scale map. So in the late nineteenth century, the Harris place was still somewhat removed from the main thoroughfare connecting Back Creek with Salem, Roanoke, and the outside world.

Today the Back Creek area is studded with upscale suburban neighborhoods. With so many of them tucked behind the wooded roadsides or obscured by the rolling topography, a motorist driving along Route 221



**Figure 19.** Late nineteenth-century topographic map showing the Back Creek area before construction of Route 221 (U.S. Geological Survey 1920 [1890]).

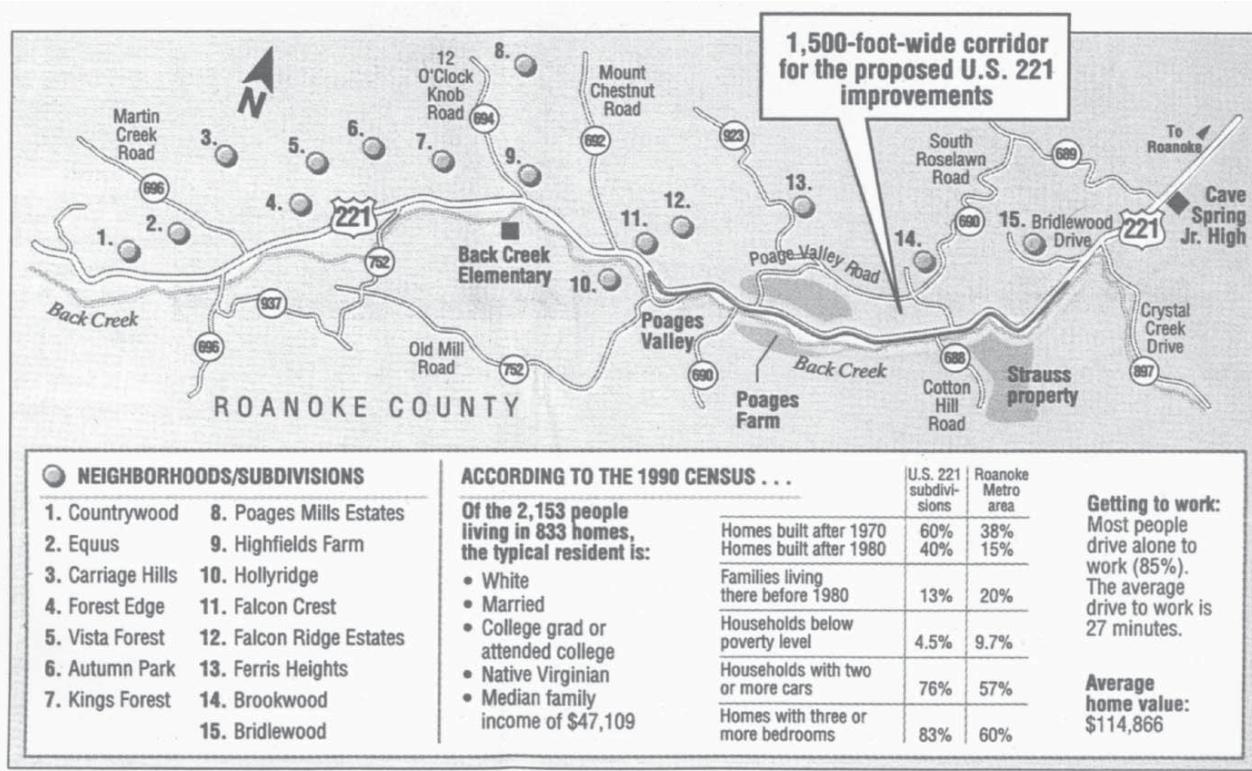


Figure 20. Residential subdivisions along Route 221 (Vertefeuille 1994:A-16).

might mistakenly believe that Back Creek remains a largely rural area. Only the rather heavy morning and evening traffic flow hints at the bedroom community that stretches along the hillsides to the foot of Bent Mountain. A glance at a recent map reveals more clearly how much development has occurred over the last several decades (Vertefeuille 1994:A-16) (Figure 20; also see Figures 3 and 4). Already in 1959, Raymond P. Barnes complained residential development around Cave Spring, “its lovely countryside distorted into another suburb of Roanoke” (Barnes 1959:4-22). Since then, a slew of housing divisions have sprung up to the west along the north side of Route 221, engulfing much of the former agricultural land along Back Creek. The Poage family’s dairy operation at Poage’s Mill is the most substantial of the few remaining viable farms. By 1994, there were 18 named subdivisions between Cave Spring and Bent Mountain. Already in 1990, Back Creek was far more suburban than rural. According to the census, the typical resident was college-educated, had a household income of \$47,109, commuted 27 minutes to work, and lived in a house worth \$114,866 (Vertefeuille 1994:A-16).

## *Community and Family Life*

### ETHNIC MAKEUP

Like the rest of the Great Valley, the main immigration route to the Roanoke area started in Pennsylvania. Among the scattered English families who had crossed the Blue Ridge were large numbers of German and Scots-Irish settlers. At first, the ethnic makeup of present Roanoke County was largely Scots-Irish. Governor Gooch had granted large tracts in the upper valley (now Augusta and Rockbridge counties) to William Beverley and Benjamin Borden, who sold much of their land to fellow Scots-Irish immigrants. Later, as some of these Scots-Irish families moved further west, German settlers purchased the newly available land. In some areas of the county, the German population clustered in enclaves, where they retained many of their old traditions and kept to themselves (Hutcheson 1993:9; Kagey 1988:17). Some historians have generalized this trend for all of Roanoke County (Kagey 1988:18). More detailed studies of the Back Creek and Cave Springs area, however, reveal a well-integrated population of ethnically diverse origins (Hutcheson 1993, 1995).

Despite the varied religious and cultural backgrounds of the local population, Charlene Hutcheson (1993) discovered that German and “British” (English, Welsh, and Scots-Irish) neighbors interacted quite freely. Her most significant finding is that religion and national origin ranked fairly low in selecting a marriage partner. This was not always the case in the Valley, even in similarly mixed rural neighborhoods. For example, at Opequon Creek in the lower valley, very few Germans and Scots-Irish neighbors intermarried during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Hofstra 1991, cited in Hutcheson 1993:10). By contrast, a sample of 40 Back Creek/Cave Springs families from the 1770s through 1850 showed high percentages of intermarriage between British and Germans. During the 1770s, when Germans made up on 23% of Botetourt County’s population, the limited number of available German partners probably encouraged the very high marriage rate to British partners (70%), but the high rate of marriage outside the group continued even as the proportion of German families increased. In fact, for both the British and German groups, the rate of marriage outside the group never dropped below 37%, a very convincing illustration of ethnic interaction (Hutcheson 1995:7).

Religion was another arena for ethnic cooperation in Back Creek/Cave Springs. Relative to its small size, the population displayed remarkable religious diversity. Leading local German denominations were Lutheran, Reformed, and Brethren. The first generations of Scots-Irish were Presbyterians, but the denomination soon was largely replaced by Methodists and Baptists. The Presbyterian requirement for seminary-trained clergy

limited its growth in isolated, rural areas like Back Creek (and across the backcountry South). Less formally trained Methodist and Baptist preachers drew many former Presbyterians to their congregations (Jordan-Bychov 2003:10). With multiple denominations dividing the small villages into tiny congregations, each denomination could not afford to build its own church. Instead, the diverse religious population pooled its resources, erecting “union chapels” such as Laurel Ridge Church between Poage’s Mill and Cave Spring. Another notable example of “ecumenical sharing” was the support of the Scots-Irish Elijah Poage for the German Brethren church. In the mid-nineteenth century, the very first Brethren services were held in his cabinetry shop. A more commodious setting was later found in a Lutheran Chapel (Hutcheson 1993:25). Finally, the Brethren were able to build their own chapel on land owned by Elijah Poage. To this day the land is owned by the Poage family, but the Brethren will retain use rights for as long as they hold services at the church (William Poage, personal communication 2003).

We are left to wonder why this particular area enjoyed such solidarity between settlers of diverse origins. Perhaps it is because their religious beliefs diverged less dramatically than those of groups found in other parts of the Valley. For example, the Mennonites and Dunkers held much more exclusionary beliefs. Based on her research of marriage patterns, Hutcheson (1995:2) observed that “...without strong sectarian religious groups, [communities] found that national origin and religious preference were not as important as location and social values in forming family and marital alliances” (Hutcheson 1995:2). Back Creek’s various Protestant groups held enough common ground to build a strong feeling of community that extended even to the point of sharing church buildings.

#### HOME AND WORK

Until the twentieth century, most Americans derived their income from agriculture. Similarly, Back Creek’s history reflects a long agricultural tradition. During the eighteenth century, local landowners had claimed tracts too large to farm themselves, so much of their land was unimproved. Areas that had been cleared were farmed by tenants and, less frequently, slaves. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, many of the large tracts were subdivided and sold. Individual families like the ancestors of John Harris farmed these smaller acreages, usually as self-sufficient farmers who sold their moderate surplus for cash. Large numbers of small mixed farms meant that slavery would never be as significant in Roanoke County as in the major tobacco-growing areas to the east. Many Scots-Irish Presbyterian and German settlers also rejected slavery on moral and religious grounds (Writer’s Program 1942:85).

Before entering into a statistical overview of local agriculture during the mid-nineteenth century, it would be helpful to imagine the daily rhythms of life for the Harris family and neighboring families. Unfortunately, no diaries or collections of letters from the Back Creek area survive from this period to give us an intimate view of family life. To transport ourselves into the world of the middling farm families of Back Creek, we must look further afield to the Catawba valley in the northern part of Roanoke County. In 1914, Maria Jane Gish Frantz wrote down recollections of her childhood on her family's Catawba Valley farm in the 1840s (Frantz 1970). A descendant passed them on the Roanoke Historical Society, and they were published in 1970. The Frantz family's daily and seasonal routines reflect life on a self-sufficient mixed farm like many of those along Back Creek. Producing much of their own food and clothing, as well as cash crops and crafts for sale outside the home, entailed a schedule of hard work involving the whole family (Figure 21). Maria's father had bought the farm in 1816 and "cleared most of it himself." Though robust, her father needed to hire hands to help him with the heavy labor involved in harvesting wheat before the advent of reaping machines. "The wheat was cut with Cradles, perhaps eight or ten Cradles going at the same time. As many rakers and as many men to bind up the sheaves" (Frantz 1970:7). The younger children helped by carrying water to the thirsty field hands laboring in the late summer sun. While helpful for an efficient harvest, hired labor diminished the return on the crop. To help pay their wages, Maria's mother spun wool and linen, and wove cloth for sale outside the home. In turn, the girls had the summertime chores of "picking" through and washing the shorn wool during the weeks between the end of the school year and the beginning of the harvest. "We little girls had to pick wool in the hot summer days and how tired we would get sitting and picking wool" (Frantz 1970:7). The burden of work was sometimes mixed with fun, as Maria fondly remembered washing wool with the other children.

We would all go out in a wagon to the creek with baskets, tubs and buckets, and as the water was warm we would each take a basket, put it half full of Wool, and wade into the creek where it was gravel bottom, and get into the baskets with feet and tramp the wool until the water ran clean from the basket, then the wool was clean. We would walk out, drain the wool, and put it back into the sheets on the grass, fill the baskets and into the water again!

This was great fun to us (Frantz 1970:6–7).

Maria also describes the intricate, labor-intensive processing of flax into linen—a series of tasks divided within the family according to age and sex.



**Figure 21. Roanoke County farmer plowing in the twentieth century (Vachon 1941). Still in the 1940s, many local farmers relied on physically demanding manual or animal-powered equipment like their predecessors in the nineteenth century.**

After the crop was harvested and dried in bundles in the field, the seed was removed by beating. The stalks were then spread in rows in a meadow, where they were allowed to rot. Once the rotted stalks were returned to the barn, Maria's father would crush them with a flax break. Women and older girls would then "scrutch" and "hackle" the fibers, which they would then spin for fine cloth. Smaller children spun the tangled tow into a coarser grade of linen.

Children also helped with more frequent tasks such as milking cows, leading the herds between pasture and barn in the morning and evening, churning butter, and gathering hens' eggs. Maria and her sisters also sewed and helped their mother cook meals in an open fireplace.

Like Maria Frantz's family, most Roanoke farmers drew their livelihood from a mixed round of grain crops and a small stock of cattle and hogs. Agricultural census information during the mid-nineteenth century gives us a detailed breakdown of the typical Roanoke County farm. In a study of the effects of the Civil War on local farmers, Scott Draper (1996:19) compiled the most accurate totals to date by transcribing information from the 1860 and 1870 census entries for the whole county into a statistical computer program. Since some very large farming operations would tend to skew the mean (average) amounts upwards, Draper's median figures are often more useful. Of the 331 farms in 1860, the median acreage in 1860 was 185 acres, of which 100 acres was improved (usable) land. Median yields for some key crops include 150 bushels of corn, 10 bushels of Irish potatoes, and 1,000 lb. of tobacco (Draper 1996:19). Though not enumerated in a summary table, several grain crops were important besides corn, including wheat, oats, rye, and barley (Draper 1996:13). The median farm in 1860 included three horses, four beef cattle, three milk cows, and 13 hogs. There were only 3,527 sheep in the whole county.

Roanoke farmers had only been growing significant amounts of tobacco for a few decades, and never on the scale reached in Piedmont counties to the east (Kagey 1988:64). By 1870, total tobacco production had dropped dramatically to 277,530 lb. from its prewar total of 878,44 lb. Tobacco regained a significant share of Roanoke County's agricultural output late in the nineteenth century, as county directories list tobacco as one of the "principal crops" along with wheat (Chataigne 1885:546, 1894:87).

By the mid-nineteenth century, tobacco production had evolved from the labor-intensive "monoculture," or single-crop system, that we associate with colonial Tidewater. Changes in curing methods allowed relatively smaller acreages to be grown and smaller-scale farms could incorporate a tobacco lot or two into their crop rotation. Smaller acreages also made the labor-intensive process of manuring the fields more manageable for the small farmer. By the 1860s, yields ranged between 800 and 1,000 lb. per

acre, with a hand assigned 2 to 3 acres per task (Gray 1933:774, 776). Under these conditions, a farmer with a moderate-sized farm and grown children helping in the fields could incorporate an acre or two of tobacco into the crop rotation.

Similar to the antebellum period, there are no written accounts of rural life in Back Creek during the second half of the nineteenth century. Our best source is a brief typescript history of the “Back Creek Settlement” by local school teacher Dolores Peters (1974). The bulk of the text was finished in 1945, after Peters’ sixth and seventh grade students at Back Creek School brought her “personal accounts given them by parents and grandparents” (Peters 1974:9). At this time the oldest generation would have recalled most of the period following the Civil War. The section titled “Recreation” describes some of the communal fun that came from sharing farm tasks with neighbors.

Lack of labor-saving devices and convenient transportation led to many novel forms of entertainment, chief among which were the applebutter boilings and quilt-making. Barn-raising, hog-killing, cornhusking, and a boil-down of molasses...offered other opportunities for get-togethers. Distances between neighbors, lack of even simple equipment that might make life easier, and the drudgery of everyday toil did not quench the spirit of nature within them (Peters 1974:7).

Neighbors came together to share a specialized task like molasses boiling more efficiently, but more importantly as a pretext for socializing. Once the task no longer needed close attention, the party could focus on “games, story telling and music.” At a time when courtship was tamed by religious prohibitions on dancing, the get-togethers also provided a supervised outlet for young people to flirt with their neighbors. “Kissing games were quite popular under the name of forfeits, which were called for by the bumping of the applebutter paddle or the finding of a red ear of corn at husking” (Peters 1974:7). From the accounts Peters has distilled, though perhaps filtered through the lens of nostalgia, we imagine not just a scattering of independent farm families along Back Creek, but also a community bound by neighborly sharing.

After the Civil War, orchards became a key cash crop for local farmers, especially apples grown in the Bent Mountain/Back Creek area. The sharp rise of orchard crops between 1860 and 1870 contrasts with the plummeting totals for tobacco over the same period (though tobacco later regained some of its popularity) (Chataigne 1885:546). In 1860 the total value of all orchard crops in the county was \$566 (an average of \$1.70 per farm). By the following decade, the mean value stood at \$39.20 per farm and totaled \$21,795 for the whole county. One of the pioneers of apple growing was “Squire” Jordan Woodrum. His successful experiment with 50 acres of pippen orchard at the head of Back Creek in the early 1870s en-

couraged other local farmers to try the crop. On the steep soils near Bent Mountain where cultivation of other crops was difficult, apples grew particularly well. By 1910, there were at least six commercial growers on Bent Mountain, with many other farmers keeping smaller orchards as well (Kagey 1988:301–302). Bent Mountain apples gained a wide reputation, even reaching an international market. A brass stencil still in possession of the local Ferguson family was used in the early twentieth century for stamping barrels of apples headed directly from their Bent Mountain orchard to Liverpool, England (Barranger 1994:13).

Collaboration of the large orchard owners brought about some major improvements that benefitted the entire Bent Mountain/Back Creek community. During the late nineteenth century, road networks in the Back Creek area had not kept pace with the orchard industry's need for efficient transportation of their produce. The journey from Bent Mountain to Roanoke took two days along the rough, muddy roads. By the early 1890s, a railway station had been established at Starkey, about 8 miles east of Bent Mountain, providing growers with rapid access to wider markets (Kagey 1988:310–311). The remaining obstacle was carrying the produce from orchard to depot. To address the problem, in 1903, the Bent Mountain

**Figure 22. Path of road petitioned by the Bent Mountain Apple and Cold Storage Company in 1910 (Surveyor's Records 5:34).**



Apple and Cold Storage Company petitioned for a new road. Skirting along the north bank of Back Creek from Poage's Mill to Starkey, the road would greatly improve transportation of their produce to the nearest rail depot (Surveyor's Records 5:34) (Figure 22). In 1910, orchard owners formed the Fruit Growers' Telephone Cooperative. First, they ran a local line that connected subscribers in the vicinity of Poage's Mill, then later had the line connected to Roanoke and the rest of the outside world (Kagey 1988:302).

At the core of Back Creek's rural farming community stood the village of Poage's Mill. Before major transportation improvements and the widespread use of automobiles, local farmers relied on the village for most of their basic needs. At the hub of such villages in a region of small farmers was the mill. Robert Poage and then his enterprising son Elijah prospered from a sawmill and gristmill powered by the waters of Back Creek. By the mid-nineteenth century, as an outgrowth of these businesses, Elijah Poage also operated a furniture-making shop large enough to employ other craftsmen (William Poage, personal communication 2003). Besides furniture, Elijah Poage also made coffins and eventually provided undertaking services with a partner. Clearly, the community revolved around the Poage enterprise, as indicated by the community's name. Further highlighting Poage's standing among his neighbors is the title Squire, which even appears next to his name on Civil War era maps of the county (see Figures 17 and 18). Rather than referring to his command of key economic resources in the community, the term indicates that he held the office of justice of the peace.

County directories printed in the late nineteenth century portray Poage's Mill among a handful of thriving villages in the county, providing a variety of crafts, goods, and services. Evident in the name of the village, milling was the most essential service farmers required before the days of efficient bulk transportation on trucks. *Chataigne's Virginia Gazetteer and Classified Business Directory* for 1884–85 listed three corn and flour milling operations in Poage's Mill. Local residents could also choose among three sawmills, two general merchants, and two distillers. Poage's Mill even had its own physician and Elijah Poage served as the local undertaker (Chataigne 1885:549–550).

Almost ten years later, the village still retained much of its vitality and even added some services. Although an 1893–94 gazetteer listed no distillery and only Elijah Poage under flour mill and sawmill owners, the community retained two general merchants, added two builders, a millwright, a tanner, and a nurseryman. Elijah Poage continued to serve as undertaker, but now in partnership with H. C. Worts. There was also a dentist and a

new physician. Also indicative of a still vital community, Poage's Mill was one of only 20 post offices in the county.

By 1898, the heyday of Poage's Mill appears to have just passed, though services had diminished only slightly. The village retained its post office. Again Poage was the only miller and continued his business as an undertaker. No dentist was listed, but the village still had a physician. There was only one general merchant, but several specialized trades appeared for the first time: a carpenter/builder, a blacksmith/wheelwright, two "carriage, coach, and wagon" builders, and a saddle/harness maker. Perhaps some of these were present before, but only now included in the directory because of a new format by a different publisher (Hill 1898).

In the early twentieth century, the small village showed further signs of waning vitality. In 1917, Poage's Mill had 50 residents, and 47 were farmers. By now the mills were gone, though a lumber "dealer" may still have sawn local timber. Farmers had better road access to Starkey and Roanoke, but could still shop locally, at two general stores and a grocer. One builder and a cannery were also listed.

Even though transportation routes to Roanoke and other centers of commerce had improved through the middle of the twentieth century, most Back Creek residents did not venture outside their community as routinely as today. Mobility was limited, as fewer residents owned automobiles and trucks. Lillian Harris (personal communication 2003) recalls that her mother-in-law Matilda Harris depended on neighbors for her occasional rides to Roanoke, where she would sell butter, eggs, and chickens from the Harris farm. During this period, before the suburbanization of Back Creek, Matilda's husband used mules for the more bulky transport of crops between his property near Poage's Mill and his homeplace. For the Harris family, on the eastern end of Back Creek, most household purchases could be made at a store in Cave Springs, while their mail was delivered to the train depot at Starkey. Some necessities such as blocks of ice for refrigeration were delivered directly to the farm. In the summer and fall months, local residents also could purchase fresh fruit from peddlers selling produce door to door.

# THE HARRIS FAMILY OF BACK CREEK

## *First Generation: Levi Harris (1777–ca. 1847)*

Levi Harris is the earliest known member of the Harris family to settle near Back Creek. He was born in Frederick County in the Lower Valley in 1777, about a generation after that area's intensive settlement by Europeans began. Although his family was Scots-Irish, they did not necessarily migrate to the Valley with the wave of countrymen who swept down from Pennsylvania beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. Instead, they may have come to the Valley through eastern Virginia, acquiring their Frederick County land through the Northern Proprietary. We know that Levi's father William was an early settler of Loudoun County further east in Virginia. Prior to the birth of his son Levi, William Harris had been living in Loudoun County as recently as 1772 when he had married Elizabeth Holmes. As a young man, Levi Harris had moved from the Valley to Bedford County on the east side of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He was living there by 1797, when he married Tabitha Hackworth. Seven years later the couple was still in Bedford County for the birth of their son William (Harris 1990).

In 1838, Levi Harris moved back west across the Blue Ridge and into newly formed Roanoke County. According to land tax records, he owned 300 acres located 10 miles south of the county courthouse of Salem, the right distance to be squarely in the Back Creek area. Buildings on his tract were valued at \$150. In the 1840 federal census, he is listed as the head of a six-person household, consisting of one male aged 60–70 (Levi), one female the same age (Tabitha), one male aged 30–40 (probably their son William, who was 36 years old by then), along with two females and one male all aged 20–30. Levi continued as the proprietor of a 300-acre tract until 1846, when his name was no longer listed in the land tax records. Beginning in 1854, the 300 acres were listed in the name of his heirs.

In 1848 a civil suit began between Levi's son William, other plaintiffs, and Levi's other heirs. Levi Harris had apparently died without a will. Adding to the complication of dividing his estate may have been the competency of his wife Tabitha. In 1853, a court order declared her an "insane person."

William Harris and William Alcorn were appointed as “committee” of her estate. John D. Eddington, Samuel H. C. Greenwood, and Joseph Archer stood as security with a bond of \$600. The same order recorded the minor Charlotte Harris as a child and heir of Levi Harris (OB D:551). Finally, in 1859, the extended case drew to a close. James Eddington, Commissioner of Roanoke Court, auctioned 184 acres of Levi Harris’ land. In a deed to the highest bidder, William Fralin, Levi Harris’ lands were described as extending to the Blue Ridge and to the Franklin County line (DB F:416).



**Figure 23. Portrait of Sarah E. Muse Harris (1820–1894) probably taken in the 1880s.**

## *Second Generation: William Harris (1804–1868)*

According to family history, William Harris was born in Bedford County, Virginia, on July 2, 1804 (Harris 1990:I:48). William married Sarah E. Muse in Roanoke County on February 16, 1843 (Figure 23). Two years later, in 1845, William acquired 120 acres on the waters of Back Creek, “with all appurtenances,” from Jeremiah K. Pitzer, Commissioner of the Circuit Superior Court (DB B:408). William’s purchase appeared in the Roanoke County land tax book, with no building valuation on land listed at \$120. This remained unchanged until 1850, when the value of the tract doubled. As the tract still contained no buildings, the increase can be attributed to land clearing and cultivation or some other improvement. Then, in 1855, a building worth \$100 raised the total value of William’s property to \$340. The increase indicates that William built a house in 1854 or 1855.

This house may have been described in a 1937 WPA inventory of Roanoke County’s historic structures. According to the inventory form, the house was a rectangular two-story log structure clad in weatherboard. Each floor had two rooms, perhaps in a hall-parlor configuration, and the house was heated by a single brick chimney. The house also included an attic and cellar. At the time, recorder Ernest H. Weaver considered the structure to be in poor condition. Horace Harris (personal communication 2003) remembers a similar house that stood on the current Harris property until the mid-1930s, but this very likely was not the William Harris house. First, there are discrepancies between Horace Harris’ description and the inventory form recorded by Weaver. Mr. Harris remembers a two-story log house with only one room on each floor and a wood shingled rather than metal roof (Horace Harris, personal communication 1997). Also, even though Weaver recorded the location as 1.5 miles southwest of Cave Spring (roughly the same as the current Harris property), the William Harris house more likely stood further to the southeast, on the south side of Back Creek. This is where a structure labeled “W. Harris”

appears on two Civil War-era maps of Roanoke County (see Figures 17 and 18). The location of the current Harris property is labeled “D Shaver,” indicating that John L. Harris built his house on a new property rather than his father’s homeplace. Unless the William Harris house was moved, the log house that Horace Harris remembers likely was built prior to John L. Harris’ purchase of the property. The chain of title on the 1937 inventory form indicates that the William Harris homeplace passed to John Harris’ brother Elisha in 1884 and then was sold out of the family in 1925.

In the federal population census for 1850, William Harris, aged 43, was listed as head of household with his wife Sarah E. (35), son John L. (6), son James L., (4) and son Benjamin (2). The federal agricultural census for 1850 listed William with 75 improved acres and 65 unimproved acres worth a total of \$600. William also owned \$50 worth of farm machinery and implements. A horse, two milk cows, five other cattle, four sheep, and nine swine were valued at \$80. The farm had produced 50 bushels of wheat, 100 bushels of Indian corn, 20 bushels of oats, 1,100 lb. of tobacco, 17 lb. of wool, 20 bushels of Irish potatoes, 75 bushels of sweet potatoes, 100 lb. of butter, 1 ton of hay, two bushels of clover seed, 20 lb. of flax, and 1 bushel of flax seed. Homemade manufactures were estimated to be worth \$12 and slaughtered animals \$32.

By the time of the next federal agricultural census in 1860, William Harris had prospered. He now had 100 improved and 25 unimproved acres. Since 1850, the estimated cash value of his farm had increased three-fold, to \$1,800. Farm machinery and implements were valued at \$60. Livestock consisted of two horses, two milk cows, nine other cattle, and nine swine. His farm produced 350 bushels of wheat, 100 bushels of Indian corn, 50 bushels of oats, 2,000 lb. of tobacco, and 100 lb. of butter, and 1 ton of hay. The value of slaughtered animals was estimated at \$50.

The doubling of William Harris’ tobacco crop follows a similar rising trend in Roanoke County and in the local Cave Springs agricultural district. By 1860, 240 of the district’s 382 farmers, or 63 percent, were growing the crop compared to only 18.6 percent ten years earlier. Among the county’s farmers, though, Harris’ 2,000 lb. crop was twice the median for 1860. The surge in tobacco production occurred as Roanoke County became a major center for tobacco processing. Three tobacco warehouses were built near the future city of Roanoke in the 1850s (Frazier Associates 1992:40). Also, the 1864 Izard map of the county shows a building labeled “Tob Facty” west of Poage’s Mill near the foot of Bent Mountain (see Figure 17). Although there is no evidence that William Harris sent his tobacco there, he seems to have packed his tobacco for shipment himself. According to Elijah Poage’s account book for 1861, William Harris bought “67 ft. 5/8” of wooden staves for a tobacco hogshead (barrel) (see Table 1).

DATE (P.#)	FIRST NAME OF HARRIS	AMOUNT POAGE RECEIVED	AMOUNT POAGE PAID	TRANSACTION
7/29/1859* (12)	William	\$5.50		1 coffin for infant dtr. who died age 2
8/9/1862* (99)	William	--		140 ft. 4/4 plank
5/5/1863* (118)	William	\$3.10		415 ft. 4/4 pine planks
2/12/1861* (63)	William	\$3.65		Lumber
2/12/1861** (63)	William	\$1.28		To sawing 256 ft. of w/board at 50¢ per hundred
2/12/1861** (63)	William	\$1.07 ½		To do. 215 ft. 4/4 poplar plank at 50¢ per hundred
2/12/1861** (63)	William	\$1.30		To sawing 324 ft. of 3/4 plank at 40¢/hd
2/15/1861* (63)	William	\$1.91		Lumber
8/21/1861* (76)	William	\$0.57		57 ft. weatherboarding
8/1861** (63)	William	67¢?		To staves for tob. hogshead 67 ft. 5/8
11/18/1862* (110)	Benjamin		—	For three days threshing
11/18/1862* (110)	James		—	For three days threshing
1866* (161)	John L.	\$28.50		Suit of clothes, jeans, shoes
1866 – 1/1/1867** (161)	John L.	\$1.50		To 1 hat
		\$7.00		To 1 suit clothes
		\$1.00		To cash
		\$5.00		To cash
		\$9.00		To cash
		\$1.50		To 1 shoe patron
		\$0.70		To 2 p_ half soles and box tucks
		\$2.50		To 2½ yd of jeans at \$2.50
		<u>\$0.30</u>		To cash
		\$28.50		Settled up in full with J. L. Harris this 1st day of
				January 1867 & fell due to Harris \$32.00

\*Harris 1990

\*\*Poage 1850s–1860s

**Table 1. Harris family transactions in Elijah Poage's account books.**

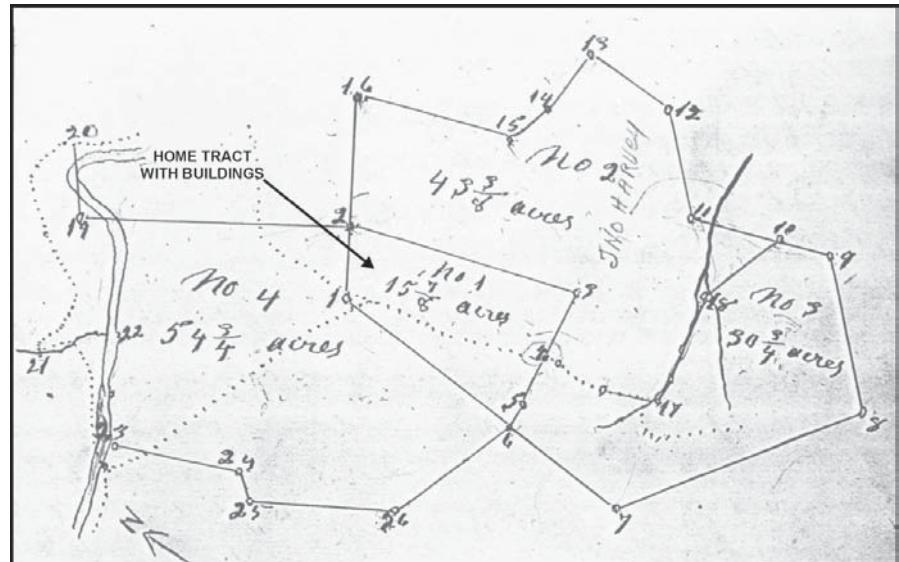
At the time of his death in 1868, William Harris owned two parcels totaling 188 acres, his 120 acre homeplace and a 68-acre tract with no buildings.. The 188 acres remained in his heirs' names in Roanoke land tax records until 1885. A survey of the home tract computed the total area down to  $144 \frac{1}{4}$  acres (Surveyor's Book 3:305) (Figure 24).

### *Third Generation: John L. Harris (1844–1898)*

After William Harris died in 1868, the 1870 federal population census showed his widow, Sarah E. Muse Harris, and his eldest son, John L. Harris, maintaining separate contiguous households. Sarah may have continued to live in the ca. 1855 house until her death in 1884. In the 1870 census, she is listed as a farmer, with real estate valued at \$715 and her personal property at \$355. Four of her children, 22-year-old Benjamin, 20-year-old Elisha, 16-year-old Thomas J., and nine-year-old Lydia, were still at home.

William and Sarah's oldest son, John, had married Sarah Jane Hayes (Figure 25) of Roanoke County in 1867, the year before his father died. The 1870 census described John as a 26-year-old farmer with real estate valued at \$450 and personal property worth \$125. His wife, Sarah Jane, kept house and cared for their three young children, three-year-old William, one-year-old Joseph, and five-month-old Susan. John's 24-year-old brother, James L., and new wife, Flemington, also lived in the same household (Figure 26).

The agricultural census schedule of 1870 provides further details about the livelihood of John L. Harris just six years before he built his house. Overall, the census data reflects a fairly modest farming operation—consistent with the family's 1876 hall-parlor dwelling. In 1870, Harris' 50 improved acres were well below the county median of 90 acres, and all his remaining 62 unimproved acres was woodland. During the previous year, Harris had sold or slaughtered \$150 worth of livestock. At the time of the census, he owned one horse, one milk cow, two other cattle, and two hogs valued at \$100, while his farming implements were worth only \$5. Subtracting these amounts, Harris' remaining personal property totaled only



**Figure 24. Survey of William Harris' home tract for division among his heirs in 1884 (Surveyor's Book 3:305).**



**Figure 25. Portrait of Sarah Jane Hayes Harris (1840–1909) probably taken in the late nineteenth century.**

**Figure 26. John L. Harris and family.**



\$20. Cereal crops yielded only 25 bushels of corn and 75 bushels of oats. On the other hand, John Harris grew significantly more tobacco than the average Roanoke farmer in the midst of the crop's postwar decline. Even though his yield of 700 lb. was much lower than his father's 2,000 lb. crop recorded in 1860, John Harris was well above the county average of 499 lb. (Draper 1996:19). The total cash value of the farm was \$450, while the value of its production for 1869–70 was estimated at \$750.

In the fall of 1871, John L. Harris and his brother, Benjamin S. Harris were the two highest bidders on two tracts of land, 113 acres and 5 acres, belonging to the estate of Louisa B. Craft (DB H:423). The brothers divided and swapped the land back and forth between themselves a number of times (DB J:178, 198, 654). Based on tax records, it appears that John L. Harris built his house on part of the Craft land in 1875 or 1876. In 1879, John received 28 acres as his share of his father's home tract, adjacent to his own homeplace (DB K:584; Surveyor's Book 3:222) (Figure 27).

The 1880 federal population census also showed John Harris living in the dwelling next to his mother's, indicating two adjacent houses. Widow Sarah Harris, 56, was "keeping house" and lived with her 29-year-old son Elisha M. Harris, a farmer, and John Bailey, an 11-year-old Irish servant.

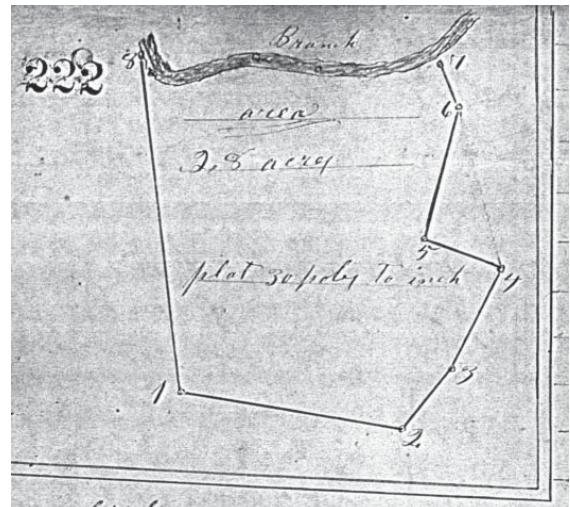
The proximity of the two houses is confirmed by the memory of Horace Harris, born in 1921. As mentioned above, Mr. Harris remembers a two-

story log house, with one room on each floor and a wood-shingled roof, located where a washhouse now stands. This description does not match a description written in the 1930s of a structure called the William Harris House. Rather than moving her husband's old house to her son's new property, she must have taken up residence in a log house already on the property, probably one belonging to an earlier landowner.

The 1880 census recorded that John Harris' farm capital on hand had increased during the previous decade, while curiously the value of production (perhaps calculated differently from the 1870 census) had declined to \$425. Sixty acres of his land were tilled, an increase of 10 acres over the "improved" acreage of 1870, along with an additional 4 acres of "old fields." Woodland comprised only 30 acres. Harris' livestock had increased considerably. He now owned two horses, three milk cows, three other cows (having also purchased a cow and sold three others during the previous year), six sheep (yielding 24 lb. of wool), 15 swine, and 20 barnyard poultry. The census also recorded more diverse crops on the farm than at the start of the previous decade. Corn (120 bushels) and oats (40 bushels) still were the major food crops, but the Harris farm also produced 80 bushels of wheat, 25 bushels of potatoes, 3 bushels of rye, and 40 gallons of molasses (the latter from a quarter-acre sorghum lot). The Harrises also cultivated a half-acre flax plot yielding 2 bushels of seed and 200 lb. of straw, perhaps for home use. Perhaps most significant John L. Harris continued the family's investment in tobacco, now cultivating 2 acres of tobacco with a yield of 1,117 lb. With the more diverse crops and additional livestock, Harris could no longer handle the farm's work load by himself and paid \$50 for outside labor over the course of 20 weeks.

In 1885, the building valuation on John Harris' 88-acre homeplace parcel increased from \$100 to \$200, indicating more construction, perhaps outbuildings or a barn. Also, John had acquired a 130-acre parcel on Mason's Knob, which he kept until his death; this parcel never included a building valuation. In 1889, John's 88-acre homeplace tract had increased to 162.4 acres. In 1893, the building valuation on the enlarged homeplace tract increased from \$200 to \$350. The increase very likely indicates the large two-story gable-front Victorian addition to the Harris House (see Figure 2).

In 1896, John and his wife, Sarah Jane, partitioned their lands and advanced  $217\frac{7}{8}$  acres of their approximately 293 acres to their five youngest surviving children. The two oldest children, William M. Harris and Susanna Grisso, were presumably established. Fruit from the partitioned lands was reserved for Sarah Jane for her family's use during her lifetime



**Figure 27. Survey made in 1879 of John L. Harris' 28-acre portion of the William Harris home tract (Surveyor's Book 3:222). This tract was adjacent to the land where John L. Harris built his house in 1876.**

(DB 16:177). The parcel allotted to the youngest children, Lutie and Elisha, was to be used by Sarah Jane Harris in support of herself and the two children until Elisha reached the age of 21 (DB 13:327, 17:83, 18:328).

John L. Harris wrote his will in 1898. He bequeathed to his wife "all my personal property consisting of horses, cows, hogs, farming implements, wagons, and household and kitchen furniture to hold and dispose of as she may think best for maintenance and ...all provisions, victuals, wheat-flour, corn, oats, bacon, pork, and forage that I may have on hand at my decease" (WB 1:510).

He also bequeathed to his wife "my homeplace which includes all my land not previously deeded to my children and supposed to contain about 45 acres, to hold her life time." After her death, the homeplace was to be equally divided between his youngest sons, Benjamin S. Harris and Elisha J. Harris. At the end of four years, Benjamin and Elisha were to pay their siblings amounts totaling \$310.

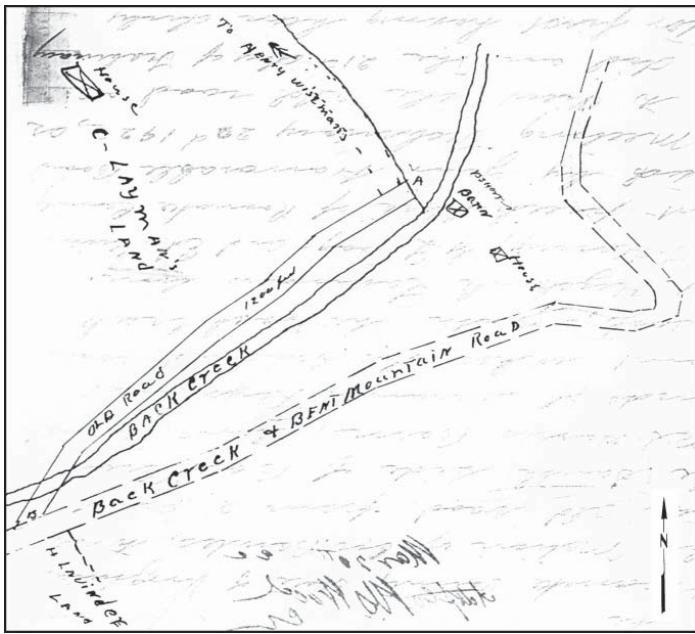
John L. Harris died in 1898 and by 1900 the Roanoke County land books listed his 46-acre homeplace under the name of his widow Sarah Jane Hayes Harris. She died in 1909.

### *Fourth Generation: Benjamin S. Harris (1876–1963)*

In 1901, John L. Harris' son Benjamin paid \$300 for the interest of his brother, Elisha J. Harris, in their father's home tract. According to the deed, the parcel contained the dwelling house, barn, and other outbuildings and about 49 acres, situated on the north side of Back Creek (DB 27:313). Two years later Benjamin bought the  $56 \frac{7}{8}$  acres advanced to siblings Lutie L. (Lerta) Harris Kirkwood and Elisha J. Harris by their father in 1896 (DB 28:127). The land was adjacent to the tract that Benjamin already owned.

Benjamin S. Harris lived on and farmed the land around his homeplace until his death in 1963. It is likely that Benjamin built most of the outbuildings that survive around the Harris House.

The county's road files indicate Section 2 of the Poage's Mill to Starkey Station Road was to pass through Benjamin Harris' land (Road File 25:14). This was probably the road petitioned by the Bent Mountain Apple and Cold Storage Company, though not specified in the records. Benjamin Harris would receive a total of \$110 compensation for his land and \$115 for damages to fencing. Even though many nearby families such as the Lavinders and Poages petitioned for the project and gave money, Benjamin Harris made no contribution.



**Figure 28.** Road reopening petitioned by Benjamin S. Harris in 1922 (Road File 30:29).

In 1922 Benjamin Harris petitioned for the reopening of the old road that ran in front of the house to the southeast (near the path of Route 221) (Figure 28).

### ***Fifth Generation: Horace M. Harris (1921–)***

When Benjamin S. Harris died in 1963, he left no will. His sole heirs at law were his widow Matilda and their two sons, Alfred B. Harris and Horace M. Harris. Matilda Harris died in 1968, leaving her estate to her two sons. In 1969, Alfred sold his half share to his brother Horace, the present owner of the property.

Horace Harris has lived his entire life on the Harris farm (Figure 29). After marrying Lillian, Horace and his family made their home in the older wing of the house, while his parents lived in the 1893 addition. Until he entered military service in 1942, Horace helped his father on the farm and earned extra income harvesting peaches and apples in the Beasley family orchards near Starkey. Following World War II, he opened an automobile repair shop a few hundred yards downhill from the farm. While operating his business, Horace also cultivated crops and raised livestock, though mostly for home consumption. Corn and hay were the main crops, grown to feed hogs and chickens. A small wheat plot produced enough flour for the family's needs (Horace Harris, personal communication 2003). Horace and Lillian Harris have moved to a new house on the property, which now encompasses 17.89 acres.



**Figure 29.** Lillian and Horace Harris in front of their new house on the old Harris farm.

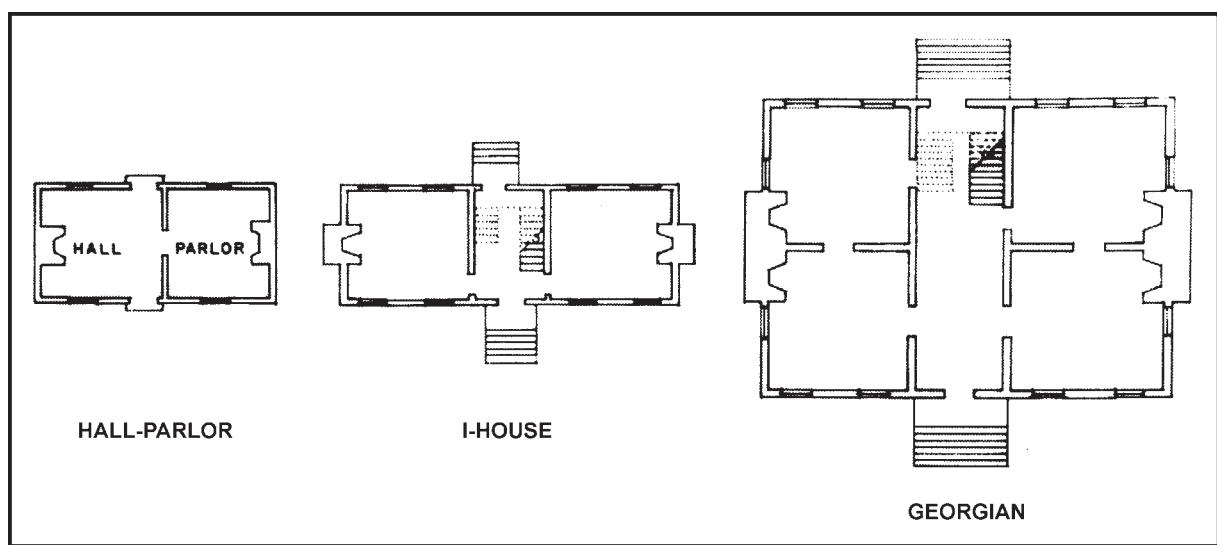
# ARCHITECTURE

## *Local Context and Significance*

In 1992 Roanoke County sponsored a survey of all the county's historic properties predating the Civil War and outstanding examples of structures built after 1861 (Frazier Associates 1992). At the "reconnaissance" level of the survey, 410 such historic properties were identified, photographed, and mapped. An additional 384 early twentieth-century properties were also located and mapped. Drawing on the large sample of structures, the survey defined the county's historic building practices, building types, and architectural styles. Back Creek was recognized as a rural community, and its architectural development paralleled the county's but, like most rural areas, in a later and more vernacular fashion.

Like other areas in the western part of Virginia, the earliest houses in Roanoke were simple one- or two-room buildings, similar to traditional Irish and English houses. The two-room version, or hall-parlor plan, had the front door opening into the main, heated room or "hall" (Figure 30). The smaller parlor was used as a sleeping room for the parents. A boxed staircase, usually in the corner of one of the rooms, led to the attic or loft, which was used as a bedroom for the family's children. The survey found many examples of this house type in the county. Typically, they were built of V-notched logs, with stone foundations and chimney, and they were usually one and one-half stories tall. Most were covered with wooden siding. Dwellings of this type ranged in size from 10 × 15 feet to 21 × 28 feet. The house type continued to be popular into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Houses were expanded by adding rear ells, shed additions, and porches (Frazier Associates 1992:16).

The 1992 Roanoke County reconnaissance survey cited the Harris House as one of only two outstanding examples of hall-parlor houses. Although later than originally thought, the house is considered significant for its architecture. The intact form and interior finish of the older portion (built in 1876) suggest an earlier time and confirm that vernacular (or folk) architecture prolongs traditional practices long after they have passed from fashion. The intact late nineteenth-century ell addition illustrates that houses were expanded to meet families' changing expectations and needs over time.



## FLOOR PLAN EVOLUTION

**Figure 30. Some house floor plans found in the Valley region during the nineteenth century (after Lay 2000:35–36).**

The simple hall-parlor plan of the Harris House, consisting of only two rooms on each floor, represents a survival of an earlier architectural style. Popular during the settlement of Tidewater Virginia in the seventeenth century, the floor plan derived from even earlier precedents in the British Isles. By the time Europeans began settling the Valley region in the mid-eighteenth century, a more formal, symmetrical layout of rooms, windows, and doors had become fashionable. Initially, the gentry adopted the “Georgian” style (named after the kings of England in the eighteenth century) in their grand plantation houses. The style also rapidly gained favor with middling classes, sometimes in modified form like the I-house (named for its later prevalence in Indiana and Illinois). Reduced in scale from the two-room-deep full Georgian plan, the I-house retained the symmetry and hallmark central passageway (Glassie 2000:117–119). Although the new layouts largely replaced the hall-parlor, examples of the older tradition were built across Virginia well into the nineteenth century (Lay 2000:41).

The Harris House is also significant for its grouping of outbuildings (Figure 31). In the 1992 survey report, the county’s most prevalent surviving outbuildings were, in descending order, barns, corncribs, springhouses, and smokehouses, of log and frame construction. The Harris House included examples of all the major outbuilding types and stood out as the latest dated of six properties with noteworthy groups of outbuildings. The outbuildings are representative of the types of buildings used by a small farm operation at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Association with the Harris family adds to the importance of the house, as they were among the early settlers of the Back Creek area of Roanoke County. The family also was typical of the area’s small, self-sufficient farmers of the mid- to late nineteenth century, remaining in their rural community through the present.

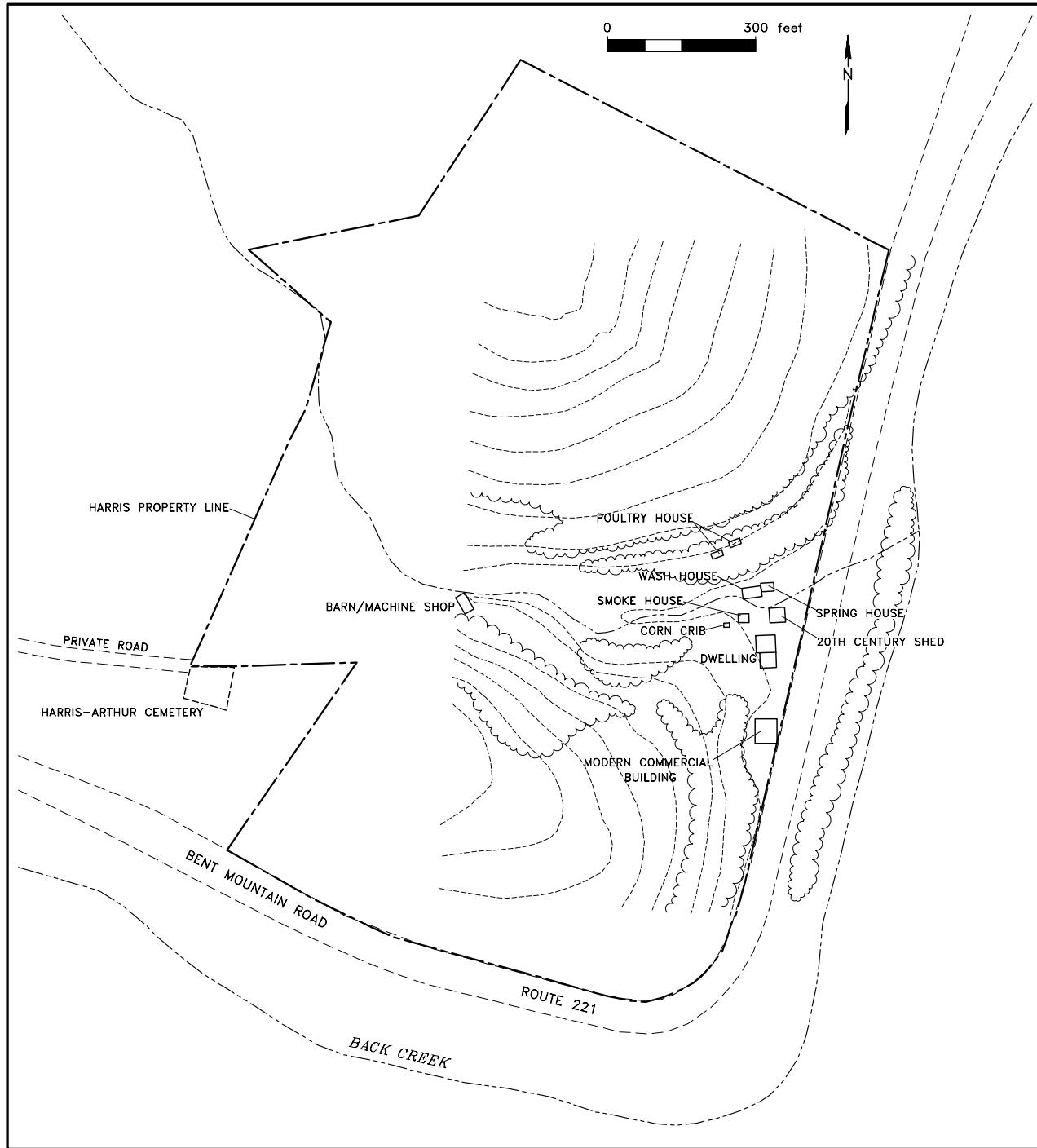


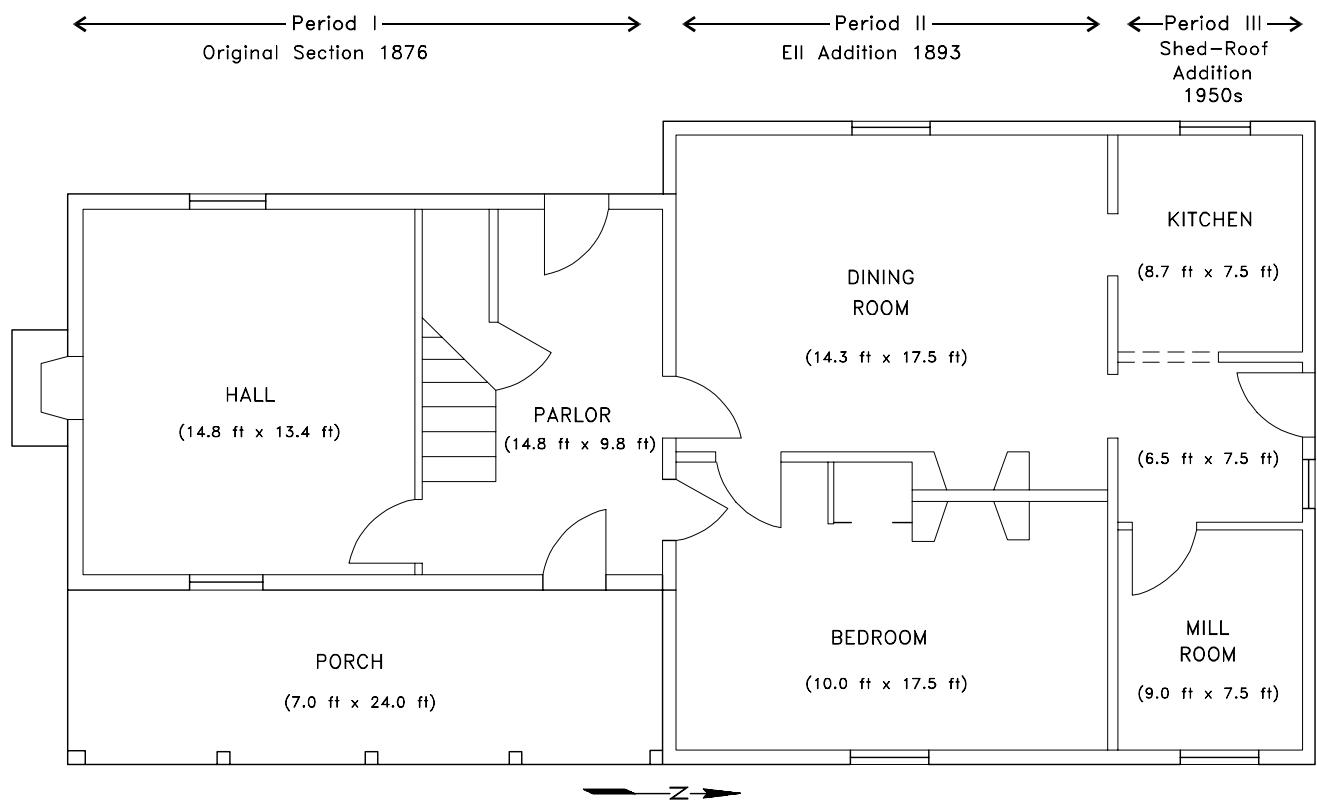
Figure 31. Plan of Harris farm. Currently, the property comprises 17.89 acres.

## *Architecture of the Harris House*

The Harris House consisted of three sections representing separate building phases (Figure 32). The first section, built in 1876, was a two-story, single-pile (one room deep) structure with two rooms on each floor and a single exterior brick chimney on the south end. A two-story porch with shed roof stretched along the length of the east facade (Figure 33). This section of the Harris House was a side-gable structure with an exterior brick chimney on the south end. The house faced the Route 221 roadway to the east. When the house was built in 1876, however, the closest major road ran along the hillside on the west (back) side of the house. About 1893, the Harrises built a two-story gable-roof addition on the north end of the building. Each floor included two rooms heated by a central brick chimney. A 1950s one-story shed addition housed a small kitchen, pantry, and central porch. The house, entirely of frame construction, rested on a stone foundation.

Simple treatment characterizes the entire exterior, reflecting the traditional, hall-parlor layout used in the initial construction phase. Only the cornice returns on the newer ell addition hint at ornament (Figure 34). Rather than exhibiting flourishes of Victorian fretwork, then fashionable on more elaborate homes, the two-story porch was guarded by a balus-

**Figure 32. Harris House floor plan.**



**Figure 33. Two-story porch, probably built in 1878, two years after initial house construction.**



**Figure 34. Cornice return on 1893 ell addition.**

trade made of plain, square balusters. Roughly dressed stone steps provided access to the south end of the first-floor porch (Figure 35). Exterior sheathing consisted of unpainted weatherboard and a new standing seam metal roof. All sections of the house were pierced with six-over-six-pane sash windows (Figure 36).

#### PERIOD I: CA. 1876–1893 HALL-PARLOR HOUSE

The hall-parlor section of the Harris House was built no earlier than 1876. Previously, the Roanoke County architectural reconnaissance survey report (Frazier Associates 1992:17, 21) had grouped the Harris House with “antebellum” houses (i.e., built before the Civil War). More intensive study by VDOT’s cultural resource staff in 1997 indicated a much later date. According to tax records and oral history evidence, initial construction occurred in 1875 or 1876. To establish the date more firmly, VDOT engaged Dendrochronology, Inc., of Blacksburg, Virginia, to perform tests on wooden structural members in the hall-parlor section of the house. Tree ring patterns in the house lumber were compared to known patterns of growth from living trees and other historic structure to determine the date when the lumber was harvested (Figure 37). The testing corroborated the documentary evidence. Oak beams under the old core section came from trees felled after the 1876 growing season, and oak sills under the two-story porch after the 1878 season.

A striking aspect of the old section was the two-story front porch. When building a new residence on the hill above the old site, Horace and Lillian



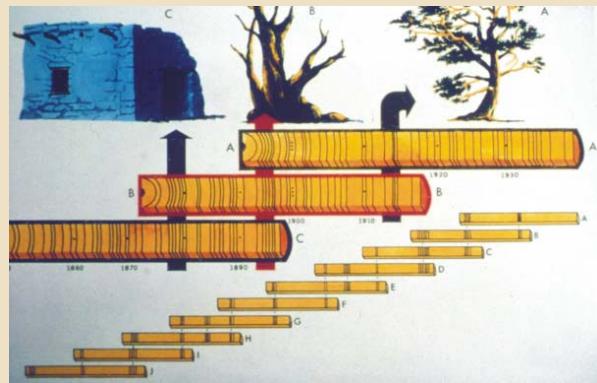
**Figure 35.** Roughly dressed boulder steps leading up to the first-floor porch.



**Figure 36.** Detail of six-over-six pane sash windows used throughout the house.

## DATING OLD HOUSES WITH DENDROCHRONOLOGY

Many of us have counted growth rings to find out the age of a felled tree. Beyond satisfying this casual curiosity, the science of dendrochronology makes use of growth patterns to study a variety of topics, including historical changes in climate and sometimes the dating of old structures. These studies depend on patterns of variations in thickness of the rings, which in turn reflect varying rates of rainfall and moisture from season to season. Since similar environmental conditions prevail across a region, patterns of growth rings are similar from tree to tree (Woodhouse and Bauer n.d.:1). Over the last several decades dendrochronologists have assembled databases of tree ring thickness patterns from various tree species in many regions of the United States. Some of the data has been collected by sampling ancient living trees using a special drill that extracts a tiny cylindrical cross-section without harming the tree. Occasionally, useful information also comes from old-growth timber harvests. A technique called “crossdating” (right) can date lumber from old buildings by comparing the growth patterns with those established from living trees. By knowing the date when a piece of structural timber was harvested, dendrochronologists can determine the earliest possible date of construction of portions of a building like the Harris House.



**Figure 37.** Thin cylindrical cross-section of growth rings bored from a living tree and an example of crossdating growth patterns from different sources (illustrations from Woodhouse and Bauer n.d.).



**Figure 38. New house on hillside with part of the old Harris House in foreground. When Horace and Lillian Harris built the new structure in 1997, they incorporated the two-story porch and gable-front ell design of their old home.**

Harris made sure to duplicate this attractive feature (Figure 38). John L. Harris also may have been inspired by a nearby example of a two-story porch. Though not particularly common in the area, a two-story porch once had been attached to the mid-nineteenth-century Old Poage Farm in Poage's Mill. William Poage (personal communication 2003) shared an early photograph of his house showing a similar "portico."

The entrance to this oldest section of the Harris House was through the smaller of the two first-floor rooms (Figure 39). Although this unheated room served as a hallway and stairwell, it is designated here as the parlor. In hall-parlor floor plans, the smaller room without a hearth was called the parlor (Shutty 1997:38). The layout of the Harris House was somewhat atypical as the front door usually opened into the larger, heated hall. In the parlor, and throughout the hall-parlor section of the Harris House, the interior fabric presented an austere simplicity. Plain, wide boards sheathed the ceilings and exterior walls, running horizontally on the walls. Rooms were separated by board partitions. Doors also followed a simple, batten design, with vertical boards held together with two tapered, nailed cross pieces (Figure 40). Left of the entrance a straight-flight staircase rose to the second floor. Like the porch, the interior staircase was guarded with a square handrail and balusters (Figures 41 and 42).

Next to the base of the stairway, a batten door opened into the hall. Exterior light entered the hall through windows on the front and back walls (Figure 43). With a hearth on the end (south) wall, this room would have been the center of family activity, and probably the most public room, when this section of the house stood alone. It also contained the dwelling's only interior ornament: a wooden mantel with carved sunburst and flanking turned piers (Figure 44).

Upstairs, the same two-room plan was repeated with another hearth on the south end wall (Figures 45 and 46). The mantel in this private space consisted of a typical, late nineteenth-century design, lacking the carving found in the hall. Both upper rooms continued with the original simple fabric of board sheathing on walls and ceilings. The absence of modern carpeting in this room revealed the floor made of wide, plain boards.

#### PERIOD II: CA. 1893 ELL ADDITION

Construction of an ell in 1893 allowed not only more room for John L. Harris' family, but also a more specialized use of interior space. With two additional rooms on the first floor, the family could separate their eating area from the hall. The rear room served as the dining room and the front room provided an additional bedroom (Figures 47 and 48). Subsequently, the ell also allowed greater privacy for two adult families living under one roof. After Horace and Lillian Harris were married, they lived in the hall-



**Figure 39.** Parlor and front door in the oldest section of the Harris House. Note the wide horizontal boards covering the walls.



**Figure 41.** Stair rail from parlor to second floor in oldest section.



**Figure 40.** Simple batten-style interior doors made of wide roughly finished boards held together by two tapered, nailed crosspieces.



**Figure 42.** Detail of squared balusters and rail from old parlor balustrade, shown here installed in Horace and Lillian Harris' new house.

**Figure 43.** Hall in old section of Harris House. Before the ell was added in 1893, the Harrises would have shared meals and entertained visitors in this room.





**Figure 44.** Detail of hall mantel with turned pilasters and carved sunburst (partly visible behind stove).

**Figure 45.** Second-floor room with fireplace (above the hall). By the time of this photograph, the house had been partially dismantled. Originally, a wall would have enclosed the opening between the post attached to the banister and the wall on the right.





**Figure 46.** View from the room above the hall toward the room above the parlor. Rooms in the 1893 addition can be seen through the far doorways. Again, this view is only possible because the wall left of the central vertical beam had been removed during dismantling of the house. The door on the right wall opens onto the second-floor porch.



**Figure 47.** Rear first-floor room of the ell addition, used as a dining room. Doors on the far wall open into the shed addition.



**Figure 48.** Front room in the ell addition. When Benjamin and Matilda Harris lived in the ell in the first half of the twentieth century, this was the master bedroom. Their son Horace and his wife Lillian occupied the older hall-parlor section.

parlor section for 20 years while Horace's parents Benjamin and Matilda occupied the new ell (Lillian Harris, personal communication 2003). Even though the house eventually would house two families, both sections shared the same staircase to the second floor. The parlor and the room above each had access to adjacent rooms in the ell through doors that opened into this newer section (see Figure 46). A central chimney with back-to-back hearths on both floors heated all four rooms.

Interior fabric of the ell closely matched the treatment in the older section, except that the boards sheathing the walls ran vertically. Similar, plain late nineteenth-century mantels framed the four hearths in this section too (Figure 49).

### PERIOD III: 1950s SHED ADDITION

In the 1950s, the house was expanded for the last time with a one-story shed-roof addition. Following the same trend of more specialized space as the 1893 ell, this new section moved cooking and food preparation to the far north end of the house. When the house was dismantled in 1997, this section housed a small kitchen, bath, and storage space. Originally, though, the space had reflected a more self-sufficient lifestyle. With few ready-made items bought from stores, the Harris family processed much of their food at home. Making bread, in particular, dictated the layout of this section of the house. The eastern third was occupied by a small "mill room," designated specifically for storing flour and kneading dough (Lillian Harris, personal communication 2003). This space was separated from the



**Figure 49.** Simple mantel design used for all four hearths of the centrally placed chimney in the ell addition.



**Figure 50.** View of shed addition before the central porch was enclosed. The family used the “mill room,” left of the porch, for storing flour and preparing bread dough. A separate space for bread-making freed up more room for cooking and other food preparation in the small kitchen on the right.

small kitchen, located on the west end, by a small central porch (Figure 50). As wood stoves require frequent resupply of fuel, this open area provided easy access to the nearby woodshed. It also served as a cool, open area for preparing food and for other tasks in the summer.

#### OUTBUILDINGS

In the early twentieth century and earlier, the collection of outbuildings on the Harris property would have been quite common on similar-sized farms. As conveniences such as indoor plumbing, washing machines, and store-bought foods became more common, however, these specialized buildings were no longer needed and gradually have decayed or disappeared completely. Unlike many of their contemporaries, the Harris family chose to live a more self-sufficient lifestyle, although still participating in the market economy through Horace’s automobile repair business. The Harris family’s continuation late into the twentieth century of traditional practices—like smoking meat, hauling spring water, and keeping chickens, for example—is a rarity, making the intact collection of early outbuildings an exceptional architectural resource.

Behind the northwest corner of the house, a gable-front, weatherboarded smokehouse rests on low fieldstone piers that prop the structure level on the hill's slope (Figure 51). The location, upslope from the house, would have diverted fumes away from the living area. The sides of the building are pierced by rows of vent holes just below the eaves (Figure 52). Entered through a batten door, the interior of the building consists of one room with a rough wood floor. Like most of the other outbuildings on the property, the smokehouse was probably built by Benjamin Harris ca. 1900, but relatively recent use has resulted in its continued maintenance and good condition. Specialized equipment used in processing slaughtered hogs was also still present on the property. The washhouse still contains a lard press used for rendering pig fat (Figure 53).

Just uphill from the smokehouse is the corn crib, used to store feed corn for livestock (Figure 54). The small gable-front building is sheathed with spaced, horizontally applied flush boards. The building includes a deep front roof overhang. Concrete block piers level the foundation of this building, which is situated on a steep slope.

Until Horace and Lillian Harris moved into their new house in 1998, they drew their water from a spring box across the small branch that flows east across their property into Back Creek. The current springhouse, rebuilt in the 1940s, features traditional diamond-notched log walls and a low corrugated metal side-gable roof (Figures 55 and 56). The west half of the structure consists of an open work area entered from the south. Field-stone walls on the north and west brace the structure against the natural



Figure 51. Smokehouse, looking west.



Figure 52. Smokehouse, showing vents below eaves.



**Figure 53.** Lard press used for processing fat of slaughtered hogs, still stored in the old washhouse in 2003.



**Figure 54.** Corn crib, looking west. Note space between weatherboards for ventilation.



**Figure 55.** Springhouse, looking north. The open work area on the left is braced against the hillside by rough stone walls. The enclosed section on the right served as a cool storage area for perishables like milk and cheese.

**Figure 56.** Detail of the west half of the springhouse showing remnant of diamond notched log joinery. In this 2003 photo, the east half of the structure has been removed.



**Figure 57.** Springhouse with washhouse behind, looking west.

**Figure 58.** Stone hearth for boiling water in washhouse.



**Figure 59. Chicken houses perched on hillside north of house.**



earth bank behind (see Figure 56). The east half of the structure (now removed) was enclosed by log walls, pierced by a small, four-pane window which allowed the family to check on perishables, such as milk, stored in the cool, damp room (Lillian Harris, personal communication 2003) (Figure 57).

In the 1930s, a washhouse was built, conveniently located next to the springhouse (see Figure 57). Vertical boards sheath the frame, front-gable structure. Entry is gained through a simple, batten door. Inside, a stone hearth once served to heat water for washing clothes (Figure 58).

Finally, two chicken houses complete the collection of outbuildings on the farm (Figure 59). These small, one-room, shed-roof frame outbuildings were built in the 1940s. Both of these dilapidated structures are perched on the steep hillside north of the house, leveled with large field stones.

### *Associated Material Culture*

Along with the intact architectural fabric of the Harris House and outbuildings, the Harris family has retained several pieces of furniture and a loom that may date as early as the initial construction of the house in 1876. During the author's visit to their new house in 2003, Horace and Lillian Harris showed him several pieces of furniture that they ascribe to this early period. The following description of objects in the Harris House is not a detailed analysis of furniture styles or an authoritative identification. Rather the photographs and descriptions extend the architectural description to further document lifeways at the Harris House and in the Back Creek community during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They also augment the record of the Harris House.

Given the location of Elijah Poage's furniture shop in nearby Poage's Mill, it is quite possible that some of the Harrises' pieces were made by

Poage and his craftsmen. Another possible source is James E. Day, a craftsman from the Cave Springs area who produced somewhat less refined furniture during the late nineteenth century (Charlene Hutcheson, personal communication 2003). On a visit to the Old Poage Farm, William Poage invited the author to photograph several pieces of furniture made at his great-grandfather's furniture works. Comparison of a dining table at the Poage farmhouse with a piece from the Harris House suggests they may have been made by the same craftsman (Figure 60). The Harris table is of a much darker wood and is more worn. Aside from these superficial differences, the lines are remarkably similar. Tabletop thickness and width relative to the substructure are almost identical, though the Harris piece has a somewhat wider frame to accommodate a drawer. Legs on both pieces taper elegantly downward, with slight bulges turned into the wood a few inches above their bases. Since we know that the Harris family regularly patronized the Poage sawmill during the mid-nineteenth century (and likely later as well), it is reasonable to assume they might have bought bulky items like furniture from Poage (see Table 1). Convenience of transport (only about a mile) would have been an important factor at a time when poor roads and horse-drawn transport connected Back Creek with larger towns like Salem and later Roanoke.

Other pieces of furniture illustrate the persistent traditional lifeways at the Harris House. Rather than embracing the growing consumer economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Benjamin Harris chose to maintain a largely self-sufficient farm—marked by his investment in specialized outbuildings necessary for that pursuit. Even though his son Horace branched out from farming into the automobile repair business, he held onto the family's farmland and continued to grow crops and raise enough livestock for home consumption. Sturdy heirloom pieces constituted the main furniture in the old Harris House before dismantling in 1997. During a visit to the Harrises' new house in 2003, the same pieces formed the core of the couples' furniture. The old dining table in the open country kitchen was the gathering place for visitors. Two old pie safes once owned by Horace's parents and possibly his grandparents continued to serve as prominent storage pieces in the kitchen (Figure 61). Upstairs, two chests of drawers were also reported to be of the same age (Figure 62) (Lillian Harris, personal communication 2003). More direct evidence of home industry and self-sufficiency is a large hand loom, still dressed with yarn. Benjamin's wife Matilda used the loom well in the 1960s to craft rag carpets for the house (Figure 63). The piece may also represent a link to the flax production mentioned for John L. Harris in the 1870 census.



**Figure 60.** Dining table originally in Harris House (*left*) and similar piece made by Elijah Poage in possession of his great-grandson William (*right*).



**Figure 61.** Pie safes from Harris House.



**Figure 62. Chests from Harris House.**



**Figure 63. Loom from Harris House (see Figure 43) and rag carpet made by Matilda Harris.**



# CONCLUSIONS

In 1876, the hall-parlor style of house that John L. Harris chose to build was already well past its peak of popularity, both in Virginia and in Roanoke County. By the late nineteenth century, many farmers and townsfolk had embraced the I-house, a simplified version of the Georgian symmetrical design with central entrance passage that had largely surpassed the popularity of the hall-parlor floor plan already in the eighteenth century (see Figure 30). Based on a comprehensive architectural survey of Roanoke County, the I-house was found to be the county's most common house type, comprising 32 percent of historic nineteenth- and twentieth-century houses recorded (no eighteenth-century houses survived). Hall-parlor houses, though less popular, were not uncommon in the county, ranking second among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century houses. Though the hall-parlor was somewhat more dated than the I-house, both types fall in the vernacular (or folk) architecture for this period. The surveyors concluded that the overwhelming sample of vernacular architecture reflect the county's "traditional agrarian culture character" (Frazier Associates 1992:9). Therefore, although the Harris House represents a marginal, archaic survival in Virginia and the eastern United States, it had retained some popularity in rural parts of Roanoke County.

Other aspects of the Harris House besides its initial layout reflect a simple, conservative approach to architecture by John L. Harris. Besides an old-fashioned floor plan, the house displayed minimal decoration. Thanks to the lack of remodeling by the Harris family, we had a rare opportunity to examine the spare fabric of the house as it appeared when first built. The only decorative woodwork consists of a sunburst pattern and turned pilasters on the hall mantelpiece; all other mantels, including those in the 1893 ell addition, are made from plain boards. The banister of the only interior staircase was made from squared wood, with slightly tapered balusters. Instead of treating walls with batten and plaster, and paint or wallpaper, John L. Harris chose a less elaborate alternative: wide boards readily available from the timber on his property. During Benjamin Harris' ownership, some of the walls apparently were covered with newspaper (William Poage, personal communication 2003). Floors followed a similar treatment of plain, wide boards. Interior batten doors are made of rough-finished boards. Only the doors to the exterior have a slightly more elaborate four-panel design. Outside, embellishment was restricted to cornice returns on the ell gables.

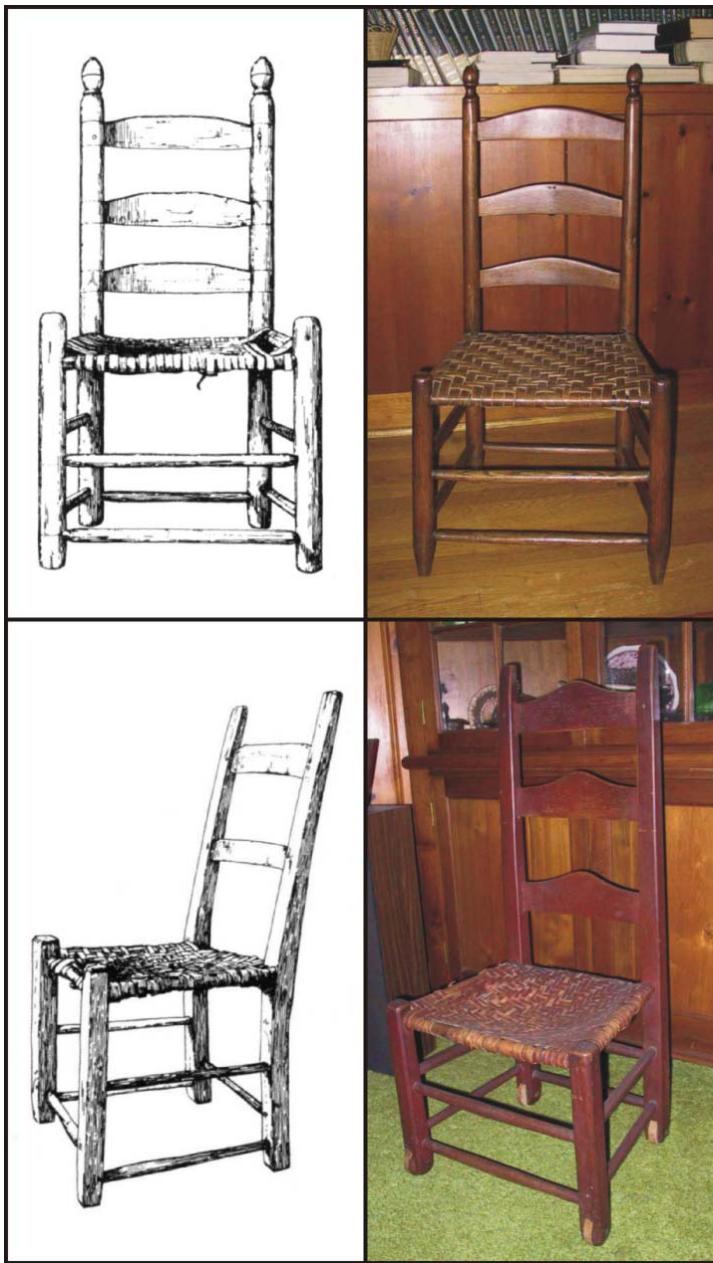
Later evidence of this conservative outlook comes from the unusually intact collection of outbuildings on the Harris farm. Although most were probably built by John L. Harris' son Benjamin in the early twentieth century, they no doubt replaced earlier examples. In the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, indoor plumbing and store-bought meats, dairy, and eggs, would still have been uncommon in most rural areas. By the time Benjamin Harris constructed the outbuildings in the 1910s through 1940s, though, such conveniences would have been more widespread, even in the Back Creek area. By then, new roads provided faster access to towns like Salem and Roanoke and rail connections at Starkey—and in turn a more comfortable lifestyle. Rather than keeping hogs and chickens for meat and eggs, many farmers chose to buy these products from stores. This allowed them to focus their efforts on a few large cash enterprises like grain crops, orchard produce, or dairying. With greater earnings, they could afford more store-bought items and conveniences like pumped water. As a result, many specialized outbuildings associated with home production, like smokehouses or hen coops fell into decay. Similarly, springhouses would have yielded to indoor taps with water pumped from wells. The rarity of the Harris farm's collection of outbuildings reflects these general trends toward modernization.

The dated, vernacular style and simple decor of the Harris House, along with traditional lifeways reflected in outbuildings, raises questions not just about the Harris family but also about the nature of the Back Creek community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Namely, we are led to wonder if the conservative outlook of the Harris family extended to their neighbors and, if so: Was the community entrenched in tradition because of isolation, choice, or other factors? The limits of our research focus did not allow a close study of nearby contemporary houses and families. Fortunately, other historians who have studied the area confirm our impression of Back Creek as a tradition-bound community, somewhat removed from the heated pace of technological and stylistic change occurring elsewhere during this period. Deedie Kagey's (1988) overview of the area in her county history emphasizes the isolation of the community and its traditional, rural character. In more detailed studies that focus exclusively on families in Cave Springs and Back Creek, Charlene Hutcheson (1993, 1995) confirms this traditional outlook, while at the same time debunking myths about clannish ethnic enclaves in this section of the county. Hutcheson's systematic analysis of marriage patterns among different ethnic groups reveals patterns of cooperation and integration. Though traditional in their relationship to the material world, local residents were open-minded, with diverse religious congregations collaborating to make the most of their limited resources.

As it appears that the Back Creek community held on to a traditional way of life, should physical isolation be considered as a major factor? In the cartographic overview above, it is impossible to ignore the obscurity of the area to outside observers into the mid-nineteenth century (see Baye 1827; Fry-Jefferson 1751; Madison 1807). Even though Crozet's (1838) notebook shows substantial settlement, contemporary maps covering the whole county emphasize settlement in other areas to the north and east while overlooking Back Creek. Civil War-era maps show more detail, including schools, churches, mills and other enterprises. The road network, however, reveals difficult connections to the outside world. Until road improvements occurred in the early twentieth century, access to major thoroughfares and railways was arduous. Indeed, apple cart drivers from Bent Mountain had to stop overnight at Poage's Mill for their two-day haul to Roanoke. A convenient rail depot at Starkey did not open until the late nineteenth century.

Despite these transportation difficulties, we should not assume that Back Creek residents were unaware of trends and technologies outside their immediate rural neighborhood. Charlene Hutcheson (personal communication) cautions us that locals still "received goods, news, pattern books and other ideas" at their community store or in their mail. Rather, she ascribes their conservatism to choice rather than necessity, or simple self-sufficiency. Like farmers elsewhere, they applied their limited resources only to trends and technologies that represented an obvious benefit. Such examples might include telephone connections, which the Fruit Growers' Telephone Cooperative had installed around Poage's Mill early in the twentieth century (Kagey 1988:302).

On the other hand, where ancient forms worked just as well, they persisted. Though by no means definitive proof, a sample of furniture made at Elijah Poage's shop is illustrative of local residents' attachment to older styles. William Poage allowed the author to photograph two handsome examples of his great-grandfather's chairs. Comparison with sketches of traditional slat back chairs in Henry Glassie's (1968) study of material folk culture in the eastern United States identifies the depth of Poage's traditionalism. The upper photograph is almost identical to a type of slat-back chair that was made with very little variation throughout the eastern United States from the seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries (Glassie 1968:228–229; Charlene Hutcheson, personal communication 2003). Poage's example, however, was made in 1843 when more elaborate, mass-produced chairs had replaced this simple design. The lower pair with backward-slanting uprights represents another common slat-back chair type in use over a similarly long time span. By the early nineteenth century, however, furniture makers in the South altered this basic design by shaving



**Figure 64.** Comparison of traditional Early American slat-back chair types with chairs made by Elijah Poage in the mid-nineteenth century (*top sketch* - slat-back chair from Middletown, Massachusetts; *bottom sketch* - Louisa County, Virginia; from Glassie 1968:230).

away part of the upright to form a “mule ear” shape. Again, Elijah Poage eschewed current trends to produce more old-fashioned chairs.

Having established the generally traditional outlook of Back Creek, we can examine the relationship between the community and the type of house John L. Harris chose to build. Folklorists and architectural historians have looked beyond mere fashion and social distinction to understand the transition from asymmetrical, hall-parlor architecture to the Georgian and I-house forms. Henry Glassie’s (2000) discussion of this transition, informed by comparative research that spans the globe, is particularly enlightening. According to Glassie, the outward appearance and layout of the hall-parlor and Georgian forms are symptomatic of shifts in social organization. The hall-parlor’s outward asymmetry reaches out to the visitor by revealing indoor function (a larger hall on one side, a parlor on the other). Direct entry into the main living areas further emphasizes trust of visitors. By contrast, the Georgian and I-house forms represent an attempt to impose order on the world—order that is lacking in the relations of society. Symmetrical openings mask the layout of the house and the central passage presents a further barrier to the outsider: “Upon entering, you do not stand in a room where people sit. You are in an unheated, unlit corridor—a hallway, a way to the hall—out of which you must be led to the sociable place” (Glassie 2000:117). For Glassie, the major transitions from “organic” to “geometric” layout has been marked by changes in the idea of community. Both in America and England, he observed that the transition coincided with the countries’ respective revolutions, when “overarching” abstract ideas of a national community superseded the sense of “immediate” community (Glassie 2000:121). In the open rural community of Back Creek, so evident from Hutcheson’s (1993, 1995) discussions of neighbors relations in the area and Peters’ (1974) brief record of local traditions, the open, hall-parlor would seem appropriate. Indeed, Glassie also compares dispersed rural communities of the backcountry uplands, like Back Creek, with similar “loose” communities he studied in Northern Ireland. In both areas, the open style of architecture suited the fluid sharing among neighbors in a stable community (Glassie 1995; 2000:140; see also Hutcheson 1995; Peters 1974).

Some final thoughts about the particular experience of the Harris family may also help explain the persistence of the hall-parlor layout of the Harris House. Horace and Lillian Harris’ new home, built in 1998, bears a striking resemblance to the house Horace’s grandfather John built more than 120 years earlier at the bottom of the hill. Except for modern conveniences, the floor plan is almost identical. Given the couple’s age and the many years they spent in the old house, it is not surprising they would find such a design more “homey” and comfortable. When asked why they chose

this design, however, Lillian said their motivation was respect for Horace's father, who would have "liked it that way." Could this respect and sentimental attachment to ancestors at least partly explain the archaic hall-parlor design of the house John L. Harris built in 1876? Might we find some motivation to continue older building traditions in a sentimental attachment to the older ways of one's parents? John Harris used a floor plan that would have been familiar. Many of Harris' neighbors would still have been living in older hall-parlor houses built of durable chestnut logs that had survived for generations. Some dated back to the late eighteenth century when symmetrical Georgian design began to supersede asymmetrical vernacular designs in many parts of Virginia. But the hall-parlor plan also would have had strong associations with Harris' parents. Moreover, when his father William died in 1868, John's mother Sarah lived next door, keeping his ties to family not only rooted in the same community, but also immediate through daily contact across the same yard—perhaps influencing the choice of architectural style. John Harris very likely had grown up in a log house with a similar layout, as described in the WPA report of the William Harris log house (Weaver 1937). Even though John Harris eschewed logs for more modern frame construction, he arranged the rooms according to the same plan as his father's old log home. Needing to establish a new home of his own, John chose a design that would have reminded him of his boyhood—building a house that his mother would enjoy visiting and where his father also would have felt at home.



# REFERENCES CITED

- Alvord, Clarence W., and Lee Bidgood  
1912 *The First Explorations of the Trans-Allegheny Region by the Virginians, 1650–1674*. The Arthur H. Clarke Company, Cleveland.
- Anonymous  
1865 Roanoke County, Virginia. Map H56, Hotchkiss Map Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- Barber, Michael B., Michael F. Barber, and Katherine Robinson Mickelson  
2003 *Emergency Excavations at the Sawyer Site (44RN39), Area B: A Protohistoric Site in Roanoke County, Virginia*. Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond.
- Barranger, Helen  
1989 Elijah Poage and His Mill: The Poage Family Built a Community When Roanoke Was Still the Great Lick Crossroad. *The Roanoker* July:14–15, 58.  
1994 Fruit for the Queen: Back Creek and Bent Mountain Orchards Once Covered a Territory. *Roanoker* November:12–15.
- Baile, Herman  
1827 A Map of the State of Virginia. Library of Virginia, Richmond.
- Chepesiuk, Ron  
2000 *The Scotch-Irish: From the North of Ireland to the Making of America*. McFarland & Co., Jefferson, North Carolina.
- Crozet, Claudius  
1838 Turnpike Survey from Danville to Fincastle, Field Book, No. 3, 1838. Board of Public Works Entry 354, Pennsylvania, Franklin, and Botetourt Turnpike. On file, Archives Section, Library of Virginia, Richmond.
- Doran, Michael F.  
1987 *Atlas of County Boundary Changes in Virginia, 1634–1895*. Iberian Publishing Company, Athens, Georgia.
- Draper, Anthony L.  
1996 Agricultural Change in Roanoke County, Virginia: A Comparative Study of Agricultural Census Documents, Roanoke County, Virginia, 1860 and 1870. Senior (honors) thesis, College of William and Mary.
- Fischer, David Hackett, and James C. Kelly  
2000 *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement*. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- Frantz, Maria Jane Gish  
1970 Roanoke County in the 1840's. *The Journal of the Roanoke Historical Society* 7(1):5–10.

- Frazier Associates  
 1992 *Historical Architecture Reconnaissance Survey Report, Roanoke County, Virginia.*  
 Frazier Associates. Submitted to Roanoke County, Virginia.
- Glassie, Henry H.  
 1968 *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States.* University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.  
 1995 *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington.  
 2000 *Vernacular Architecture.* Material Culture, Philadelphia, and Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Gray, Lewis Cecil  
 1933 *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, vol. II. Carnegie Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Harris, Nelson  
 1990 *Settlers Along Back Creek.* 3 vols. Privately published, Roanoke, Virginia.
- Historic American Buildings Survey  
 2003 Introduction page of HABS website. <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/habshaer/habs>>
- Hofstra, Warren R.  
 1991 Adaptation or Survival? Folk Housing at Opequon Settlement, Virginia. *Ulster Folklife* 37:36–61.
- Hutcheson, Charlene D.  
 1993 *The Hofauers and their Community: Material, Economic, and Religious Aspects of an Emerging Community in the Virginia Backcountry, 1830–1860.* Senior project, Mary Baldwin College, Staunton, Virginia.  
 1995 Marriage Patterns in Cave Springs and Back Creek, Roanoke County, Virginia, 1770s–1850. Paper presented at the “After the Backcountry: Rural Life and Society in the Nineteenth Century Valley of Virginia” Conference, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia.
- Izard, Walter  
 1864 Map of Roanoke County, Southern Section. Jeremy Francis Gilmer collection. Published by Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.
- Jack, George S., and E. B. Jacobs  
 1912 *History of Roanoke County, History of Roanoke City and History of the Norfolk & Western Railway Company.* Privately published, Roanoke, Virginia.
- Jordan-Bychov, Terry  
 2003 *The Upland South: The Making of An American Folk Region and Landscape.* Center for American Places, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Harrisonburg, Virginia, in association with University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville.
- Kagey, Deedie  
 1988 *When Past is Prologue: A History of Roanoke County.* Roanoke Sesquicentennial Committee, Roanoke, Virginia.
- Klatka, T. S., and J. R. Kern  
 1994 *Blacksmith Shops in Catawba, Virginia: Archaeological and Historical Investigations.* Research Report Series No. 6. Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond.

- Klatka, Thomas S., and Michael J. Klein  
 1993 Preliminary Report on the Graham-White Site: A Late Prehistoric and Contact Period Site in Western Virginia. Paper presented at the Southeastern Archaeological Conference, Raleigh, North Carolina.
- Lay, K. Edward  
 2000 *The Architecture of Jefferson Country: Charlottesville and Albemarle County, Virginia*. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- O'Dell, Cecil  
 1995 *Pioneers of Old Frederick County, Virginia*. Walsworth Publishing Company, Marceline, Missouri.
- Peters, Dolores S.  
 1974 A Short History of the Back Creek Settlement. Typescript on file, Roanoke County Public Library, Roanoke, Virginia.
- Poage, Elijah  
 1850s– Account book. Ms. in possession of Molly Coon, Poage's Mill, Virginia.  
 1860s
- Puglisi, Michael J. (editor)  
 1997 *Diversity and Accommodation: Essays on the Cultural Composition of the Virginia Frontier*. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.
- Rainer, Joseph T.  
 2000 "Commercial Scythians" in the Great Valley of Virginia: Yankee Peddlers' Trade Connections to Antebellum Virginia. In *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800–1900*, edited by Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra, pp. 62–76. The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.
- Shutty, Michael S.  
 1997 *An Old House in Greenville, Virginia: A Study of Human Intention in Vernacular Architecture*. The McDonald & Woodward Publishing Company, Blacksburg, Virginia.
- Stearns, Peter N.  
 1983 New Social History: An Overview. In *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*. American Association for State and Local History, Nashville.
- Summers, Lewis Preston  
 1970 *Annals of Southwest Virginia, 1769–1800*. Reprinted. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore. Originally published Abingdon, 1929.
- U.S. Geological Survey  
 1984 Bent Mountain, Virginia quadrangle. 7.5-minute topographic series. Photorevised, originally published 1963. USGS, Reston, Virginia.
- Vachon, John  
 1941 Farmer Plowing Cut-over Land [Roanoke County, Virginia]. Digital ID fsa 8c19238, Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- Vertefeuille, Jan  
 1994 An Onion in a Petunia Patch. *Roanoke Times & World News* September 4:A1, A16–A17.

- Wayland, John W.
- 1957 *Twenty-five Chapters on the Shenandoah Valley to which is Appended A Concise History of the Civil War in the Valley*. The Shenandoah Publishing House, Inc., Strasburg, Virginia.
- Weaver, Ernest H.
- 1937 William Harris Home. Works Progress Administration of Virginia, Historical Inventory No. 208. On file and online, Library of Virginia, Richmond.
- Woodhouse, Connie, and Bruce Bauer
- n.d. *Tree Rings: Ancient Chronicles of Environmental Change*. World Data Center-A for Paleoclimatology Educational Slide Project, Boulder, Colorado.
- Writers' Program
- 1942 *Roanoke: Story of a County and a City*. Writers' Program, Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia. Sponsored and published by Roanoke City School Board, Roanoke, Virginia.
- U.S. Geological Survey
- 1920 Christiansburg quadrangle. 30-minute topographic series. Reprinted. U.S. Geological Survey, Washington, D.C. Originally published 1890.
- 1984 Bent Mountain, VA quadrangle. 7.5-minute topographic series. Photorevised. USGS, Reston, Virginia. Originally published 1963.