Presented at the African Americans in Western North Carolina and Southern Appalachia Conference, Asheville, NC, October 19, 2018.

Junaluska, an African American Neighborhood in Boone, NC: An Oral History

Susan E. Keefe and Roberta Jackson

Few ethnographic studies exist of African American communities in the Carolinas, and even fewer exist of African Americans in the Appalachian region. This oral history offers insight into one of the earliest black communities in Western North Carolina and perhaps the only one persisting into the twenty first century (Margrif 2012). As such, it provides us with a description of a unique black community and reminds us of the diversity of African Americans who vary by geography, cultural heritage, national origin, religion, and class.

This project has been conceived from the beginning as a participatory research project. Participatory research is designed to incorporate community members from the beginning in research design, data collection, data analysis, and the publication of research findings. In our case, parity and collaboration between Keefe and community members was established from the beginning of the project. Keefe expressed an interest in helping to produce a community history with the help of community members. At the outset, the community organization, the Junaluska Heritage Association, was designated as primary author of the work with Keefe as editor. In all cases, final decision-making authority on content and interpretation has rested with the JHA. This approach contributed to the final success of the project by fostering trust and mutual respect, cooperation, and agreement on common goals.

The research project sponsored several focus groups on topics including school, family, and community, and sixteen interviews were conducted by Keefe and her students and Junaluska residents in 2013 and 2014. Other interviews were sourced from Keefe's research with the community over three decades. Additional interviews conducted in the 1970's and later decades were found in Special Collections of Belk Library at ASU, and permission was granted to include them in the oral history. A total of 37 life history interviews with narrators born from 1885 to 1993 make up the final collection (**PHOTO 1**).

The life history narratives that we have collected provide another lens on the truth of the black experience. As John M. Coggeshall (2018) points out, African American communities can provide "counter memory" and an alternative history to the one set forth by those writing the dominant historical narrative. In Appalachian Studies, for example, these alternative histories provide a corrective to the common assumption that Appalachia is populated only by whites. Furthermore, as John Inscoe (2001) points out, there is power in Appalachian blacks telling their own stories in their own voices, unmediated by others. The actual life stories of Appalachian blacks present a history as told from below, and they highlight the significance of oral history in addition to one based on written documents in investigating the history of black Appalachians.

The Origins of Junaluska

The people of Junaluska do not speak much about their slavery past. "History is sensitive and painful," says Sandra Hagler. "Blacks don't want to remember those things" (Hagler 1989). The fact is that these historical events also continue to impact their lives in the twenty-first century as Junaluskans continue to deal with the legacy of discrimination and segregation and the powerful forces of white domination. Most if not all residents trace descent to slaves held in Watauga County and its environs. This is evident in the surnames shared by many Junalsukans with county slaveholders in the census from 1850-1860, including the Councills, Hortons, Whittingtons, Folks, Hattons, Shearers, and Moores (Olson 1984).

The first mention of named African Americans in Boone in the historical literature comes in a book by John Preston Arthur (1915). According to Arthur, two free men of color, John and Ellington Cousins, moved into the area from Forsyth County bringing white wives with them. Ellington bought an acre of land up Blackburn Branch (now Straight Street) in 1857 where he built a house (**PHOTO 2**). This possibly marks the beginning of a black neighborhood in Boone. According to a recent architectural survey of Junaluska, the oldest standing house in the neighborhood dates to 1880-1899, providing further evidence that the community was founded in the nineteenth century (Margrif 2012). Junaluska residents describe their neighborhood as the result of whites segregating them on the hillside above Boone toward Howard's Knob on steep land that nobody wanted. They traditionally referred to their neighborhood twofold as The Hill (just above the town of Boone) and The Mountain (further up the hillside along what is now Junaluska Road) (**PHOTO 3**).

Residents suggest that the land where Junaluska is located was originally held by the largest slaveholder in Boone, Jordan Councill, Jr. Frazier Horton (1942) and others say that early residents were sharecroppers for the Councills, Coffeys, and other landowners in the foothills north of Boone, eventually paying off their land. Some black residents who moved into the area were able to buy their parcel out right or were allowed to clear land and keep a portion. In any event, most Junaluska residents became landowners and home owners, a fact that is still true in the community today. In fact, land ownership has been critical to the survival of Junaluska as an ethnic community.

A Village within a Village

Junaluska has been called a village within a village because, historically, it was a segregated neighborhood in Boone, and people tended to confine their activities and their relationships to their own people (**PHOTO 4**). Prior to integration, Virgil Greer described Junaluska as “one big family.” And indications are that residents are interrelated in multiple ways through both blood and marriage. Family ties contributed to the survival of the segregated neighborhood as people could depend on one another for reciprocal aid, advice, emotional support, job referrals, small financial loans, babysitting, nursing help for the sick, general assistance for the elderly, and so on. Residents interacted in overlapping ways as friends, relatives, neighbors, schoolmates, fellow church members, and co-workers. No one was a stranger, and everyone looked out for everyone else.

Junaluska residents trace descent largely from four female ancestors: Polly Grimes, Jane Hagler, Lucinda Bly Whittington, and Lyda Mott (**PHOTO 5)**. Polly Grimes was a free person of color, while the other women were born slaves. All of these women were born either in Watauga County or in the nearby Yadkin River Valley, which flows from Caldwell County to the south through Wilkes County to the east. While Junaluskans identify as African American, their genealogies indicate a mixture of black, white, and Native American heritage.

Family reunions are often held by these four family groups and others. They provide an opportunity for visits by family members who live at a distance. Reunions generally happen in the summer and often last several days with scheduled events such as barbecues, business meetings, and dinner dances (Braswell 1990). Family reunions serve to reinforce the extended kinship ties of Junaluskans and provide a forum for the exploration of their family roots. They substantiate their identity as a persistent people who have endured many struggles yet remain unified, proud, and strong.

Community Life

Prior to desegregation, life for Junaluskans was led primarily inside the neighborhood (**PHOTO 6)**. Everything but paid employment could be found there. People survived on subsistence agriculture. While lots were small, most houses had a garden, and if you had more food than you needed, you offered some to others. Corn shucking was a communal affair. People had hogs, and neighbors would come to help on slaughtering day. Others raised chickens or rabbits for food. Men hunted and families went fishing together (**PHOTO 7**). Women canned vegetables and sausage. Although no one made much money, there were few who complained of hunger, and many women were renowned as good cooks. Because few people had cars until after the mid-twentieth century, people walked everywhere, and they talked to their neighbors as they went places. The neighborhood has never held more than about 400 people, and there are about 100 residents today.

In a 2012 focus group Keefe conducted, the community in the 1950's and 60's was described as having a village atmosphere. Everybody's door was open. People helped one another. Close living quarters meant people kept an eye on one another. If a neighbor caught a child doing something wrong, they punished them, and the child was punished again after they got home when their parents found out what happened. Churches were packed on Sundays, and the church community reinforced the rules of behavior among residents. When there was a death, everyone was dedicated to helping the family recover by bringing food and sitting up with the body in the home and grieving together. For the funeral, men would dig the grave in the black cemetery and bury the casket while women cooked food for a communal meal in the church following the burial.

As Roberta Jackson says, Junaluskans made their own entertainment. Children had few toys but they had fun playing outside. One family welcomed teenagers into their basement for dance parties. Residents opened small social clubs and cafes in the neighborhood, such as the Chocolate Bar in the 1940’s (**PHOTO 8**). Junaluska was proud of its own black baseball team in the 1950’s called the Mountain Lions, who played against white teams in other communities and towns (**PHOTO 9**). At movie theaters in town, African Americans were segregated into the balcony, but they remember it as “their” exclusive place with a better view of the movie screen. Hunting was a sport that many men enjoyed, and their hounds could be heard at night on Howard’s Knob and beyond as they chased coons. And in the evenings, men in the community often congregated on The Corner (at the intersection of North Depot Street and North Street) under the only street light in the neighborhood to socialize, tell stories, and relax, perhaps sneaking a drink.

Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans in Junaluska were prevented from getting anything but menial jobs. Men worked as janitors, restaurant cooks, dishwashers, bellhops, construction workers and plasterers, road construction laborers, timber industry workers, share croppers, and farm hands. Women were employed as cooks, nannies, housekeepers, seamstresses, and laundresses in white people’s homes.

There were also small black-owned businesses in the Junaluska neighborhood. Small grocery stores operated out of two homes. There was a hairdresser and a one-chair barbershop. Rev. Ronda Horton ran a coal and ice business at the foot of The Hill catering to both blacks and whites (**PHOTOS 10 & 11**). A number of homeowners took in boarders, such as the resident black school teachers who came from Winston Salem. Many residents were part-time peddlers selling things like butter, eggs, chickens, and hogs. This included children who sometimes sold worms to local fishermen.

While Junaluskans found contentment in their ethnic community, it was impossible to escape the hurtful affronts of racism and discrimination in the larger society. Virtually every aspect of life was segregated. There were separate churches, schools, and playgrounds. Restaurants and cafes would only serve African Americans at the back door or in the kitchen, although they charged the same prices nonetheless. The bus depot had a separate black waiting room, and blacks had to sit in the back of the bus. Blacks were segregated at the movie theater and the skating rink. Even the city cemetery had separate sections for whites and blacks. Roberta Jackson remembers as a teenager being told not to go into the town of Boone alone and never at night, as they were unwelcome there.

In 1932, an incident occurred which terrorized the neighborhood. Ralph and George Horton, two cousins from Junaluska, were involved in an altercation with a white construction superintendent when attempting to collect money owed for moonshine sold to some employees. Armed with warrants issued at the behest of the white employer, a deputy sheriff pursued the men, arresting George at his home on Junaluska Road (Watauga Democrat 1932). The deputy then made his way to Ralph's home. When Ralph's mother refused to let him enter, the deputy pushed her aside and started through the door only to have Norwood Horton (Ralph's brother) fire and near fatally wound the deputy. Ralph and Norwood were able to escape and fled over the mountains by foot toward the Tennessee line. A white mob of perhaps one hundred men followed with bloodhounds through the night. The following morning a small deputized posse of a dozen men found them on the highway near Mabel. During an exchange of gunfire, Ralph was shot to death and Norwood was wounded and died several weeks later.

Black residents report being terrorized and buying guns and ammunition for self-defense afterward at the Farmer's Hardware downtown. More significantly, it resulted in the out-migration of more than thirty members of the victims' extended family to Philadelphia in the years following the incident. This, in turn, contributed to the decline of the black Methodist Church in the neighborhood, as the Hortons made up much of the congregation (**PHOTO 12**). Residents who remained in Junaluska responded by withdrawing further into their neighborhood and adopting a strategy of accommodation rather than confrontation with whites.

The other main church in the community is the Boone Mennonite Brethren Church (**PHOTOS 13 & 14**). One of six remaining black Mennonite churches in western North Carolina, the BMBC has an interesting mix of Mennonite theology and African American cultural traditions (such as the gospel choir) (**PHOTOS 15 & 16**). From the 1930's through the 1950's, church was the center of most activities in Junaluska (Manross 1996). People could attend morning and evening Sunday services at the Methodist and the Mennonite Brethren churches, which were held so as not to conflict with one another. Pageants and programs were held on religious holidays in both the Methodist and the Mennonite churches, and many people attended programs in both.

Junaluska had its own black school which until 1959 did not offer classes past the ninth grade (**PHOTO 17**). Segregated schools served the neighborhood until 1965 when a new consolidated and integrated county high school opened, and younger black children were admitted to the white elementary school in town. While their segregated facilities had been limited, present day Junaluskans have good memories of their black schools, which were located in their neighborhood and which they considered "their" schools. While they had hand-me-down textbooks from the white schools, they also had black teachers with college degrees and classes they found academically challenging. School programs and plays were well attended. Parents were involved with the school, and they urged their children to do well and aim high (**PHOTO 18**). Teachers encouraged the students to go on to college.

The first few years following integration, on the other hand, brought up bad memories for many Junaluskans in a focus group Keefe conducted in 2012. While they do not remember having trouble academically in the white school, they do remember feeling snubbed by white students and teachers who seemed to feel the black students were not as educated. Some remember being called hurtful names by white students. Many men reported getting into fights every day at school, especially with white kids from rural areas of the county. Several black students dropped out after integration due to the prejudice and discrimination.

In the decades following desegregation, Junaluskans experienced an expansion of opportunities in education, work, and housing choices. More residents could now finish high school as well as attend college, since Appalachian State University opened its doors to blacks in 1964. With more education, many young black people migrated out to seek jobs in larger, more diverse urban areas. With more education and better jobs, residents could buy cars and leave Boone for shopping and entertainment. No longer restricted to the black neighborhood for housing, some Junaluskans moved to other neighborhoods in Boone and Watauga County.

The Junaluska neighborhood began to shrink as a result. Many elderly residents were left with no close family members nearby to help with transportation, heating bills, and applying for benefits. Many found it impossible to afford home maintenance, and their houses began to deteriorate. People were no longer as interdependent as before. Church attendance dropped over the years, and Virgil Greer was moved to say despairingly, “Our values disappeared.” Residents became concerned about the decline of their community.

The condition of the neighborhood also came to the attention of the town. Historically, the town had paid little attention to Junaluska, leaving its streets narrow and unimproved. In the later twentieth century, however, government funds became available for depressed areas. Major improvements to the homes and neighborhood infrastructure happened with the assistance of state and federal grants in 1977 and 1987.

Developers were attracted to the area in the 1980’s and 90’s, and Junaluskans have battled over the years to maintain their single-family home neighborhood. Junaluskans often feel there is a conspiracy to take their community away from them, and they vow to remain vigilant.

The Junaluska Heritage Association

In the twenty-first century, the Episcopal Church developed a national initiative to promote a ministry of racial reconciliation, justice, and healing as repentance for its participation in the slave trade. Members of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Boone responded to this national initiative in 2011 by coming together with the Boone Mennonite Brethren Church to support racial healing locally. Along with some other interested citizens and university faculty, they organized as the Junaluska Heritage Association (JHA) committed “to protect and preserve the historically black Junaluska neighborhood of Boone, NC, and to collect, curate, and celebrate the cultural heritage of its residents” (Junaluska Heritage Association website 2018). Never very large, the JHA remains a small group with both black and white members (**PHOTO 19**). It works using bonding social capital, which means the group can pull in the tightly knit community to provide manpower for major projects. The work of JHA is always vetted by the community through the informal social networks that exist in Junaluska.

The JHA initially focused on two collaborative efforts: (1) the Junaluska Jubilee, an annual celebration open to the larger community meant to increase the visibility of the black community in Boone (**PHOTO 20**) and (2) a History Project to help Junaluska residents research their family genealogies and community history. Four Jubilees were held at the Boone Mennonite Brethren Church between 2012 and 2015, while one outcome of the History Project is the oral history described here.

The most recent project for the JHA was the recognition of the historic black cemetery in Boone, first established by Jordan Councill, Sr. for slave burials. The segregated black cemetery was left outside the adjacent fenced white cemetery, and only three tombstones marked black graves on the grassy knoll (**PHOTO 21**). After the JHA brought this to the attention of the Town of Boone's Historic Preservation Commission, the town ultimately took ownership of both black and white sections of the cemetery in 2016 and allocated over $100,000 to improve the site, clearing trees in the black section, erecting new fencing around the entire cemetery, and adding a retaining wall where erosion threatened one end of the black cemetery. The town also undertook a ground-penetrating radar survey of the entire black cemetery site and discovered 165 mostly unmarked graves. The JHA raised over $5000 for the installation of a granite marker (**PHOTOS 22 & 23**) listing the names of the 65 African Americans known to have been interred there during the first half of the twentieth century.

The dedication of the cemetery marker was important for a community that grieved the loss of their people and their history. It was an opportunity for Junaluskans to reclaim some of those who had gone unnamed in death, and to better know where they came from as a community. And it was an opportunity for the Town of Boone to offer some redress for the sacrifices made by the African Americans living in its midst.

We have collected and edited 37 life history narratives for an oral history to be published soon. The following is a portion of Roberta Jackson's life history (**PHOTO 24**).

Roberta Jackson Life History:

My mother told me I was born in Dr. Len Hagaman's clinic on Water Street in Boone. It was 1946. We lived on The Hill, on the far end of North Street. Later we moved to North Depot Street.

I remember having a good childhood. We didn't have a lot and we used our imagination. We played outside in the summertime. We climbed trees, played hide-and-go-seek, and we'd dig around in the dirt. Momma would say, "Stop playing in the dirt. You're going to get worms!" And we did.

In the wintertime, we always had lots of snow, so we would ride on sleds. When I was growing up, we had winters. I mean sometimes I don't remember seeing the ground until spring. We didn't have the best of homes. It was cold outside, and it was cold inside because there were cracks in the walls. I slept with all three of my sisters in the same bed together, and it helped us stay warm.

My dad changed tires at Andrew's Chevrolet right down on Depot Street. And at one time he butchered for Jones Hollow Abattoir on Bamboo Road in Boone. My mom worked at Northwestern Bank on King Street cleaning at night.

We didn't always have plenty of food to eat. I can remember my mother would send us downtown to Goodnight Brothers Produce Company on Howard Street. They would have cabbage and potatoes that were damaged and they'd set them on their dock area for free. We'd go down there to get cabbage and potatoes and bring them home. We never went hungry, but it was not easy sometimes because there were six of us children at home.

I read a lot when I was young. I read anything I could get my hands on! At Watauga Consolidated School [the segregated black school] on Wyn Way, there was a small library, and I would borrow books. I read all the Tarzan books by Edgar Rice Burroughs. I loved those. I graduated from there in 1964.

We had teachers that encouraged us to go to college, and they wanted us to go to their school (Winston-Salem Teachers College, now Winston-Salem State University). I was going to be an elementary school teacher. I got sick in my second year of college and came back home. Then I couldn't afford to go back to school because it was really financially hard on my mom and dad. When I started working at ASU as a receptionist at the physical plant, they told me I could take a class a semester tuition-free, and I took classes until I could graduate. That was after my daughter, Lynn, finished her college degree, so it took a long time.

My uncle, Rosalee Hagler, was a Holiness preacher at tent revivals, because there was no Pentacostal church in Junaluska. Our family was really religious. Girls couldn't wear pants or sleeveless blouses. We also attended the Methodist Church in Junaluska every Sunday. My grandfather was a deacon there as I recall.

When I was dating Cecil Jackson, I started coming to the Mennonite Church on Church Street. It was very different compared to the Pentecostal Church, where we were more physical and expressive. At the Mennonite Church, it was more structured and you didn't clap your hands. We just sang directly out of the hymn books and that was it.

We only went shopping at Christmas and Easter, just to get new clothes to wear to church for the holiday programs. There was also a grocery store on King Street that we went to, but I don't remember doing a whole lot of grocery shopping. We had to buy coal for heating, and we got it from Rev. Ronda Horton's coal yard on Depot Street.

We could go to the movies downtown, but we had to sit upstairs in the balcony. That really was the best place to sit at a movie, I think. We would go every now and then. They kept us separated for a long time at the theater.

We couldn't go to sit down at a restaurant until 1963 or 64. Before that, if you wanted to get anything from a restaurant, you had to go around back and pay for it and take it with you.

There was never any social interaction between white kids and black kids at that time. I'm glad that my kids got the experience of having all kinds of friends, because we didn't. It makes them more well-rounded. You get used to everybody. We were separated and that's just the way it was. We only played with the kids in our neighborhood.

References Cited

Arthur, John Preston. 1915. A History of Watauga County, North Carolina, with Sketches of Prominent Families. Richmond, VA: Everett Waddey Co.

Coggeshall, John M. 2018. Liberia, South Carolina: An African American Appalachian Community. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Hagler, Sandra. 1989. Interview with Susan Keefe.

Horton, Frazier Robert. 1942. "Negro Life in Watauga County." B.S. Thesis. Greensboro, NC: Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina.

Inscoe, John C. 2001. Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Junaluska Heritage Association. October 20, 2018. JHA Mission Statement. Retrieved from junaluskaheritage.org.

Manross, Jodie Danielle. 1996. "A Cultural History of the Boone Methodist Episcopal Church." B.A. Honors Thesis. Boone, NC: Appalachian State University.

Margrif, Trent. 2012. "Architectural Survey, Junaluska Neighborhood, Boone, North Carolina." Unpublished PowerPoint.

Olson, Eric. 1984. "Blacks in Watauga County, 1770-1870." Unpublished paper. Special Collections, Appalachian State University.