

## "Forever Free:" Unearthing the Buried History of Appalachian Slavery

### Abstract

This panel will explore an innovative collaboration between Buncombe County, North Carolina's Register of Deeds and the Mars Hill University Public History Program to find and digitize slave records of Madison County, North Carolina. The panel will showcase student work expanding the pioneering "Forever Free" slave deeds database project, discuss challenges faced and lessons learned, and consider prospects for extending this potentially transformative Appalachian-born project into other mountain counties. If expanded, "Forever Free" has the potential to transform our understanding of slavery not only in the Mountain South but also throughout the United States. The panel will introduce the project, recently begun by Buncombe County Register of Deeds Drew Reisinger, and the first such undertaking in the former slaveholding South. Like county public records offices throughout the Appalachian region and beyond, Reisinger's office holds buried in dusty deedbooks unknown numbers of documents related to race-based chattel slavery. Soon after his 2011 election Reisinger made unearthing and digitizing these public records a high priority, thus illuminating an area of our "Many Mountains" history that has long been enshrouded in darkness. Deeds of sale, wills, and other property transfer documents often contain names of the enslaved, and sometimes include other important information such as skills and family relationships. In the fall of 2014, Mars Hill University undergraduate students undertook a pilot extension project, bringing "Forever Free" to Madison County, a neighbor to Buncombe. We report from the field, offering this work as a model to others who might wish to undertake it.

### Presentation 1: Drew Reisinger

#### **Creating "Forever Free:" Uncovering Slave Deeds in Buncombe County, North Carolina**

**Abstract:** In recent years, Drew Reisinger, Buncombe County Register of Deeds, launched a trailblazing project to discover, digitize, and make widely available important slave deed records, which until now have been buried deep in the dusty volumes of the county's deedbooks. The Buncombe County Register of Deeds office has kept property records since the late 1700's. In these public records, one can find a wealth of information about the history of this mountain community. The holdings include extensive slavery records such as wills and deeds of sale for Appalachian African-Americans held in chattel slavery in Buncombe County through 1865. Since they were considered alienable "property" prior to end of the Civil War, sales, wills, and other transfers of these enslaved Appalachians were recorded in public records housed in the

county's Register of Deeds office. Reisinger will discuss how his office worked with community partners to bring the online slave records database into existence. He will also discuss the future of the project and the hopes he has for its expansion outside Western North Carolina into the larger Appalachian region and the rest of the South. In the discussion after the panel, Reisinger can offer guidance for other communities interested in becoming part of this important effort to preserve the past of our Many Mountains.

### **Presentation 2: Patrick Cash**

#### **Many Mountains: Immersing Students in the Tough Stuff of Appalachian Public History**

**Abstract:** In the fall of 2014, Mars Hill University's undergraduate Introduction to Public History class began working with the Buncombe County Register of Deeds to expand the "Forever Free" online slave deeds project into Madison County. The project was designed not only to help grow an important historical undertaking but also to provide students in the class with valuable hands-on experience in the fields of public history and primary source research. Instructor Patrick Cash, who grew up in the North Carolina mountains, took the first public history course offered at Mars Hill University and has since completed his Master's at East Tennessee State University. His research interests have long focused on issues of civil rights and race relations in Appalachian history. His presentation will explain how he set up the student project, how he tied the material to class discussions, and how the project helped students recognize that the history of slavery in the Appalachian region is far more complex and extensive than most had originally understood. It will also examine the ongoing efforts of the Public History program at Mars Hill University to expand its work within the Madison County records in hopes to uncover and make available to the public more of the story of slavery in the region.

### **Presentation 3: Ragan Ramsey**

#### **Finding Their Stories: Digging into the Slave Records of Madison County, North Carolina**

**Abstract:** Ragan Ramsey, an undergraduate student from neighboring Yancey County who took the 2014 Introduction to Public History class at Mars Hill University, will offer insight on her experience working with the Madison County slave records. Ramsey will discuss how she and her classmates felt about the project, what processes they used to carry out their assignments, and how the project taught them to be better public historians. This presentation will examine the hands-on research and work it took to compile the Madison County slave records database. It will also draw on student testimonies to gain a better understanding of how the project helped deepen students' understandings of the professional field of public history, and of the complicated history of slavery in the Appalachian region. Ramsey will discuss why students

believed the project was important for the community and why they agreed to undertake it. She will also explain what the benefits of the project were for herself and her classmates, and she will discuss issues and difficulties that arose in the course of the project.

#### **Presentation 4: Kathryn Newfont**

##### **The Past in the Present: How Innovative History-making Shapes Our Many Mountains**

**Abstract:** Kathryn Newfont, Professor of History at Mars Hill University, will reflect on how collaborations such as the Madison County "Forever Free" project extension can shape our understanding not only of the Appalachian region's complex past, but also of its multi-faceted present. Drew Reisinger's efforts to unearth the history of chattel slavery in the public records under his care set a new standard for the nation. From the beginning Reisinger emphasized the importance of this historical work to the present-day citizens of Buncombe County, who elect the Register of Deeds. Now, in another Appalachian innovation, educators and students with Mars Hill University's Public History Program have extended this remarkable effort into neighboring Madison County. Newfont will reflect on the potential this sort of work has for transforming our understanding of slavery in the southern mountain region and beyond. She will consider ways this collaboration and others like it can not only extend our grasp of the Appalachian region's "Many Mountains" past, but also shapes our understandings of its complex "Many Mountains" present.

**Tracks:** Ethnicity and Race, Politics and Government, Pre-Industrial , Social Conditions

**Special Requirements:** Tier 2

**Need internet**

#### **About the Presenters:**

- 1) Drew Reisinger, Buncombe County Register of Deeds, (828) 250-4303, [register@buncombecounty.org](mailto:register@buncombecounty.org), 35 Woodfin Street, Suite 226 Asheville, NC 28801
- 2) Patrick Cash, MA, Instructor of History and Public History Program Coordinator, Mars Hill University, (828) 689-1663, [pcash@mhu.edu](mailto:pcash@mhu.edu), P.O. Box 6663, Mars Hill NC, 28754
- 3) Ragan Ramsey, History Major and Public History student, Mars Hill University, [s000181771@mhu.edu](mailto:s000181771@mhu.edu)
- 4) Kathryn Newfont, PhD, Professor of History and Faculty Chair, Ramsey Center for Regional Studies, Mars Hill University, (828) 689-1117, [knewfont@mhu.edu](mailto:knewfont@mhu.edu) P.O. Box 6663, Mars Hill NC, 28754

**Presenter Bios:**

- 1) Drew Reisinger: Drew Reisinger is the Register of Deeds for Buncombe County and founder of the Slave Deeds Online Database project. He has served in this elected office since 2011.
- 2) Patrick Cash: A BA graduate of Mars Hill College in 2011 with an MA from East Tennessee State University in 2014, Patrick Cash coordinates the Public History Program at Mars Hill University.
- 3) Ragan Ramsey: A senior at Mars Hill University majoring in History with a concentration in Public History, Ragan Ramsey plans to enter the field of historic preservation after she graduates.
- 4) Dr. Kathy Newfont: Professor of History at Mars Hill University and Faculty Chair of the University's Ramsey Center for Regional Studies, Kathy Newfont has worked closely with the Public History program. She taught the 2012 class in which students studied slavery at Vance Birthplace North Carolina State Historic Site, and presented their work at ASA 2013. Her book, *Blue Ridge Commons: Environmental Activism and Forest History in Western North Carolina*, won ASA's 2012 Weatherford Award for Non-fiction.