

# GRAHAM COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



HONORING THOSE WHO PIONEERED  
THE RUGGED MOUNTAINS  
OF GRAHAM COUNTY



[www.HISTORYGC.org](http://www.HISTORYGC.org)

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Tere Moore, Editor



Autumn at Lake Santeetlah

## NEWSLETTER

### CONTENTS

Vision & Mission Statements	2
Board of Directors	2
GCHA Oral Histories	2
Meet Leota Denton Wilcox	2
Genealogy Corner	3
History of GC Part XIII	4-5, 7
GC's "Dry" History	7-9
History Makes Great News	9
Membership Information	10



GCHA meets the 1st & 3rd  
Mondays of each month  
(except holidays) at 5 pm  
at United Community  
Bank, 132 Rodney Orr  
Bypass, Robbinsville.

We also have a  
teleconference option.



Contact us for  
call-in information

### GCHA VISION STATEMENT

To maintain a heritage center located on Main Street, by focusing on education, history, and community activities, to assure that Graham County's place in history will be secured for future generations.

Participate in the revitalization of downtown Robbinsville, NC, and promote cultural tourism and economic development in our area.

### GCHA MISSION STATEMENT

To preserve, interpret, and convey Graham County, regional, and Appalachian history through exhibitions and educational programs to showcase our history, making Graham County a desired historical destination.



**Graham County  
Historical  
Association is in the  
process of taking  
Oral Histories from  
anyone with a story**

**to tell about their experiences, family ties  
and/or remembrances in Graham County.**

**Whether you are, were, or are not a  
resident, whether your story is young or old,  
it most surely can become the future history  
of Graham County.**

**Contact us today to schedule your interview!**

[grahamcountymuseum@gmail.com](mailto:grahamcountymuseum@gmail.com)

*Today's Story is Tomorrow's History*

## **MEET LEOTA DENTON WILCOX GCHA COMMITTEE(S) CHAIRPERSON**



DESCENDENT OF JOHN H.C. AND ALBERTINE DENTON (THE ONLY FAMILY OF EUROPEAN DESCENT TO LIVE IN JOYCE KILMER MEMORIAL FOREST).

The daughter of Victor and Grace Webster Denton and sister to Lona Rae Denton Kell, Leota spent her childhood living at Ranger Stations in various National Forests, including Pisgah, Mt. Mitchell, and Nantahala (located at present Rattler Ford Campground). After graduating Robbinsville High School, she attended Gaston College.

From 1954 to 2003 she enjoyed marriage with Thomas Junior Wilcox, having three children: Vicki Wilcox Rhyne, Donna Wilcox Lewis and Thomas Denton Wilcox.

Leota honed her expansive organization skills during her 30-year employment at Pharr Yarns, Inc. in McAdenville, NC, working as an Associate, Lab Secretary, Quality Control Manager, ISO Co-Ordinator and Management Representative successively, until retirement in 1999. She then returned to Graham County in 2007.

When asked about her affiliation with GCHA, Leota shared, "My passion for history led me to GCHA in 2017. The organization was newly formed and I had the opportunity to become involved at the beginning. I had previously collected family artifacts and, with a lot of help, was able to have a display in the *Denton Family Museum*. "I have been fortunate to serve on and chair several GCHA Committees that composed and implemented documentation for the Association. We are progressing nicely with our plans to have a Graham County Regional Heritage Center in the old Snider Dept. Store Building to preserve and maintain our unique history to be enjoyed by present and future generations. "

A stalwart and inexhaustible member, GCHA is fortunate to have Leota in our ranks.

## Genealogy Corner



Thomas Jefferson & Caroline Catherine Colvard Hooper

Thomas Jefferson Hooper (1830-1895), son of Enos C. and Margaret Harbison Hooper, married Caroline Catherine Colvard (1834-1917).

### THE SHELTERED GRAVE

by Marshall McClung  
The Graham Star, May 2002

"Visit the cemetery on the hilltop above the intersection of West Buffalo Road and Huffman Creek Road, and you will see an unusual sight, a grave with a shelter built over it. This cemetery is called the Hooper Cemetery by some and the Stewart Cemetery by others. Both Hoopers and Stewarts are buried there. Inside this shelter are the graves of Thomas Jefferson Hooper (Ross calls him T.J.) and his wife Catherine Colvard Hooper (also known as Granny Kit).

"This sheltered grave came about as a result of Hooper's service in the Civil War. Hooper served in the Confederate Army for the entire duration of the Civil War. He apparently suffered greatly from exposure to the elements. Upon returning home he told family members that had it not been for the soldiers huddling together for body warmth, the surely would have frozen to death. He then made the request that he didn't want his bones to lay out in the elements again and wanted a shelter built over his grave when he died. Family members honored his request and built a shelter some thirteen feet long and covered it with wooden shingles called "boards" by locals.

"There seems to be some discrepancy about Thomas Jefferson Hooper's date of birth and detail.



The old original gravestone which is hand carved states: T.J. Hooper, born March 24, 1830, died March 22, 1895. The three looks more like a nine than a three. A headstone erected later gives his date of death as March 24, 1895. In the book, "Our Heritage - The History of the Hooper Family and Hyde Family", compiled by Betty Hooper Carpenter, his date of birth is given as March 24, 1831 and his date of death as March 22, 1895. There is also some discrepancy in the dates of birth and death of his wife Catherine whose grave is also inside the shelter. Her headstone lists her as being born June 1826 and dying in July of 1917. The Hooper book lists her as being born in 1834.

"Thomas Jefferson Hooper and his brother Riley "Rial" homesteaded on several hundred acres of land in the West Buffalo area. They raised large herds of cattle. Thomas and his wife Catherine, who was from Monroe County, Tennessee, had nine children, five sons and four daughters."

### *Children of Thomas Jefferson & Caroline Catherine Colvard Hooper:*

**Margaret** – (1856- 1950)

**William** – (1857-1948), never married, died near the Oregon Trail

**Nancy** – (1859-1934), married Sam Barker

**General Marion** – (1860-1938), married Hettie Ruth Hyde; noted hunter and settler; cared for people's cattle grazing in the mountains for \$1 per head; built wagon roads in Graham County and nearby sections of Tennessee using crude hand tools of the day; built a wagon about one-half the size of regular wagons to better navigate the steep, narrow roads of the day

**Enos** – (1864-1932)

**John Decatur** – (1864-1945), thought to have died in California

**Patrick** – (1867-1901), remained a bachelor until his death at age 34. Patrick Meadows in Graham County is named for him

**Kansas Josephine Frances** – (1869-1943), married John H. Eller

**Eleanor May** – (1874-1944), married Homer Martin  
Her real name was Elona

**Editor's Note:** If you would like to share your family genealogy with GCHA, please contact Tere Moore at [GCHAnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:GCHAnewsletter@gmail.com)

**RELIGION IN GRAHAM COUNTY**

Graham County from early on has been a deeply religious section. In pioneer days the meeting house and schoolhouse was a combination building of logs. Though in time many small meeting houses have scattered themselves over Cheoah Valley at each of the settlements. In great part, the religious history of the county centers around what is still known as "The Old Mother Church". As a child, the writer recalls the feeling of spiritual blessing on entering the building. It is unique in that it seems to have no creed. Methodist and Baptist alike have worshiped within the portals. It has served as a temple of justice. It has served as a temple of knowledge; and it has served as a temple of worship. Lastly it keeps silent watch over the departed. The Old Mother Church has sheltered and shared



**Old Mother Church today**

the joys and the sorrows of Cheoah Valley from the time the white man entered the territory.

The history of the place of worship is that in the earliest days the site was at the meeting house spring; that there was the old brush arbor or shelter for camp meetings. It would seem logical that it was then Methodist, for it was the Methodist clan who hitched up the horse and spent a week at camp meeting. Tradition gives that there were, at different periods, two small meeting houses at this site. In time there was a third and larger one, but still the log structure on the summit of the hill. The fourth and present building is situated on the side of the hill, across the hill from the camp meeting site. The date of the present building is not definitely established, but it is thought to be 1875.

The large cemetery now covers the hill and even crosses to another hill behind the church. It is the only cemetery for many miles, and people from all over the county bring loved ones to rest at the Old Mother Church. The exact date of the beginning of the cemetery is not known. There are eighteen graves without dates at the camp meeting site. It is

thought those graves date around 1840. The gravestones of the present cemetery carry 1856 as the earliest date and the name Amanda Harwood.

The land for the Old Mother Church and cemetery was given by Abram Wiggins. His stipulation was that so long as it was used for the purpose of worship, the people could have it, however, no actual deed was ever made. A few years ago [before 1956], a granddaughter, Belle Slaughter, made a deed for the property.

In the beginning the camp meeting site speaks Methodist, but as years moved on, it became Baptist.

The church is in the Sweetwater section, and when the town of Robbinsville came into being, a church was organized in town. For a time the old church was lonely, being used only occasionally as a funeral building. Recent years the Old Church has reorganized, has been repaired and services held regularly.<sup>1</sup>

This church (in town), originally called the Cheoah Baptist Church, is said to have been formerly organized on July 18, 1848 by Elders Baily Bruce and James Kimsey, traveling missionaries under the auspices of the Baptist State Convention. The church had eighteen members. The name "Cheoah Baptist Church" was used until the church voted in 1924 to use the name "Robbinsville Baptist Church of Robbinsville, N. C."



According to old church minutes, the church continued at the original site until 1908. In 1907 a building committee was elected and an appeal was made for funds for constructing a new building in the town of Robbinsville. This building was occupied in 1908 and continued to be the place of worship until the congregation moved into the educational part of the present building in December 1961. The sanctuary was dedicated and occupied on December 17, 1967.<sup>2</sup>

Baptist and Methodist were in early times and

Cont'd Pg. 5

<sup>1</sup> Our Heritage – The People of Cherokee County, North Carolina 1540 -1955 by Margaret Walker Freel

<sup>2</sup> Grahamcounty.net

## HISTORY OF GRAHAM COUNTY - PART XIII (cont'd)

have always been the denominations of Graham County.

Of the Baptist ministers, there was Rev. William Morgan, generally known as Billy Morgan. Another of the Baptist faith was Rev. Marion Medlin, of English descent. His parents came to the Cherokee Nation among the very earliest of the white settlers and located in the Panther Creek section of what is now Graham, near the Swain County line. His brother donated the land on which the Panther Creek Church was built. He and his father, Lewis Medlin, were the first delegates from this church to the Tennessee River Baptist Association.

Of the Methodist faith was the Rev. Joseph Wiggins, son of Abraham Wiggins, the donor of the land for the "Mother Church". "Uncle Joe" Wiggins, as he was endearingly called, was one of the most distinguished preachers of that day. His preaching career began in the late fifties. He was, as the good Methodists say, a "Circuit Rider".<sup>3</sup>

Circuit Rider clergy, in the rough frontier days, were clergy assigned to travel around specific geographic territories to minister to settlers and organize congregations. This pattern of organization in the Methodist Episcopal denomination and its successors worked especially well in the service of rural villages and unorganized settlements.



Rev. Joseph Wiggins, pioneer Methodist Circuit Rider



Pioneer sanctuary. In this cave Rev. Joseph Wiggins preached to the convict labor at the time of the building of the railroad from Asheville to Murphy.

Rev. Joseph A. Wiggins, a distinguished Methodist minister of this county, was born on Alarka creek in 1832, but moved with his father to Graham in 1840, when there was but one wagon road, that from Old Valley Town to Fort

Montgomery, just constructed for the soldiers who removed the Indians in 1838.

Dr. Dan F. Summey of Asheville was in charge of its construction. There were no mills except a few grist mills, and wheat was "packed" on horses by a trail to a mill five mile from what is now Bryson City – a distance of about thirty miles. Indian relics were then plentiful at the head of Tallulah creek at what is called The Meadows. Mr. Wiggins married a daughter of George W. Hayes, after whom Hayesville was named. There was not a church in the county and but a few log school houses. He began to preach in 1859, and served four years as chaplain in the Confederate army, after which he rode circuits in Tennessee, Southwestern Virginia and Western North Carolina till stationed in Graham county

His great-grandfather, Garland Wiggins, served in the Revolutionary War, as did his wife's great-grandfather, Edward Hayes.<sup>4</sup>

Another preacher of the Baptist creed was Rev. Edward Delozier. He took land grants of some of the best lands of Tuskegee section. He came in 1837 and lived on Sawyer's Creek.<sup>5</sup>

Rev. Isaac Carringer was another of the early Baptist preachers. Isaac was born about 1810. He was the son of Daniel Wesley Carringer and Nancy Funkhouser. He married Nancy Jane Caringer in about 1830. They were the parents of at least 11 sons and 7 daughters. He came from the eastern part of this state and lived in the Yellow Creek section. He died on 11 March 1896 at the age of 87 and was buried in Odom Cemetery, Santeetlah, Graham County, NC.

In 1861, just prior to the Civil War, the Baptist Tennessee River Association was formed. It was made up of churches from Swain and Graham Counties. Also in 1861, the Friendship Association was formed with six churches from Cherokee, Graham, and Macon Counties. They were Valley River, Valleytown, Nantahala, Cheoah, Murphy, and Fort Lindsey.

With the beginning of the Friendship Association and the Tennessee River Association, the Valley River Association ceased to be. Cont'd Pg. 7

<sup>3</sup> Our Heritage – The People of Cherokee County, North Carolina 1540 -1955 by Margaret Walker Freel

<sup>4</sup> Western North Carolina: A History (from 1730 to 1913) by John Preston Arthur

<sup>5</sup> Our Heritage – The People of Cherokee County, North Carolina 1540 -1955 by Margaret Walker Freel

# annual harvest festival

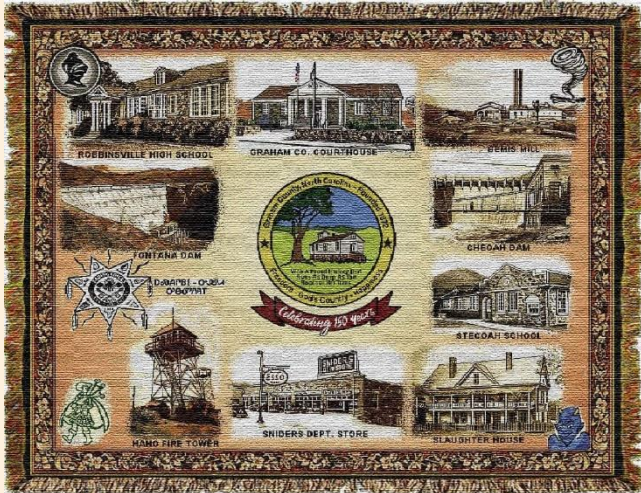
A 2-day festival celebrating all things Fall with music, food, arts & crafts vendors, country fair, quilt show, artisan demonstrations and more.

**October 20th & 21st**  
Friday, 6 to 8pm  
Saturday, 10am to 6pm

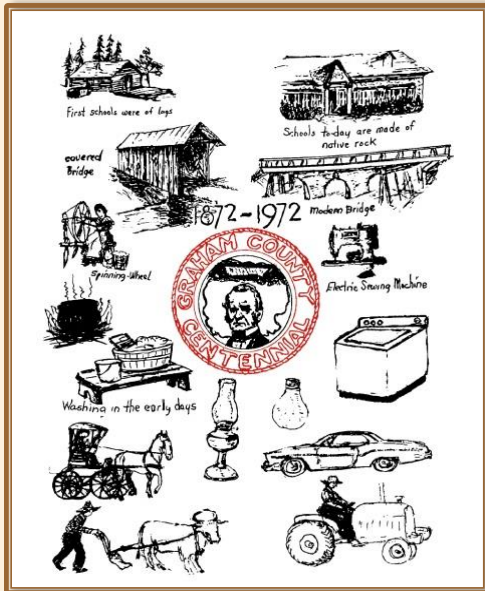


GCHA Booth at Stecoah Harvest Festival

## Visit Graham County Historical Association's Booth to purchase **Graham County 150<sup>th</sup> Commemorative Blanket**



## GC Centennial Book



## Raffle Tickets

### GUN RAFFLE



HENRY SILVER BOY .22 WMR, Model H004SM

#### PURCHASE TICKETS AT:

GCHA Booth at GC Farmers Market & Special Events  
Hometown Tax Lovin Equipment & Sales

**Chances \$ 5.00 Each or 5 for \$ 20.00**

Drawing to be held at the 2023 Stecoah Harvest Festival

Winner is required to legally own/obtain a buyer's permit and pass all background checks. If not be eligible to own and/or acquire a firearm permit, the winner will be disqualified and another ticket will be drawn.

All Proceeds benefit the GRAHAM COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## Early GC Families Tee Shirts



## HISTORY OF GRAHAM COUNTY - PART XIII (cont'd)

Just before the Civil War in 1861, there were about forty Baptist Churches West of Balsam Gap... including Cheoah... The churches were small, averaging 35 members per church. These included white settlers, Indians, and some black slaves.

Godly men with a deep commitment to God and the Baptist cause such as Elisha Hedden, Alfred Corn, George Washington Lovingood, Charles Mingus, Jacob Mingus, Bill Pruitt, George Orr, and many others had leadership roles in expanding the Baptist work in these mountains.<sup>6</sup>

The Rev. Armstrong Cornsilk was one of the most memorable Indian preachers to serve in our county. In 1861 he joined the services of the Confederacy and continued until the end of fighting. When he returned to the mountains after the war he became a preacher to his people. He was one of the last confederate veterans in Graham County to pass. He was likewise one of the last of the close friends of Junaluska and offered the main address at the unveiling of the Junaluska monument in 1910.

The first Baptist Church in the Stecoah valley was located near the Little Tennessee River and served Tuskegee, Sawyer's Creek, Panther Creek, and also some settlements in Swain County. In 1849 the Stecoah Missionary Baptist Church was organized. It was situated more in the center of the valley where the population was concentrated. The building was erected on the Joel L. Crisp farm, later owned in part by Billy Holder. Early ministers serving Stecoah valley were Thomas Medlin, Joshua Edwards, P. G. Green, G. W. Hooper, and W. C. Morgan.



Rev. Armstrong Cornsilk, minister of Cherokee Indians.



Stecoah Baptist Church

Because settlements were sparsely populated and transportation difficult, church services were held only once or twice a month. Worshipers often walked eight to ten miles to attend church. Many pastors served two or more churches. It was not until 1949 that the First Baptist of Robbinsville had a full time pastor.

Gradually Baptist churches sprang up in various communities. Lone Oak and Yellow Creek churches were formally constituted in 1887. It is difficult to ascertain the correct beginning date for many of our churches. Some choose to function for years without affiliating with local or state associations, therefore no official records are available in its formative years.

From the congregation of the four earliest Baptist churches, especially Robbinsville Baptist, others grew. These divisions were caused by differing beliefs, personality conflicts, or needs or space and location.

Between 1900-1940 the following churches were constituted and recognized by the North Carolina Baptist Convention: Bear Creek, Bethel, Buffalo, Cedar Cliff, Long Creek, Mount Nebo, Mt. Creek, New Hope, Panther Creek, Santeetlah, Sweet Gum, Sweetwater, Tuskegee, and Mt. Zion.<sup>7</sup>

**Look for "History of Graham County - Part XIV" in the next GCHA Newsletter**

## Graham County's "Dry" History

by Tere Moore

Have you ever wondered why Graham County became "dry" in 1948? We've asked that question of Ralph and Shirley Crisp, children of John Booth Crisp, Sheriff of Graham County during that time.

Ralph and Shirley were the children of John Booth and Amanda Wiggins Crisp. Their siblings were Arnold and Boyd (both served as Sheriff of Graham County at different times), John, Helen, Booth Jr, Harold, Frank, and Mary Ruth.

### Ralph Crisp:

I was born two months before the Great Depression started in October 1929 – that's when the stock market crashed – August the 17th in '29, just a couple months before everything collapsed and we had the Great World Depression.

Cont'd Pg. 8

<sup>6</sup> God's Messengers from the Mountains by Fred B. Clunford  
GCHA NEWSLETTER

<sup>7</sup> Grahamcounty.net

## Graham County's "Dry" History (cont'd)

We were living up on Jack Branch, up near Talula, scratching a living out of the earth. My dad, he was a farmer and worked in timber and that kind of stuff. There was a large family of us, ten children in the family. So times were tough there in my early childhood days.

We finally moved into the town of Robbinsville, I think it was 1938. My mother and dad bought a building from Abijah and Icee Crisp, a cousin of his, the old Swank Hotel and Restaurant. So my mother ran the business.

My dad was in politics, at that time Chairman of the County Commission. At some point he became a Robbinsville policeman and later was elected and served as the Sheriff for eight years. He was Sheriff from probably '46 until '54.

He was the Sheriff during the time that alcohol was voted out of Graham County and was one of the leaders in that movement to have it voted out. Dad worked with Dan Moore from Jackson County, a Superior Court judge that came around the circuit every three months, and one of Dr. Crawford's sons, Frank Crawford, who was Sheriff of Cherokee County, to get beer and wine outlawed, to close down the honky-tonks, as they called them those days. It was typical for the people that worked in the woods – primarily Bemis Lumber Company – to work the camp, camp out in the woods all week, and on the weekend they'd come into town. And most of them, you know, were married with children, and they'd spend their pay on beer and wine and the kids would go without clothing and their needs not taken care of.

My father, he probably didn't have very many friends left in the beer and wine business after he had led the movement to get it voted out in Graham and Cherokee County. And that was the end of that until probably about 1980 something, when they started voting it back in here in Cherokee County, and Graham County was just in private clubs.

### **Shirley Crisp:**

I think my dad was elected Sheriff in 1946. This was right after World War II ended and all the men and boys were returning home after the war.

Practically all the men and boys out of Graham County were drafted in World War II.

When they started coming back, of course beer and wine was available there in the town of Robbinsville. The town of Robbinsville consisted of right around the courthouse. It kind of got out of hand during that time, just all the drinking right in the town of Robbinsville – and, of course, the alcohol was available countywide – and there were other establishments that, I guess you would say, became very rough. That's why my dad went to the legislature and asked that Graham County become a dry county.

Will & Marie's Cafe was a very popular cafe serving beer and wine. It was located where the rock facade is there on North Main Street, across from the Phillips & Jordan office building, which used to be the post office.

Before the cafe was known as Will & Marie's, it was owned by Ralph Matherson. On February 15th, 1936, he shot and killed his then 19-year-old wife, Virgie Orr Matherson, there in the cafe. Her death was alcohol-related and she left a little baby three weeks old.

The other one was Maxwell's. It was located beside the courthouse, right beside where the coffee shop is now. On December 7th, 1940, the town policemen shot and killed Fred Hyde in the Maxwell establishment. Fred Hyde was only 28 years old, and of course that was also alcohol-related.



Above Courthouse Square looking down  
N. Main Street, Robbinsville, NC

Cont'd Pg. 9



## Graham County's "Dry" History (cont'd)

The other one was directly in front of the courthouse right by the theater, and it was operated by the Bowers family.

The Bowers family – of course I was young and I don't know the exact details – but somehow they had to leave the incorporated town of Robbinsville because their place was so rough. So they went just outside the city limits and built another building on Highway 129 as you start towards Topton, and that was a very rough establishment too. Along about 1948, one of the Bowers girls was shot and killed near that cafe.

What I remember right after the war – of course we lived out there at, I call it, kind of the back of the courthouse where the vacant lots are – on Saturday afternoon, everybody in Graham County came to town. It was so congested that the Maxwell establishment, if you wanted to walk from Mama's cafe (Crisp's Cafe and Bording House) at the corner drugstore, you had to walk out in the street because there was so many people on the sidewalks. Mama never did have beer and wine in her cafe.



Ingram Drugstore Building - 1940

Robbinsville was a very exciting little town when I grew up, but of course it was all right up around the courthouse.

If you wish to share your memories of this period in Graham County's history, please send an email to [GCHAnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:GCHAnewsletter@gmail.com).

## History makes Great News!

**Santeetlah Again:** Our Presbytery held its spring meeting at Murphy, the most western town in the State. On Saturday I crossed the Snow Bird Mountains horseback and came to Robbinsville, the county seat of Graham, where I preached twice on Sunday. There was no other preaching there that day. Monday morning, in company with my friend who introduced me to the Santeetlah people, I set out for the upper settlement on big Santeetlah. The distance is sixteen miles around the road, but we shortened it about five miles by taking at times bridle trails. We reached the Stewart's in time to catch a few trout for supper, and held our first service that evening.

The Santeetlah is one of the wildest, roughest, prettiest streams we have ever seen. The water is so clear that every pebble on the bottom can be seen clearly, even where the water is a fathom deep. Out in the Unakas the tops of mountains are very high and the sides very steep. The stream races through the deep ravine, which it has worn, or cut, for ages, its bottom being exceedingly rocky. Good hiding places for the trout! The woods were full of flowers. Beds of wild violets of many shades of blue; forget-me-nots and trailing arbutus; while the dogwood, being in full bloom, lit with white flowers the woods here and there. —the people were hungry for the gospel. Some stopped plowing corn to come out to the day services. A number of Cherokees were present, listened intently and helped in the singing. For three days the good news of the gospel was proclaimed God again visited His people and blessed them. Three young men and two girls made good professions of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. To him be the praise! A Sunday-school has been organized, and will be conducted through the summer and autumn at the schoolhouse. May God's richest blessing rest upon these young Christians who are leading in this good work.

Wm. P. Chedester.

The Presbyterian of the South (Atlanta, Georgia) Wednesday, June 2, 1915

# We Need Your Help



## PRESERVING GRAHAM COUNTY'S HISTORY

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Lifetime	\$1000 or more	All 1-year benefits plus memorial at Museum

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- Drop off at **Hometown Tax**, 62 Tapoco Road, Robbinsville
- Mail to **GCHA**, PO Box 1221 Robbinsville, NC 28771

*If you know someone who loves history like you do...*



### GRAHAM COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP / DONATION FORM

The work of Graham County Historical Association is greatly assisted by your generous support!

**Membership Includes:** Membership Card & Decal / Meetings & Committees / Quarterly Newsletter

1 year \$25.00	5 years \$100.00 (1 year free)
10 years \$200.00 (2 years free)	Lifetime \$1000 or more

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\* First \$25 of donation goes to 1-year Membership

Membership \$   Donation \$

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I authorize GCHA to auto-draft my donation from my account

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