

# MONTFORD

VOL. 1 No. 7

THE NEWSLETTER OF ASHEVILLE'S MOST HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD

APRIL 1996

## UPCOMING

- April 6. Easter Egg Hunt and hot dog lunch. Bring your kids to the Montford Park at 11 a.m.
- April 10. Historic Montford Meeting at 7 p.m. at the Greek Center on Cumberland Ave. Jim Barrett, director of Pisgah Legal Services, will talk about the services offered to Montford neighbors. Everyone is invited to attend.
- April 18-26. Asheville Heritage Celebration of Place. For a free brochure that includes a schedule of events, call The Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County at 254-2343.
- April 20. Earth Day Clean Sweep and Cookout. Pick up trash bags at the Montford Resource Center. Cookout is at the Montford Park at 4 p.m.
- May 5. Community Flea Market. , 8 a.m.-Noon at the Cumberland Ave. Baptist Church parking lot. Donate clothes, appliances, sporting goods, nick-nacks, furnishings — whatever — to help raise money for the neighborhood Citizens on Patrol efforts and the Montford Legal Fund.
- May 10th, 7p.m. Limited Liability Corp. meeting. Resource Center.
- Early June, 2nd Annual Street Dance.

## Montford: A Neighborhood Rich in History

One of the main reasons people are currently drawn to Montford is because of its historical charm. Houses that were built 100 years ago still line the streets. In front of many of the homes are brick sidewalks that have been worn by a century of soles. And a stroll through the neighborhood's Riverside Cemetery reminds us who was here first.

Before the latter part of the 1800s, what is now known as Montford was farmland scattered with a few houses. Owning a good portion of the land — approximately 75 acres — were the Rankins, who lived at the house that still stands facing what is now known as Elizabeth Place (named for Elizabeth Rankin). The Rankins built the grand Greek Revival mansion around 1846 and operated a dairy and a tannery on the land.

In 1889, a group of prominent businessmen, including the Rankin's son-in-law James Bearden, formed the Asheville Loan and Construction and Improvement Company. The firm purchased much of the land from the Rankins and began selling lots at the southern end of Montford Ave. (then known as Academy St.). The company failed and was taken over by wealthy lumberman George Willis Pack, who donated the land for Montford Park and who is responsible for much of the neighborhood's development.

Some of the area's movers and shakers

bought sites in Montford, including doctors, lawyers, store owners, and architects. Several of these residents found immortality in Thomas Wolfe's autobiographical "Look Homeward Angel," such as tuberculosis specialist Dr. Eugene Byron Glenn (Dr. Hugh McGuire in Wolfe's novel); wealthy businessman Gay Green (Big Jeff White); merchant Louis Lipinsky (Louis Rosalsky); and mail carrier Fergus Strikeleather (Fergus Paston). Wolfe wrote of Montford Ave. or "Montgomery Avenue" in the book, as "the most fashionable street in town." But, as early city directories show, Montford has always been home to a mixture of wealthy and working class citizens of diverse cultures.

From 1893 to 1905, Montford was an incorporated village of about 50 people, with James Edward Rumbough as its only mayor. (See related article in this newsletter on the Rumbough House.)

The architecture is as varied as the people who originally lived here. Some of the earliest houses are Queen Anne and feature impressive towers. Many of the

*The architecture is as varied as the people who originally lived here.*

*continued on page 4*

## *If These Houses Could Talk ...*

What would they say about the people who occupied them and their architectural heritage?

Martha Baker Rumbough called the stately yellow house on 49 Zillicoa Ave. (Highland Park) her "beloved Hopewell Hall." She writes in her book, "Memories of Another Day," that her father built it for her after her marriage to James Edwin (Teddy), whom she married Oct. 23, 1890. She writes about her courtship: "Being a so-called Yankee, perhaps I had a deeper and more serious impulse — so his fancy being caught, I anchored it!"

The Rumbough House has been called the "creme de la creme" of Montford's historic district. It is considered one of the few remaining mansions of Asheville's turn-of-the-century elite. About her house, Martha says, "It had more timber and nails in it than several Southern homes of its size. I have heard them say that in case of an earthquake, the house could role to the bottom of an adjoining hill and not be damaged. I hope it will not happen ever."

For several years, the Rumboughs and their three children "wintered" in Palm Beach and "summered" in Asheville. Teddy made some of his money in tobacco and is credited with being the first person to drive an automobile across the Appalachian

Mountains and as the builder of Asheville's first golf course.

According to Ben Slosman, who is a current owner of Highland Park and has his office in the Rumbough House, Teddy owned much of the land around the house, but eventually sold parcels of it to people who wanted to develop Montford. Teddy became the first and only mayor of Montford when it was considered a separate village. He sold some of the property to Dr. Robert Carroll, who built the massive stone structure situated next door to the Rumbough house. Dr. Carroll also bought the land on the other side of the Rumbough

House and, much to Teddy's dismay, established a mental hospital. Teddy refused to ever sell his house to Dr. Carroll, but eventually donated it to Duke University in 1939. The area became Highland Hospital and was operated by Duke for many years.

The house was renovated in the '70s. Fine architectural details are abundant throughout the house, including jeweled stained glass, and Italian ceramic tile around the fireplaces.

The house that is now Abbingdon Green Bed and Breakfast on Cumberland

Circle was also a thriving residence at the turn-of-the-century. Designed by Richard Sharp Smith and considered one of his finest homes, the house was originally owned by Mary and David L. Jackson, who was a journalist, restaurant owner, and realtor. The house is a mix of many styles, including late Victorian and Colonial Revival. It has such features as Corinthian columns and a variety of different fireplace mantels.

The house was then bought by Wythe M. Peyton, who was Asheville's postmaster for 15 years, one of the first highway engineers, and a prominent member of the community.

According to current owner Valerie Larrea, an elderly neighbor who had worked with Wythe, said he was a member of the Men's Garden Club and raised prized flowers and vegetables. Wythe had a wife and four sons, and he died in the house at age 70 in 1956.

Larrea bought the house in May 1993 and had it renovated. Since the 1960s, the house had been occupied by groups of people sleeping on mattresses throughout.

After six months of renovation, the house

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## *Stumptown Remembered*

At one time, the area off Pearson Ave. that is now the amphitheater, community center, playground, and softball field complex was a separate neighborhood — called Stumptown.

In an article published sometime in the 1970s, Phyllis Sherrill recalls growing up in Stumptown and playing with her friends down in the hollow where baseball games are now played. Where the amphitheater is, Phyllis and her friends pitched horseshoes.

All that changed with the emergence of urban redevelopment

in the mid -1960s. Many of the residents living in Stumptown were older and living on fixed incomes. Their homes were not in the best shape and many did not have the money to make necessary repairs. When the Housing Authority came in and bought up a lot of the property, many of the Stumptown residents were forced to move.

Some of Montford's old timers might remember stories about Stumptown. If you hear of any, please call the Montford Resource Center at 255-4946. We would like to publish more about the lost neighborhood in future issues of MONTFORD.



# Montford Timeline

- 1889** Asheville Loan and Construction and Improvement Company formed and lots in Montford begin to be sold.
- 1893** Montford is incorporated as a separate village.
- 1905** Montford becomes part of the City of Asheville.
- 1926** Montford Hills is promoted as “The Suburb in the City,” where people can buy homes ranging in price from \$1,800 to \$2,400 and enjoy “countryside life in the center of Asheville’s residential section.”
- 1938** Montford described in James Caine’s “Yesterday and Today” column in the Asheville Citizen-Times as “one of our most attractive residential thoroughfares, wider by several feet than most city streets; adorned with magnificent trees of great age, and affording a superb vista from end to end of its sweeping length.”
- 1977** Montford is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- 1979** Montford logo of a hummingbird is adopted and a banner is created.
- 1987** Montford Redevelopment Plan is adopted by City Council to improve living conditions in Montford and increase property values.
- 1995** Montford Resource Center opens and a monthly community newsletter, *MONTFORD*, is published.





# NEWS & VIEWS *From The Turn of The Century*

**NEWS:** Mr. G.W. Pack will build a 14-room frame house on Chestnut Street. The cost will be \$7,000. (July 16, 1890)

**VIEWS:** Velvet blouses are very dressy and becoming to wear with fine, face cloth skirts and are newer and more becoming than silk. The latest fancy is to trim them with straps of cloth. To be smart, the blouse and skirt must match in color. (December 30, 1904)

**NEWS:** The Mayor and the Board of Aldermen met last night and resolved to have all barbed wire fences removed from the streets. (July 19, 1890)

**NEWS:** Cullowhee St. stands an even chance of being paved or remaining unpaved. The decision rests practically with Mr. Curry of Key West, Fla. who owns the

property at the corner of Montford and Cullowhee, and to whom has been sent for signature a petition requesting paving. Some of the property owners on the street wish paving, but others do not fancy the expense. The paving is made possible by the generosity of a gentleman who does not even own real estate on the street or in the city. John A. Roebling has offered to give \$500 toward the paving of Cumberland and Cullowhee. (December 30, 1904)

**NEWS:** A very fine bird dog that belonged to Fred Jones was run over and killed on Montford Ave. yesterday morning by the street car. Mr. Jones says that it was the best trained dog in the country and regrets very much the lose. (October 2, 1903)

**VIEWS:** The action of the Board of

Aldermen with regard to the street sprinklers ... they paid no attention to the fact that the city would soon be without sprinklers and King Dust would rule. It is a stinging and lasting disgrace to the fairest spot in the mountains that no more attention should be paid to the condition of its streets. Patton Ave. yesterday morning was one cloud of dust. Pedestrians walked up it with their hands over their eyes and all of the stores were closed. No more appeared on the streets than had to and that did not include any ladies. It is high time for something to be done. (July 22, 1890)

**NEWS:** Ed Mitchell, Will Barnes, H.S. Bolell, and N.A. Norriss, a quartet, were playing cards yesterday afternoon at about 5 p.m. in what is known as "Stumptown." They were locked up to await trial this morning. (Early 1900s)

## *Neighborhood* (continued from page 1)

homes are a blend of different styles, including Queen Anne, Georgian, Mission, and Colonial Revival. A good portion of the houses were designed by Richard Sharp Smith, who was the supervising architect for the Biltmore Estate and responsible for most of the buildings in Biltmore Village. Smith's influential style combined gambrel roofs, hipped gables, heavy porch brackets, pebbledash, shingled siding, bay windows, and steeply pitched roofs.

The origin of the name "Montford" remains a mystery. The best guess is that it was conjured by one of the late 19th century real estate developers. Some have suggested that the name is a condensation of

"Mountain Ford," which was a river crossing on the French Broad just north of downtown. And, an early 20th century reporter wrote that the neighborhood was named after a Colonel Joseph Montford of the Halifax District, but that story was later disputed in 1977 when researchers failed to uncover any information about the Revolutionary War veteran. Whatever the case, Montford became known as the neighborhood that stretches northwest from Battery Park to the French Broad River.

Beginning in the 1930s, Montford suffered a slow decline. The trend accelerated in the '50s and '60s as suburb life became

attractive to city dwellers. Many of the historic homes were converted into boarding houses or apartments. By the mid 1970s, Montford was in dire straits. Property values were among the city's lowest and houses were lost to fires, neglect, and demolition.

Then, around 1976, the Montford Community Club was organized with its primary goals to improve the neighborhood and launch a campaign to get Montford listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Club's mission was successful in November 1977. Since then, Montford has steadily improved, with a significant portion of turn-of-the-century homes completely restored to single-family dwellings.

## POLICE PROFILE: *A Look Back*

Asheville as a frontier town in the mid-1800s, was a wild and rowdy place. The first policemen to bring order to the town were volunteers selected from the biggest and toughest men around. A minimum weight of 190 lbs. was necessary to be considered.

Bearded, with handle-bar mustaches, Asheville's first police force patrolled on foot. Having to "trot" — sometimes miles — to the scene of trouble, the men were often too exhausted to cope with the situation.

The volunteer force became almost non-existent around 1860 and citizens feared to go outside. City Aldermen adopted a resolution for a Citizens Patrol, and prominent residents were selected to patrol on a weekly basis.

Formally chartered in 1875, the Asheville Police Department consisted of a chief and four patrolmen. Rules of conduct directed the chief to be responsible for recording "... all drinking saloons, gambling houses, and houses of ill-fame, and of all places where idlers, gamblers, whores ... congregate."

In 1906, the department purchased a bicycle to respond to emergencies. The residents of Asheville were so outraged by this "squandering" of public funds, that all officials in office at the time lost in the next election.

## *Houses* (continued from page 2)

was opened as a bed & breakfast. Visitors have included Wythe's son, Carlton Peyton, as well as the daughter-in-law who was married to youngest son William; she told Larrea that she and her husband occupied the property's carriage house when they were newlyweds.

## *What Ever Happened To The Montford Trolley?*

**M**any long-time as well as new residents are not aware of the fact that Asheville was the second U.S. city — after Richmond, Va. — to install electric cars for transportation.

A young engineer by the name of J.H. Barnard prompted the city to adopt an ordinance in 1886 that would allow construction of street railways for the transportation of "passengers, freights, and commodities." Electric cars were considered the futuristic way to travel using 550 direct current volts of electricity. In 1889, Barnard was "motorman" on the maiden voyage through the crowded streets of Asheville. At one point, excited onlookers had to help put the car back on its track after rounding a curve on Biltmore Ave.

It is reported that tracks were laid on "streets that lead to the depot of the Western North Carolina Railroad Company, and on Main St., Patton Ave., Haywood St., Academy St. (which eventually became Montford Ave.), College St., Pearson Ave., Chestnut St., Merrimon Ave., and Charlotte St." Electric cars "enabled the city to spread out, furnished recreation, and helped Asheville move from a struggling village to a young city."

In a Sept. 11, 1903 article, it is reported that: "The Montford line has for years been operated on a 20-minute schedule, except in summer when there are attractions at the [Riverside] Park and then several cars have been run together on a 10-

minute time."

Interestingly, many trolley riders in Asheville seemed to prefer riding on the platform instead of inside the cars. One observer reportedly said: "I will bet there isn't any place in the country where so many people ride on the street car platforms as in Asheville. Why actually, yesterday I saw a car on Patton Ave. that was a sight. There was not a person in the car, but the back platform was crowded and

one man was standing on the edge. There's a lawyer who lives out in Montford and he always rides on the front platform no matter how cold it is. Wants to get fresh air, I reckon."

The last trolley ride took place in 1934, at \$1 and \$2 for a 45-minute ride through the streets of Asheville. Proceeds went to support a Rotary Club crippled children's fund. On the first ride and the last were prominent residents Gay Green and J.Y. Jordan

Sr. Five hundred other passengers enjoyed the trolley's last run.

With buses becoming the popular form of transportation, the city paved over rails and crossties. However, a 1965 article reports that the crossties eventually rotted causing the pavement to sag. All the roads where trolley cars had traveled had to be dug up and replaced at an "escalated cost." The Montford Ave. trolley rails and crossties were dug up in 1965.

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### **We need a name...**

If you have any name ideas for the proposed park on the corner of Cumberland Ave. and Starnes Ave., call the MRC 255-4946.



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