

APPALACHIAN BAPTISM:  
THE ASHEVILLE FLOOD OF 1916

A Thesis  
by  
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## **Abstract**

### APPALACHIAN BAPTISM: THE ASHEVILLE FLOOD OF 1916

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The disastrous Southern Appalachian flood of 1916 was no act of God. The actions of a few powerful white men and women added to the severity of the disaster. It ignited broad social discord and challenged the hegemony of Asheville's elites. The socio-economic priorities of city leaders shifted. Tourism received the full support of Asheville's government leaders as river-based industries declined. As a result, hundreds of laborers, both black and white, lost their jobs, homes, and places in society. Forced by circumstance, they likely joined nation-wide migrations to the West and North. This story is about class, race, and the rise of industrial capitalism in America. It also adds to historiography detailed analysis of the natural disasters that shaped regional socio-economies.

The disaster both unveiled and altered a complicated socio-economic system during a crucial period of transition. In 1916, Asheville boasted a balanced economy supported by old and new industrial pursuits; the mills and rails that spawned industrial growth and the tourist trade that became synonymous with the city by the 1920s. Yet, by the 1930s, Asheville suffered immensely during the Great Depression

because of that period of unwarranted speculation from which the city never recovered. This study discusses the futility of the belief in the boundless potential of the environment, wealth, and social power structures in early twentieth century capitalist societies. Asheville's leaders responded conservatively to the flood, which led to further marginalization of vulnerable segments of the population and industries.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am fortunate to have Mallory Sadler as an amazing spouse, partner, and best friend. Her undying confidence in my abilities gave me the power to see this through. She challenged me to be a better writer, researcher, and person. I hope the sum of these sentences pay some tribute to her unique influence on me.

I gathered a variety of debts to those who went far beyond the scope of their obligations. The Appalachian State Office of Student Research financially supported my attendance at several conferences where I gained perspective on my research. Ralph Lentz, Jari Eloranta, and Katherine Ledford at Appalachian State became important supporters and confidantes during the course of my graduate work. John Inscoe, Brian Drake, David Whisnant, and Clay Ouzts went above and beyond their positions as professors to assist me at every molehill and pitfall that challenged my road to a graduate degree. Without them, I would not be where I am today. My fellow cohorts at Appalachian State also contributed to whatever quality this work may possess. From the classroom to the TA office, Shane Parker, Connor Harney, Cody Miller, and Savannah Paige Murray were especially helpful throughout the course of the work.

Finally, my intrepid thesis committee patiently dealt with the ups and downs of my writing process. This work does not entirely reflect the talent of Tim Silver, Bruce Stewart, and Karl Campbell, but only due to my involvement in the project. I chose them for their bravery and immense abilities. They did not disappoint.

## **Dedication**

To my wife, the Shooks, the Sadlers, and my roller derby family.

Without you, I am nothing.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	ix
Dedication.....	x
Introduction: River of Sorrow, Land of the Sky.....	2
Chapter 1: The “Great” Flood: Man and Nature.....	25
Chapter 2: Clean Slate: Disaster and modern Asheville.....	44
Chapter 3: The Asheville Spirit: Disaster, Race, and Class.....	69
Conclusion: The Flood, the Lessons, the Future.....	94
Bibliography .....	123
Vita.....	135



*“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”*

Mark 16:16

*“You never let a serious crisis go to waste...it is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.”*

Rahm Emanuel

## INTRODUCTION: RIVER OF SORROW, LAND OF THE SKY

### **The Journey**

Those who have lived through floods know to fill their bathtubs in case of the loss of power and drinking water. They know that generators can make the difference between life and death. Today, some Appalachians speak of the 1940 flood like it happened yesterday. Although they were children, they remember the water, the destruction, and the smell of kerosene and sewage. They also remember communities coming together. They never blamed the river or God. They simply understood that flooding was the trade-off for living in the mountains.

The 1940 flood was not the worst in the region's history. That honor belongs to the Great Flood of 1916. Very few people are living who survived the 1916 flood. It devastated five states and much of the agricultural lands of the southeast. By 1916, the nation was experiencing a transition between older ways of living into the rise of American metropolises. War loomed over the world. Americans experienced an extremely prolific time of technological advancement. Dramatic social, economic, political, and environmental changes sent communities into turmoil. Industrialization, urbanization, and global conflicts became a burden on most. Natural disasters only made things worse.

A new era of natural disasters grew from the consequences of rampant extraction and manipulation of the landscape. Hurricanes, heat waves, droughts, earthquakes, and floods became more frequent. News of the disasters spread far due to the maturation of

the country's newspaper industry. This caused outrage among the public, which led to federal intervention. Natural disasters had always been a local problem, but the federal government increasingly interceded when such events occurred, which led to inter-jurisdictional disorder.

Disasters disrupted the progressive plans of American leaders at the turn of the century. They found it difficult to rationalize such distractions at a time when so many rushed toward the future without much regard for the present or past. Because they did not fully understand how to mitigate such disturbances, Americans continued the same practices that contributed to the increase in likelihood and vulnerability of disasters. A population boom led to the placement of many homes within flood zones surrounding Asheville, North Carolina. Added to that, widespread and destructive environmental practices, such as deforestation and waterway manipulation, contributed to an increase in flood frequency and devastation in Appalachia.

In Asheville, syncretistic prejudices, which combined historical southern beliefs with progressivism, led to the marginalization of minority communities in the decades leading up to the flood. When the devastation came, those communities took the heaviest toll and did not receive adequate aid from local, state, or national officials. Along with each tale of how Asheville rose to wealth in the early twentieth century there is a story of minority communities caught in the gears of the social mechanism that sponsored white, southern, middle-class prosperity.

Floods destroyed, but also wiped slates clean. Progressive leaders sought to fill the voids left by the disaster with new and improved programs and policies. They designed the new government to serve ideal citizens, who were white, middle class, and

progressive. It allowed Asheville's leaders to refocus the community on the fixed goal of a tourist economy. Only those who had long held power, or the rising white middle class who sought political prominence, had a say in Asheville's future.

### **Framing the Argument**

To properly frame the research for this thesis, theories from three writers served as a model. Immanuel Wallerstein's "world systems" framework provides a basic binary lens.<sup>1</sup> While this study is firmly planted in a regional context, the social system that affected the daily lives of Asheville's citizens before and after the flood was not. Wallerstein's work provides the social context for this thesis. However, a binary approach is limited in scope and applicability on a smaller scale, such as Asheville.

In the late 1980s, sociologist Michael Mann published a theory on the four sources of social power in global empires. They were ideology, economy, military, and politics. Social groups "sought to expand their collective and distributive powers" and extended markets through the interplay of these sources.<sup>2</sup> Mann's theories expanded on Wallerstein to provide a more complicated framework that is applicable to regional studies.

This thesis places Asheville within Mann's framework using the flood of 1916 as a catalyst for the discovery of Appalachian stratification during the beginning of American imperialism. Whether at the hands of coal barons, timber bosses, or tourist magnates, the working class fell between the cog and wheel of American

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<sup>1</sup> Wallerstein's theory was explored in a three-part series that began with, Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: The Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 3: Global Empires and Revolution, 1890-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

industrialization.<sup>3</sup> Examining the political, ideological, economic, and military institutions in Asheville at the time of the flood unveiled an interrelated social system that further explains the complex history of Appalachia during industrialization.

In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007),<sup>4</sup> Naomi Klein insisted that “disaster capitalism” initiated the rise of the modern free market. “The original disaster,” she warned, “the coup, the terrorist attack, the market meltdown, the war, the tsunami, the hurricane—puts the entire population into a state of collective shock . . . shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect.”<sup>5</sup> Some people take advantage of the social, economic, and political conditions that remain after catastrophes. These so-called “disaster capitalists” in Asheville allowed the decimation of factories, neighborhoods, and the landscape to gain a fresh start on an old agenda.<sup>6</sup> By using the theories of Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Mann, and Naomi Klein as a framework for the research, a more complicated narrative of Appalachia within the world economic system can be revealed through the examination of the sources of economic, political, ideological, and military powers in the mountains.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Joseph Crespino and Matthew D. Lassiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7. This work challenged modern historiography through the research of historians admittedly from outside the subfield of Southern History. This choice could be interpreted as weakness, but the broader questions asked within the text were valid. “In challenging southern exceptionalism, our agenda is not to absolve the South but to implicate the nation,” insisted the editors. “Discarding the framework of southern exceptionalism,” they continued, “is a necessary step in overcoming the mythology of American exceptionalism, transforming the American Dilemma (regarding racial tension) into a truly national ordeal, and traversing regional boundaries to rewrite the American past on its own terms and in full historical perspective.” (Parenthetical phrase added by author).

<sup>4</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

## **Historiography**

The story of the greatest natural disaster in Southern Appalachian history is largely unknown, underrated, and unappreciated. The study contributes to Appalachian meteorological, environmental, and social history but also adds to the history of America during the transition to industrialization. It explores the social structure of Asheville through the lens of the Great Flood of 1916. The story also ties the flood and Asheville to the national reaction to the burgeoning middle class, consumerism, transportation, communication, and the transition from an agriculturally dominant society to urban centers. By design, Asheville was a unique American city. The Flood of 1916 forever changed its trajectory. In Asheville after the flood, the fear of natural disaster, the confluence of regional, state, and national ideologies, and an exploitative and capital-dominated social class created a truly distinctive social and environmental legacy.

## **The West, the South, Appalachia, and the Environment**

In the twentieth century, large-scale manipulation of western waterways demanded the attention of historian Donald Worster, who studied the social and political power derived from river development and control.<sup>7</sup> Yet few researched non-western rivers. Twentieth century conservation ignited interest in the environmental history of American rivers. Natural disasters revealed bleak social realities during the southern industrial age. After a devastating Mississippi flood in 1927, tenuous class and racial relations surfaced. It became national news and tested the partnership between southern

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

elites and the federal government.<sup>8</sup> The Mississippi flood advanced the federal government's interest in disasters and produced the modern era of waterway manipulation.<sup>9</sup> A study of the "great flood" of Asheville in 1916 reveals a similar paternal system rooted more in progressive ideologies than in the "Old South" *noblesse oblige* epitomized in 1927 Mississippi. Asheville's socio-economic system resembled the progressivism of the Southern Sociological Congress discussed by George B. Tindall in *Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (1967).<sup>10</sup> The Asheville flood unveiled the confluence of national and regional ideologies and an environmental consciousness of one of the era's largest and most developed Appalachian cities.

Southern environmental history is a burgeoning field that inherently suffers from a lack of focus on watersheds. However, the advent of western environmental history provided a vast library of resources. Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985)<sup>11</sup> is the best study on the relationship between social power and regional river development in America. Still, succeeding narratives on southern waterways, such as Christopher J. Manganiello's *Southern Water, Southern Power: How the Politics of Cheap Energy and Water Scarcity Shaped a Region* (2015),<sup>12</sup> highlighted the nexus of power, politics, and southern water throughout the twentieth century. The work on southern waterways begs for more questions than

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<sup>8</sup> John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> James M. Wright, "The Nation's Responses to Flood Disasters: A Historical Account," (Madison: Association of State Floodplain Managers, 2000), 9.

<sup>10</sup> George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967).

<sup>11</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher J. Manganiello, *Southern Water, Southern Power: How the Politics of Cheap Energy and Water Scarcity Shaped a Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

currently answered, which leaves an incredible knowledge gap in the ways the people of the southeastern United States related to their surroundings throughout history.

Recently, an array of river histories expanded the conversation on human and waterway interdependence but focused primarily on “activist” agendas, characterized by historical revision, to explain the success or failure of river conservation. A few notable efforts are *Environmental History of the Hudson River: Human Uses that Changed the Ecology, Ecology that Changed Human Uses* (2011),<sup>13</sup> edited by Robert E. Henshaw and Daniel McCool’s *River Republic: The Fall and Rise of America’s Rivers* (2012).<sup>14</sup> This study steers clear of such agendas by focusing on the contemporary reasons for environmental, political, and economic decisions to attempt to better understand the social conditions caused by the event. The flood uncovered interplay of social powers during environmental crisis. It also hastened the shift in Asheville’s priorities from factory industrialization to tourism, which dramatically changed the social structure and function of the city.

Natural disasters caused rapid social and economic change but also carried long-lasting cultural and intellectual legacies. Roderick Frazier Nash virtually established intellectual environmental history in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967).<sup>15</sup> Americans, according to Nash, hitched faith, esteem, and identity to their ability to control nature. In the post-bellum south, rivers became metaphor for the glory of Dixie and frequent floods promulgated watershed development. In *Ecology of Fear: Los*

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<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Henshaw, *Environmental History of the Hudson River: Human Uses that Changed the Ecology, Ecology that Changed Human Uses* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Daniel McCool, *River Republic: The Rise and Fall of America’s Rivers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).



*Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1989),<sup>16</sup> journalist Michael Davis investigated the use of fear by boosters to gain political power while destroying the waterways of the Southwest. The 1916 flood turned Asheville's elites against one another, as it became regarded as a portent for further development of the river. It gave the boosters already spearheading the shift toward tourism more reason to force their cause. A culture of fear gripped the city, which led to a reticence to assist the recovery of factories and shifted their focus to other opportunities such as investment in hotels, resorts, golf courses, and other forms of tourism. Also, a sense of panic derived from post-flood conditions spawned an environment of abuse in Asheville between the police and lower class citizens, especially blacks, in the name of crime prevention and the protection of assets.

Appalachian environmental historians examined river development but failed to produce deeper studies into flooding. Examples are Ronald Lewis' *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (1998)<sup>17</sup> and *Mountains on the Market: Industry, the Environment, and the South* (2012),<sup>18</sup> by Randal L. Hall. These authors touched on mountain industrialization but did not elaborate on the specific subjects of this study. The history of the social, political, and environmental effects of rivers and floods in Appalachia is largely untold.

The Appalachian environment had an influence on national identity during industrialization. Romantics portrayed the mountains as idyllic and pristine, while others highlighted its evils and impetuosity. Examining the environmental and social

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<sup>16</sup> Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Randall Hall, *Mountains on the Market: Industry, the Environment, and the South* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012).

ramifications of flooding in Appalachia further dismantles mountain myths of “otherness” described in Henry Shapiro’s *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978).<sup>19</sup> A collection of historians who succeeded Shapiro further distanced Appalachia from Appalachian “otherness,” including John C. Inscoe’s *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (1989)<sup>20</sup> and Wilma Dunaway’s *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (1996),<sup>21</sup> both of whom decried the isolation myth of Appalachia and placed the mountains within a national context. This study is a continuation of that scholarly debate, which focuses on the broad economic, communication, and transportation network, in which Asheville played a central role, that connected the region to outside markets

Asheville’s historiography consists almost entirely of popular histories written by either newspaper columnists or members of the chamber of commerce. However, key works by popular columnist and amateur historian Bob Terrell, especially *Grandpa’s Town: Asheville at the Turn of the Century* (1978),<sup>22</sup> provided historical, logistical, and cultural context for this thesis. The best academic work concerning Asheville is Richard Starnes’ *Creating the Land of the Blue Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (2005).<sup>23</sup> Starnes produced an ambitious work concerning Asheville’s history as a tourist mecca, but he failed to examine the diversity of the city’s economy prior to the

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> John Inscoe, *Mountain Masters: Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Wilma A. Dunaway, *First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Bob Terrell, *Grandpa’s Town: Asheville at the Turn of the Century* (Asheville, NC: Bob Terrell, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Richard D. Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005).

Great Depression and the role of the flood in both the tourism industry and the social history of the city. Another similar work is C. Brenden Martin's *Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double-Edged Sword* (2007).<sup>24</sup> Martin focused on the entire Southern Appalachians but gave credit to Asheville's central role in the region's development of a tourist industry. His work on how tourism affected the social, economic, environmental, and political history of the city proved essential for this study. Still, by focusing primarily on tourism, Martin left out the role of the flood and other industries on Asheville's history.

The city's transition into a metropolis cost Asheville its Appalachian distinctiveness, which becomes troublesome within the fields of Appalachian studies and history. Asheville represents an abnormality that is hard to reconcile with the rural narrative that dominates regional scholarship. But by focusing on the urban-rural nexus discussed by William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991),<sup>25</sup> this study incorporates Asheville into the very land use practices and folkways that are distinctive to the region. To some, Asheville is more southern than Appalachian, and American above all else. The city and its inhabitants also shared a landscape and history with the rest of Appalachia, which provides an interesting lens into the complexity of the region instead of fixing on its homogeneity.

The flood was a catalyst that culturally separated Asheville from the rest of the southern highlands, which combined the reality and mythology surrounding the city. This study underscores the futility of the myth of a coherent Appalachian culture or industry

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<sup>24</sup> C. Brenden Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double-Edged Sword* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. and Norton Company, 1991).

separate from mainstream America. By examining the role of progressivism and environmental disaster in the region, this thesis detracts from the predominant focus on extractive industries and folk-based tourism. Ultimately, this paper complicates the narrative of Appalachia as a colony of the North and a land of impoverished hillbillies.

### **Appalachian Weather**

From the moment mountains rise from the earth they begin to crumble. Winds shape peaks and valleys in tiny increments over millennia. Tectonic plates shift and quakes mold slopes. Water cuts and twists the landscape, shaping the mountains many call home. In cascades of caustic flooding, rivers challenge the fortitude of mountains and the lives of anybody who dares to live near.

Water comes from many sources, but hurricanes bring more to the mountains of the southeastern United States than any other phenomenon. Tropical cyclones caused most disastrous floods in Southern Appalachian history. Scholars failed however to thoroughly discuss the threat of these systems. Two tempests helped produce the flood of 1916 but did not act alone. These events combined with dam failures, a landscape prone to flooding due to deforestation, and other human catalysts, such as ill-placed settlements, created the greatest disaster in North Carolina history. As historian Ted Steinberg instructed, “natural calamities frequently do not just happen; they are produced through a chain of human choices and natural occurrences.”<sup>26</sup>

The Southern Appalachians is a land of microclimates. Scientists agree on this point, but the nature of those climates has prevented meteorologists from developing adequate system-wide conclusions. Humans have harbored a distinct interest in mountain

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<sup>26</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xix.

meteorology for many centuries. Man viewed the mountains in ancient times with awe and reverence due to unexplainable climatic phenomenon. Tibetans called Mount Everest the “goddess of the snows.” The Maoris of New Zealand named their ranges the “long white cloud.”<sup>27</sup> In Appalachia, the Cherokee spoke of a place called *Tsakonage*, or “the place of the blue smoke,” now known as the Great Smoky Mountains.<sup>28</sup> Often, meteorological phenomena became both myth and fact within mountain ranges and, in modern times, grew as an important part of narratives produced for tourism. Mountain climates therefore exceed meteorological significance. Appalachian weather was a pivotal factor in the construction of place and identity. By the 1870s, scientists conducted systematic analysis of mountain climates at several observation stations throughout the world, including those at Mount Washington, New Hampshire, Pike’s Peak, Colorado, and Mount Hamilton, California. They placed none, however, in the Appalachians.<sup>29</sup>

Interest waned by the twentieth century, which resulted in the closing of most observation stations. Because of that, meteorologists know more about the Alps in Europe than any other chain in the world simply because of the long history of uninterrupted data collection throughout the range. The stop-and-go nature of mountain weather observation led to an inability to establish conventional climatic descriptions for specific ranges. The remoteness of major cities also hindered the study of mountain climates. This resulted in a science with severely inadequate data. The climates of

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<sup>27</sup> Roger G. Barry, *Mountain Weather and Climate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Al Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen, *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 226; Donald Edward Davis, *Where There are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>29</sup> Barry, *Mountain Weather and Climate*, 8.

specific peaks became well known while scientists lacked broad understanding of entire ranges.<sup>30</sup>

The Industrial Revolution led to the innovation of instruments that accurately measured weather characteristics. Those new tools attracted federal investment to the burgeoning science. In 1870, Congress created the United States Weather Bureau. The bureau focused on events that effected commercial and military interests. The federal government sought early detection of the formation of systems such as hurricanes to develop a warning system. A scientific community grew from the formation of the bureau and provided the innovations and theories needed for early detection and tracking. In 1916, however, the bureau's warning system depended upon local bureaus struck by storms to warn others in its path. This put a burden on relatively new lines of communication such as the telephone and telegram system. It also meant that word-of-mouth warnings could get caught up in the political bias of the era, including a pre-warning of one of the 1916 storms from Cuba and other parts of South America.<sup>31</sup>

A comprehensive text on mountain meteorology did not arrive until the 1990s. Scientists outside of the meteorological community first published articles on climate and weather. The spread of literature across several disciplines made a comprehensive text necessary to assess the field. Meteorologist Roger Barry of the University of Colorado published the first cumulative study of mountain meteorology. In *Mountain Weather and Climate* (1992)<sup>32</sup> he took a global approach to the field and produced a detailed sweep of

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<sup>30</sup> Barry, *Mountain Weather and Climate*, 4-8.

<sup>31</sup> Fueled by nationalist and xenophobic tendencies, by 1916 the United States intervened many times with the countries of South America and the Caribbean Islands. Donald R. Whitnah, *A History of the United States Weather Bureau* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 1-45.

<sup>32</sup> Barry, *Mountain Weather and Climate*.

broad studies based upon data from primary observation stations. Throughout the text he highlighted the difficulties of studying mountain climates using the standard methods of the field. His work established both why and how mountain climates became assorted and exceptional, which explained the nature of the system that pummeled the southeast in 1916. Barry intended for his work to aid other scientists throughout the world in their research, especially those in Europe.

C. David Whiteman focused primarily on North America in *Mountain Meteorology: Fundamentals and Applications* (2000).<sup>33</sup> Unlike Barry, who dabbled in many aspects of mountain climates, Whiteman's research centered on airflow, a distinctly important topic in hurricane trajectory and the Appalachians. Most importantly, he devotes part of his research to the Appalachians, which Barry left out entirely due to his focus on higher elevations. Whiteman provided a distinctly American framework for understanding the southeastern storms of July 1916.

The nature of rivers, rainfall, airflow, and the effects of slope and elevation on these processes are keenly important when discussing the flood. George M. Hornberger and several other environmental scientists and hydrologists contributed to *Elements of Physical Hydrology* (1998),<sup>34</sup> the best comprehensive text on the field. This study focused on how water moved where and why. Their description of hydrographs and discussion of soil saturation and water tables greatly informed the study of the post-flood graphs and text later devised by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) concerning the 1916 event. In addition to hydrology, geography is a valuable source for historical

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<sup>33</sup> C. David Whiteman, *Mountain Meteorology: Fundamentals and Application* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> George M. Hornberger, *Elements of Physical Hydrology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

understanding of flood events. Several studies on the nature of earthen dams, debris flows, and flood mapping contributed to research on the flood of 1916.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars from the sciences and humanities scantily discussed the flood of 1916. The waning of meteorological interest in the beginning of the century reduced the study of the flood to a scattering of data that were mostly incomplete. The maps and charts that survived should be taken at face value for their relative inaccuracy. The scientists who developed flood maps and data on the Asheville flood observed the devastation after the waters receded and deduced the data using either broken gauges or no instruments at all. More recent advancements in the study of the natural, social, and economic phenomena during the time of the flood of 1916 encourage a more thorough investigation into its environmental history.<sup>36</sup>

It is difficult to present Appalachia within a pan-regional framework. Scientists cannot draw regional conclusions from conditions in one city, county, or section. So, the first task was to draw attention to the common environmental and societal traits that tied Asheville to its neighbors and the rest of the nation. Once commonalities are explored, it was important to discuss the troublesome climatic characteristics within the region.

On a local level, popular historians tackled the prominence of hurricanes on a state-by-state basis. Jay Barnes of the North Carolina Aquarium Society wrote about Florida and North Carolina's hurricane history. In *North Carolina's Hurricane History*

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<sup>35</sup> Such as; Li, Li, Bin Yu, Yunbo Zhu, Shengming Chu, and Yufu Wu. 2015, "Topographical factors in the formation of gully-type debris flows in Longxi River catchment, Sichuan, China," *Environmental Earth Sciences* 73, no. 8: 4385-4398. *Environment Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 27, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> There were river height gauges on a few bridges in the region, which were damaged or washed away. Their measurements exceeded all known measurement but the maximum height of the floodwaters is a matter of speculation with various reports ranging from 15-25 feet on the French Broad River.



(2013),<sup>37</sup> Barnes chronicled storms throughout the state's history. His book focused more on the social and economic consequences of the storms than their scientific importance. Although he acknowledged how cyclones shaped inland landscapes, the bulk of his story focused on the coast. He also failed to explore the importance of semi-permanent oscillations, such as El Niño, on the development of cyclones in the South Atlantic Basin. Storms shaped coastal communities *and* the mountains. Scientists and historians agree that there is much work to be done on the subject of mountain meteorology, particularly the occurrence of hurricanes. Climate change made weather patterns throughout mountain ranges become more erratic. As sea temperatures rise along with global warming, hurricanes will become more common and powerful. With an increase in damage and a higher likelihood of landfall, the Southern Appalachians will see more events like that of July 1916, or worse. Studying the extent of the incidences that make up the flood of 1916 could lead to more understanding of the nature of these storms and their effect on the Appalachians.

### **Connected: Why the Asheville Story is Important**

The piedmonts of the Carolinas experienced far more agonizing outcomes from the flood. The majority of the twenty-two inches of rain that fell on Altapass Orchard, at the eastern continental divide, ran south into the Catawba River basin. That river flooded at a fifty-foot peak. Farmers suffered overwhelmingly. Their devastation far outweighed those in Asheville. However, their story, although intimately connected to the activities in urban centers like Asheville, is altogether more complex and deserves as separate study.

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<sup>37</sup> Jay Barnes, *North Carolina's Hurricane History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

Already in 1916 there were two ways of living: urban and rural. This was not entirely due to the progressive ethical overhaul or reform in theory. The geographic and circumstantial differences between cities and the country dictated separate models for living. There were many “Appalachia’s” in 1916, far more still today. That complexity is often lost in regional narratives. This story is a sliver of the whole. It is not meant to explain everything, but binding the narrative of Asheville and the flood with well-established studies on rural communities challenges widely held assumptions about the maturity of Appalachia’s social, economic, and political systems at the turn of the century.

Appalachian isolation is a myth. Early writers on the region created a tale that implied the mountains separated mountaineers from the rest of the world. According to them, the highlands prohibited mountain dwellers from developing economic, education, and social practices to the standards of mainstream America. This fairy tale resulted in nineteenth century stereotypes that permeated national rhetoric concerning the Appalachians.<sup>38</sup> Certainly there were economically devastated sections of the region. But color writers had no reason to characterize all mountaineers as hillbillies living in a harsh land by cruel means according to the stunted folkways of their pioneer ancestors.

For the better part of a century, both academic and popular writers prolonged those labels. Historians and social scientists began the arduous task of their dismantlement in the 1970s. Asheville in 1916 challenged those mythologies through its position as the cultural, commercial, financial, medical, educational, and transportation center of a large socio-economic network that blurred the lines between rural and urban.

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<sup>38</sup> For more on this, see: Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*.

It certainly characterized a far different Appalachia than the “needy” and “anomalous” features of the supposed “Appalachian problem” at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

### **Rise of the Southern Business Progressives**

Many southern leaders saw the election of Woodrow Wilson as the return of the South to national political importance for the first time since the Civil War. Leaders “Wilsonized” the Southern Democratic party, explained historian George B. Tindall, because they prioritized party solidarity and patronage over political factions in the southern states. It was more important for southern leaders to secure national power through Wilson than to serve the partisan needs of their constituents. Wilson led progressives away from the principles of democracy, corporate regulation, and social justice the early movement championed. Instead, he prioritized efficiency and public services.<sup>40</sup>

During the era, governments at every level experienced unprecedented growth. Many existing departments, such as the Army, executed reformist policies. Federal leaders created new progressive institutions such as public health departments, highway commissions, and private sector philanthropic organizations. The American Red Cross and various local associated charities acted on behalf of the government, which authorized the institutions and supported them financially and politically.

The pseudo-political aspect of these institutions obscured their true mission in disaster relief. While they aided in personal financial, material, and medical relief, these

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 66-70; Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, xiii-xv.

<sup>40</sup> George B. Tindall, "Business Progressivism: Southern Politics in the Twenties," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (Winter 1963 1963), 94.

associations primarily focused on protecting government interests and often fell short of producing long-term recovery for stricken areas. Local and national institutions like the Red Cross incubated the biases of the political leaders who formed their ranks and oversaw their activities.<sup>41</sup>

In the South, the expansion of government public services meant the institution of public welfare, education, and health programs. The middle-class leadership that once fought against corporations and monopolies adopted a staunch faith in industrial progress in the New South. As Tindall explained, “the reform urge, the social justice movement, never strong in the South, had been muted.”<sup>42</sup> So, the South established itself in the early twentieth century as the land of “Ku Kluxury” fundamentalism *and* economic, educational, and literary renaissance. It was a paradox with which contemporaries and historians struggled.

North Carolina spearheaded the national moderate movement. The state’s brand of progressivism was later adopted throughout the South, and eventually the nation. The

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<sup>41</sup> Myles McMurchy, “‘The Red Cross is Not All Right!’: Herbert Hoover’s Concentration Camp Cover-Up in the 1927 Mississippi Flood,” *Yale Historical Review* (Fall 2015), accessed July 21, 2016, <http://historicalreview.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/McMurchy.pdf>. Additionally, the American Red Cross has a long history of scandals. In 1905, Congress rewrote the organizations charter to make it more difficult for Red Cross officials to misuse funds. After more than one hundred years of existence, the Red Cross has an excellent reputation for providing food, blankets, and shelters for the immediate relief of disaster victims. Anytime the institution attempted more, critics claimed that overall lack of organization, mishandling of funds, or critical mistakes added to the destitution in the long term. For more information, see: Kevin Kosar, *The Congressional Charter of the American National Red Cross: Overview, History, and Analysis* (Washington, D.C., 2007). For modern criticism see the works of journalist Richard M. Walden, especially: Richard M. Walden, “The Red Cross Money Pit,” *Los Angeles Times* (September 25, 2005), accessed July 21, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/25/opinion/op-redcross25>; For a journalistic approach to the history of Red Cross scandals, see; Joe Allen, “The Truth About the Red Cross: The Right-Wing, Scandal-Ridden ‘Charity’ That Really Isn’t a Charity,” *www.socialworker.org* (October 21, 2005), accessed July 21, 2016, [http://socialistworker.org/2005-2/562/562\\_04\\_RedCross.shtml](http://socialistworker.org/2005-2/562/562_04_RedCross.shtml); For a source on how the Red Cross spread American ideology through humanitarianism at the time of the flood, see: Julia F. Irwin, “Teaching ‘Americanism with a World Perspective:’ The Junior Red Cross in the U.S. Schools from 1917 to the 1920s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (August 2013), 255-279, EBSCOhost, accessed July 21, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Tindall, “Business Progressivism,” 95.

state's government increased taxes to fund public services by more than 550 percent between 1913 and 1930. It also expanded its expenditures by 850 percent, which was greater than any other state during the same period. Along with more taxes and expenditures, state legislators boosted North Carolina's debt from \$13.3 million to \$178.265 million.<sup>43</sup> State progressives focused primarily on highways and education, although they spent far more on roads than schools. It was clear that North Carolina's leadership saw a close link between infrastructure and industrial growth. Carolina led the way for municipal governments by authorizing and allocating funds for infrastructure development on the local level. Still, states throughout the South struggled to produce revenues.<sup>44</sup> The jewels of the Southern progressive crown were the very roads, bridges, schools, power lines, and communication networks the flood destroyed. It was an attack on their way of life.

### **Progressive Asheville in the Days of the Flood**

Asheville's progressive leaders backed the North Carolina southern business cause and enacted policies within their city that complimented state-level programs. They lobbied for state and outside funds that helped the city transition from a village. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the city's government created a department of public health, financed communication and transportation infrastructure, and formed the Associated Charities. Ashevilleans had full faith that these departments ensured the betterment and protection of all citizens. They designed the programs and policies with the desire to transition the city into a suitable tourist destination. Each new program or

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>44</sup> This particularly affected the persistence of relative poverty despite the astronomical investment of government in infrastructure and education. This will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

tax increase met some resistance and by 1916 the city had suffered a series of skirmishes that showed the frailty of the city's social contract with all of its citizens.<sup>45</sup> The flood of 1916 tested the ideological resilience of progressive leaders and the strength of their infrastructure, communication network, supply chains, and public services. Their institutions succeeded or failed according to the basic tenets of southern business progressivism.<sup>46</sup>

Asheville became a laboratory for progressive ideals. That pursuit built on the creation of modern metropolises, such as New York and Chicago, which “altered the relationship between nature and society in a series of material and symbolic dimensions.”<sup>47</sup> Leaders demanded a transformation in landscape and a reorganization of society. Those in Asheville worked tirelessly to create a sense of security through the management of nature. Paved roads, concrete bridges, water supply systems, and certain technological advancements represented just a few of the projects that further separated citizens from their natural surroundings. Asheville's leadership promoted a style of commerce centered on social responsibility while attempting to support the struggling backcountry, which created an economy and culture centered on an urban/rural nexus. Like elsewhere, the deterioration of the rural sections of Appalachia fueled urban growth

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<sup>45</sup> David Whisnant, “Family Challenges in the ‘Teens: A Strike, a Flood, and an Epidemic,” *Asheville Junction: A Blog by David E. Whisnant*, March 4 2016, <http://ashevillejunction.com/family-challenges-in-the-teens-strike-a-flood-and-an-epidemic/>.

<sup>46</sup> For more on business progressives and the progressive movement in the South, see: Tindall, *Emergence*; Paul D. Casdorff, *Republicans, Negroes, and Progressives in the South, 1912-1916* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1981).

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Grandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2002), 5.

in Asheville. But by 1916, the resulting population growth had placed great strain on the city's infrastructure.<sup>48</sup> The flood exposed the fragility of those progressive systems.<sup>49</sup>

### **Chapter Overview**

This study focused on three key points: the storms, the clean slate, and marginalized communities. The overarching theme of the thesis is uneven recovery. The disaster affected a broad range of individuals and organizations, but the leaders in charge of recovery efforts clearly favored some segments of the population over others. Why and how they did that became the central theme to this study.

The first chapter concentrates on the environmental conditions of the flood and the role of mankind in making the disaster worse. It explores the role of global meteorological phenomena, such as El Niño. The 1916 hurricane season produced a historically high number of storms that made landfall. Chapter one also discusses the role of man-made earthen dams and regional environmental destruction on the intensity of the flood. Chapter two picks up after the storm ceased and the waters receded. It focuses on the role progressive ideals played in the uneven response to the flood from federal, state, and local leaders. The third chapter examined the role that racism and classism played in uneven recovery. It asserts that progressive leadership worked hard to create an ideal for Asheville's citizens and, in the process, marginalized large segments of the population. Those marginalized communities struggled the most but received the least from the city's progressive institutions. Ideology led the leaders of the federal, state, and city

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<sup>48</sup> There are many indications of this ranging from the city's struggles with providing clean water for the entire population, issues with housing, crime, and vagrancy. See: "The Sewer Question," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), February 29, 1988, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 2-19.

governments to build up some communities while others sank into the French Broad River.



## CHAPTER 1: THE “GREAT” FLOOD: MAN AND NATURE

### **In the Middle of a Wide, Wild River**

Tired, trembling, and terrified, Katherine Lipe clung to a tree at the Biltmore Lodge Gate just outside of Asheville, North Carolina with her father, J.C., and two nurses, Charlotte and Marion Walker, sisters. The waters continued to rise. Homes dislodged from their foundations. The Swannanoa River swallowed the iron bridge near the Lipes’ place. It tore it apart bit-by-bit. The thick, clay-filled stream rushed by the group—all holding hands. Her thighs raw from clinching the bark, Katherine watched as one villager after another tried to rescue them. People floated past. Those alive grasped for safety.

After eight hours, a rescuer reached the tree. They chose to save Marion Walker first. At fifteen, she was the youngest. She clung to the man who struggled to save her. She panicked when they entered the angry river. Kicking and bawling, the child slipped vanished into the rapids. “Marion! Marion!” her sister Charlotte screamed. She then slipped off the tree and also drowned. The waters were too strong, too deep. Onlookers powerlessly watched.

The Swannanoa took J.C. from Katherine a few hours later. He struggled and tried to grab another tree but the river was too strong. Katherine closed her eyes as her father sank into the muddy swirl. She prayed for the strength to hold on. She begged God for mercy on her father and the others who drowned. She prayed so hard that she failed to notice Vickie Foister letting go. The girl sank into the river. Katherine’s strength waned

and she knew it was only a matter of time before she too descended into the chilly, muddy abyss. Alone, she prayed.

A man swam carrying a rope and saved her.

Several days later, in the hospital she heard that lifeguards had recovered the bodies. Their home stood until the waters retreated. It then crumbled, like so many others.<sup>50</sup>

### **What Makes a Flood “Great”**

Man and nature created the “greatness” of the Great Flood of 1916. Asheville’s citizens never experienced such loss before, because they never had so much at stake. Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) engineers speculated that the worst flood in North Carolina history occurred in 1791 on the Swannanoa River. It peaked at approximately five feet more than that of 1916. Then, very few people lived and worked in the flood district.<sup>51</sup> The “greatness” of the flood of 1916, therefore, related to the loss of human life and property, not the extent of the natural benchmarks of the disaster. The rapid rate of Asheville’s growth placed factories, railways, parks, and certain communities in direct danger. The disaster therefore represented the confluence of these choices with natural events. This thesis discusses those choices and their consequences. Unique but cyclical meteorological phenomena combined with near-sighted environmental and social decisions made the disaster worse on the people and institutions of Asheville than any previous flood.

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<sup>50</sup>Betty Carter Brock, “The Lipe Family in the 1916 Flood,” *The Heritage of Old Buncombe County, North Carolina. Vol 2* (Old Buncombe Genealogical Society: Asheville, 1987).

<sup>51</sup> Tennessee Valley Authority, “Floods on Swannanoa River and Beetree Creek in Vicinity of Swannanoa, North Carolina,” *Tennessee Valley Authority Division of Water Control Planning*, May 1963.

## **Appalachian Floods**

The rivers of Appalachia ran in all directions. The branches of waterways scattered throughout the basins and linked communities. When raindrops fell on the peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains they slithered down steep slopes into creeks that twisted into rivers and flowed through the southern piedmont and coastal plains. They eventually joined the waters of the Gulf of Mexico or Atlantic Ocean. Almost thirty years before the flood of 1916, railroads and timber barons ushered in the region's worst era of environmental degradation. To understand the human causes of this flood, one must become aware of nineteenth century landscape manipulation.

The industrialization of the Southern Appalachians began many years prior to the latter part of the nineteenth century. Before the arrival of timber and railroad barons, small-scale industrial projects such as iron foundries, mills, mines, and dams operated throughout the southern highlands. They polluted streams, air, and forests. When the timber harvesters came to Appalachia in the 1880s they entered a land primed and used to the sort of degradation they offered. This era of deforestation contributed greatly to the intensity of the flood of Asheville in 1916.<sup>52</sup>

### **Deforestation in the Land of the Sky**

The soil and rivers surrounding the flooded areas could not adequately absorb the historic inundation. Decaying leaves and other organisms such as fungi enriched tree root systems that created tunnels throughout Appalachian soil and increased absorption rates. At the time of the Civil War, Appalachia boasted several species of large trees with trunks from eight to ten feet in diameter. American Chestnuts, Hemlock, and Yellow

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<sup>52</sup> See, Hall, *Mountains on the Market*; Inscoe, *Mountain Masters*; Davis, *Where There are Mountains*.

Poplars reigned over Appalachian forests and produced rich, sponge-like humus, the organic component of soil that binds it together and supports honeycombing created by root systems.<sup>53</sup> Appalachian rivers are naturally prone to floods because of their narrow valleys, shallow beds, and high runoff on surrounding steep slopes. The region's rivers drained the steep mountains and carried floodwaters into the wider beds of the piedmont region. By 1916, the consequences of deforestation rendered the soil and rivers incapable of these natural absorption rates. These changes in the Appalachian landscape directly led to floods like that of the summer of 1916, which affected every community in the southeastern United States.

For centuries, relative isolation and inadequate transportation within the Southern Appalachians spared the region from large-scale deforestation like what occurred in New England and the upper Mid-West. However, the coming of the railroad to the region in the 1870s and 1880s solved that problem for industrial capitalists. Coinciding with the arrival of rails, the industry in New England and the Great Lakes region of the West diminished. Entrepreneurs first purchased Appalachian acreage for timber harvesting in the mid 1870s and focused their attention on the timber- and mineral-rich lands of West Virginia and Kentucky. By 1880, foreign capitalists acquired forested acreage throughout the mountains of western North Carolina with the help of local brokers. The harvesting devastated the landscape surrounding Asheville and contributed greatly to the region's susceptibility to floods.<sup>54</sup>

Once the trees were gone, throughout much of the lower peaks of Appalachia, a cycle of environmental consequences began as early as the 1880s. Historian Donald

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<sup>53</sup> Davis, *Where There are Mountains*, 167-169.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*; Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 5-10.

Davis chronicled the increased occurrence of forest fires due to the dry and sappy waste left behind by loggers. Railcars loaded with timber heading to coastal markets threw sparks into the debris and ignited fires along their path.<sup>55</sup> Winds at higher peaks prevented forest regeneration by reshaping deforested landscapes making grooves and chopping down weak seedlings.<sup>56</sup> Without enriched, honeycombed soil, water from heavy rains rolled over the barren land and carried earth down the slopes and into the rivers. The runoff built up riverbeds with muddy sediment. The forests that once protected rivers from such runoff became more rare. Flooding became more common in this new Appalachian landscape.

By the early twentieth century a strong anti-logging movement gained the attention of the federal government. This resulted in the Weeks Act of 1911 that allowed federal officials to purchase cutover lands for forest reserves.<sup>57</sup> Still, the growing military conflict in Europe increased demand for naval supplies, which accelerated deforestation throughout the region.<sup>58</sup> At the time of the Asheville flood, Appalachian deforestation had reached a peak. The already erratic nature of the Appalachian climate combined with the freshly degraded environment shaped a new era of natural disaster.

The people of Appalachia have always lived within a region dominated by erratic weather. Variations in elevation and slope produced an assortment of mountain climates.<sup>59</sup> Weather patterns shift from peak to peak, valley to valley.<sup>60</sup> Higher elevations

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<sup>55</sup> Davis, *Where There are Mountains*, 168.

<sup>56</sup> Timothy Silver, *Mount Mitchell and the Black Mountains: An Environmental History of the Highest Peaks in Eastern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 20, 24, and 146.

<sup>57</sup> Davis, *Where There are Mountains*, 171-73.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-170.

<sup>59</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, elevation is defined as height with respect to sea level on Earth's surface. Slope is a surface of which one end or side is at a higher level than the other.

<sup>60</sup> Barry, *Mountain Weather and Climate*, 3-10.

experience the majority of precipitation during storms. But intricate Appalachian watershed systems carry precipitation into a few key points. The fork of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers is such a confluence. Before the rivers flooded that July, some higher peaks, such as Grandfather Mountain, suffered from more than twenty inches of rain within a twenty-four hour period. Lower elevations experienced as little as an inch.<sup>61</sup> The variety of climates within Appalachia contributed to a unique attitude made weather prediction highly improbable during the infancy of meteorological science.

### **One Continual Downpour**

The flood of 1916 was more than a “cloudburst” or “one continual downpour.” It was a culmination of more than a month’s worth of catastrophes that added up to almost \$500 million in damage and approximately eighty deaths.<sup>62</sup> Floods are more than too much water. Two hurricanes dropped millions of tons of rain on the southeastern United States between July 4<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, 1916. The water filled the basins of every Appalachian river, which put pressure on human “improvements” such as dams and water supply systems. Flooded rivers were often the symptom of greater disasters; they represented a fraction of the total damage. Along the periphery, the waters decimated methods of communication and travel. In the mountains, debris flows occurred rapidly and produced some of the most devastating outcomes. Somewhere between 300 and 1,500 landslides

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<sup>61</sup> Ashley Hiatt, “NC Extremes: Flood of 1916 Wiped out Railways, Records,” *State Climate Office of North Carolina*, July 15, 2015, <http://climate.ncsu.edu/climateblog?id=141>.

<sup>62</sup> Barnes, *North Carolina’s Hurricane History*, 58-60. There is great debate over how many the floods killed. In *So Great The Devastation: The 1916 Flood in Western North Carolina*, writer and state archivist Jessica Bandel claimed that only 40 or so deaths could be traced to the flood using death records. However, in those days not all deaths were reported to municipal authorities. Some locals estimate, based upon family reports that possibly more than one hundred people passed in the disaster. Contemporary newspaper reports claimed eighty deaths.

affected Western North Carolina.<sup>63</sup> The meteorological history of the southern Appalachians explains the flood—the hurricanes, watershed overflow, and debris flows. But it, alone, does not explain how unlikely the storms were.

### **The Christ Child and the Southern Highlands**

Global weather patterns created the flood of 1916. Ocean temperatures throughout the Western Hemisphere entered a cooling phase in conjunction with the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) of the period between 1914 and 1921.<sup>64</sup> Subsequent Southern Oscillations (SO) overshadowed the intensity of this early twentieth century appearance. The longevity and storm-inducing nature of this particular SO produced historic events. This included the 1916 hurricane season that still holds national records for storm landfalls.<sup>65</sup>

Most people in the early twentieth century knew nothing about El Niño or the Southern Oscillation. Large forces dictate the tendency and ferocity of tropical cyclones. Among those are the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation (AMO),<sup>66</sup> which directly effects the temperature of ocean currents in the Atlantic Basin, the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO),<sup>67</sup> which results in dramatic shifts in atmospheric pressure, mostly between Greenland and Britain, and the better known ENSO<sup>68</sup> that impacts many elements,

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<sup>63</sup> David Weintraub, *Come Hell or High Water, Remembering the Great Flood of 1916*, Film, Center for Cultural Preservation, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> NOAA, "Southern Oscillation Index," *National Centers for Environmental Information* (accessed October 15, 2015), <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/teleconnections/enso/indicators/soi/>.

<sup>65</sup> Barnes, *North Carolina's Hurricane History*, 60.

<sup>66</sup> NOAA, "What is the AMO?" *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration* (accessed November 2, 2015), [http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/phod/amo\\_faq.php](http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/phod/amo_faq.php)

<sup>67</sup> NOAA, "Climate Variability: North Atlantic Oscillation," *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration* (accessed November 2, 2015), <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/understanding-climate/climate-variability-north-atlantic-oscillation>.

<sup>68</sup> NOAA, "NOAA's El Niño Portal," *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration* (accessed November 2, 2015), <http://www.elnino.noaa.gov/>.

including ocean surface air temperatures in the Pacific. These massive and global natural phenomena disturb surface air temperature and atmospheric pressure of the oceans in the Western Hemisphere. Often the oscillations work together to form unique periods in climatic activity.

Each oscillation has a positive and negative phase. Together, they cause what scientists call a “see-sawing” effect that allows them to manipulate climates over large periods of time and great distances as they interact with each other. For example, El Niño, meaning “Christ Child” due to its appearance on the west coast of South America around Christmas, represents the warm (positive) phase of the Southern Oscillation. La Niña is its cold (negative) phase. The warm phase produces a decrease in tropical cyclonic activity in the Atlantic Basin and Caribbean. The cold phase increases the likelihood of cyclones and their landfall.<sup>69</sup>

Put together, the two phases of ENSO occur on a cycle of 3-7 years with peak activity between the months of October and January.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, ENSO’s cold phase, La Niña, produces more tropical cyclones and increases the likelihood of storm landfalls from 28% during El Niño years and 48% during neutral periods to 66%.<sup>71</sup> Even more important to this thesis, La Niña increases cyclonic activity on the east coast of the United States from South Carolina to Maine while landfall patterns in the Gulf and in Florida remain stable.<sup>72</sup> La Niña therefore created most of the cyclones that pummeled

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<sup>69</sup> Shawn R. Smith, Justin Brolley, James J. O’Brien, and Carissa A. Tataglione, “ENSO’s Impact on Regional U.S. Hurricane Activity,” *Journal of Climate*. Vol 20, 2007 (accessed November 15, 2015), 1404-1407.

<sup>70</sup> Henry F. Diaz and Vera Markgraf, *El Niño: Historical and Paleoclimatic Aspects of the Southern Oscillation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>71</sup> Smith, et Al., “ENSO’s Impact,” 1405.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1403.



the southeast coast of the United States throughout its natural history, especially Appalachia.

Historians find great difficulty in collecting data on these three major oscillations because historical data is almost non-existent for all three. Most historical data for the three oscillations only go as far back as the early 1950s. However, studies on El Niño and La Niña events date back to the early twentieth century. At that time, stations existed throughout the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf basins that measured surface air and current temperatures along with atmospheric pressure changes.

Scientists who study southern oscillations used historical data to isolate twenty-four highly active warm and cold phase years throughout the twentieth century. One of the most active was the La Niña cold phase of the Southern Oscillation between 1916 and 1917.<sup>73</sup> The hurricane season of 1916 produced eleven major storms. Eight made landfall. For comparison, only seven storms developed in 1915 and four made landfall. In 1917, four occurred; only three hit land.<sup>74</sup> Never before, or since, has a season produced two storms so near to one another in time and location as those that hit Appalachia in July of 1916.

### **High Country Tempests**

One June 28, 1916, just north of Panama, a high-pressure system of circular air shifted west in the Caribbean, its center remained just off the coast of North Carolina. Spiraling in a clock-wise direction, it captured moisture and threw it on Panama. Warm

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<sup>73</sup> Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology, "Australian Rainfall Patterns During La Niña," *Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology*, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso/ninacomp.shtml>.

<sup>74</sup> NOAA, "Historical Hurricane Tracks," *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration* (accessed November 2-6), 2015, <https://coast.noaa.gov/hurricanes/?redirect=301ocm>.

Caribbean air rose from the ocean's surface and fueled the Bermuda High. The warm air continued to rise. The Bermuda system filled the remaining space. The warmth mixed with the cool, spherical, high-pressured air, and spawned twisting winds in a counter-clockwise direction that gained momentum. Clouds formed as warm and cool air mixed. Surrounding air from high-pressured areas moved in to the low-pressure system that formed above the sea. It warmed then rose and mixed with the cool air and joined the tropical winds. The process repeated again and again. The speed of the formation increased. The oscillation pulled the clouds into a circle and left room for an "eye" filled with low-pressured air. High-pressured air bent over the system and plummeted through the chasm between clouds. Warm air rose, mixed with cool, high-pressured winds that fueled the cell into a tropical cyclone.

First it was a depression with winds at thirty-nine miles per hour. The Equatorial Low and the Bermuda High pressure systems guided the cell into a northwestern trajectory. The Northeast Trade winds pushed the burgeoning storm past Nicaragua, where it gained strength from the warm Caribbean air. On July 2, it pummeled the Swan Islands off the coast of Honduras as a tropical storm boasting winds at approximately fifty-five miles per hour. Honduran officials sent a telegram to the United States to warn Americans of the north or northwestern track of the storm.<sup>75</sup> When the cyclone reached the Gulf of Mexico, warmer waters pushed the system's winds into hurricane speeds. With winds rapidly increasing past seventy miles per hour, the storm traced the boundary of the strong Bermuda High pressure system and shifted northeast. It targeted Mobile,

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<sup>75</sup> Albert Ashenberger, "Hurricane of July 5-6, 1916, at Mobile, Ala.," *Monthly Weather Review*, 44, no. 7 (July 1916): 402-403.

Alabama as a Category-3 major hurricane with sustained winds between 111 and 130 miles per hour.<sup>76</sup>

For three days the storm slowly trekked across the gulf gaining speed and intensity. Warnings continued to filter into the States. By the fifth, the entire nation knew of the storm. Alabama's harbor masters halted ship traffic. The winds increased by five on the morning of the fifth. They strengthened from forty to sixty-five miles per hour before the storm hit land at around noon. The cyclone decreased its intensity but winds picked up throughout the afternoon reaching a peak of 105 miles per hour at around 3:15 pm.

The eye of the hurricane moved over the Alabama and Mississippi coasts. A barge capsized and killed three passengers and the winds blew a woman from a boathouse. She drowned in Mobile Bay. Rainfall reached nearly nine inches by the afternoon of the sixth. The Mobile River held at just below flood stage until the rains returned on the seventh. Flooding occurred along the water's edge and spilled into businesses and homes. Louisiana and Mississippi suffered great losses to this rare and intense tropical storm. The system continued to move into a northeastern path.<sup>77</sup>

The system entered a decaying stage but a Jetstream weakened by the effects of la Niña allowed it to maintain relative integrity as it slowly scuttled across the southeast before settling over east Tennessee. Trapped between the westerly winds and the Bermuda High pressure system, the tropical depression dumped between eight and ten

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<sup>76</sup> Everything above was taken from the following: Ibid.; George W. Cry, William H. Haggard, and Hugh S. White, *North Atlantic Tropical Cyclones: Tracks and Frequencies of Hurricanes and Tropical Storms 1886-1958* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce and National Weather Service, 1959); David Allen Glenn, *A Reanalysis of the 1916, 1918, 1927, 1928, and 1935 Tropical Cyclones of the North Atlantic Basin* (master's thesis, Mississippi State University, 2005); NASA, "How do Hurricanes Form?" [www.nasa.gov](http://www.nasa.gov), October 6, 1916, <http://spaceplace.nasa.gov/hurricanes/en/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ashenberger, "Hurricane of July 5-6, 1916," 402-403.

inches of rain in the Southern Appalachians over the course of a week. Appalachian soil and streams absorbed the inundation. The French Broad at Asheville flooded. The storm ceased by the tenth of July.<sup>78</sup>

Another tropical cyclone of what became one of the most active hurricane seasons in history brewed off the Bahaman coast on July 9, 1916. It quickly strengthened to form a tropical storm with winds between 40 and 73 miles per hour. The warm Atlantic air fueled the cloud layers as the Bermuda High system pushed the cyclone closer to Florida in a northwestern path. By July 13, the storm settled off the coast of Jacksonville and graduated to a hurricane. The next day it made landfall just north of Charleston, South Carolina as a Category-1 cyclone with winds between 90 and 110 miles per hour.<sup>79</sup> At Charleston, storm surges flooded streets and winds lightly damaged many buildings. Five inches of rain fell on the city before the system took an unusual northwestern turn. It headed for southwestern North Carolina. The eye settled near Altapass Orchard, southeast of Asheville, in the evening of July 14. It dumped more than twenty inches of rain in a twenty-four hour period. Because the previous storm had fully saturated the soil, approximately 80%-90% of this downpour flowed directly into the rivers. The inundation put dramatic pressure on man-made structures throughout Appalachia.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> NOAA, National Centers for Environmental Information, "Investigating the Great Flood of 1916," *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*, <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/news/investigating-the-great-flood-of-1916>.

<sup>79</sup> Walter J. Fraser, *Low-Country Hurricanes: Three Centuries of Storms at Sea and Ashore* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 220-221.

<sup>80</sup> Alfred J. Henry, "Floods in the East Gulf and South Atlantic States, July 1916," *Monthly Weather Review* 44, no. 8 (August 1916): 466-476.

## Dams Upstream

In Hendersonville, one of the hardest hit areas of the disaster, at least four earthen dams failed between two and ten in the morning. At nine, debris carried twenty miles by the torrent of water slammed Biltmore Village. It only took an hour for the Swannanoa River to grow to nineteen feet. It was about then that the Captain and the two Walker sisters lost their lives.

Five states suffered from the flood. In North Carolina, the areas south of the highest peaks bore the most damage due to the natural run-off system of the Catawba River basin. The French Broad however is one of few north-flowing rivers in North Carolina. The dams that burst south of Asheville in the Hendersonville area dramatically effected devastation caused by the flood.

Newspaper editors, city leaders, and business managers only mentioned the dam bursts in passing, as if they were a natural aspect of the event. This sort of understanding of disasters ran rampant in the early twentieth century. According to Ted Steinberg, those in powerful positions in government and business combined natural and human elements of disasters under the heading of an “act of God” to protect the leadership class from legal or political repercussions.<sup>81</sup> On the contrary, environmental historians, along with human geographers and economists, found that natural disasters were linked to human choices before, during, and after the catastrophes that carried short- and long-term social and economic consequences, especially for the poor and otherwise marginalized.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Steinberg, *Acts of God*.

<sup>82</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Barry, *Rising Tide*; and Steinberg, *Acts of God*.

It is possible that without the bursting of the dams the flood would have been just as disastrous. Still, the sheer magnitude of the amount of water released so violently and in such a short amount of time proved to be devastating to the people along the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. The water travelled a great distance. Along the way the flow gathered enormous tree trunks and debris from the bridges and homes along the river's path. Very little is known about the stability of those earthen dams. The stories of how and why they were built, however, underscored the social and economic changes within Appalachia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They also highlighted the environmental consequences of those transitions.

### **Improvements for God's Sake**

Appalachian tourists drew connections between the aesthetics and restoring elements of the mountains and religion throughout the nineteenth century. But in the latter part of the 1800s, industrious Protestants ushered in a new era of religious tourism in the area surrounding Asheville that carried both social and environmental consequences. The realities of industrialization set in during this period and Christians sought retreats from the social and environmental ills caused by the rapid changes that occurred in lowland urban centers. Industrial royalty, like George Vanderbilt, began a second-home movement in Appalachia during the 1880s and 1890s that helped make the region a destination for those sick and tired from city life. Inspired by this movement, northern investors acquired lands with the help of brokers in Asheville and developed Christian convention and retreat centers in the rural sections surrounding the growing metropolis. But these lands alone did not have the scenic or industrial characteristics sought by developers. They needed to change the landscape according to their objectives.

This led to environmental manipulation for the sake of hydroelectric power and recreation, especially the construction of several large earthen dams.<sup>83</sup>

Thousands of acres became the resorts of Protestants in Appalachia. Developers designed the retreats to be secluded and self-sufficient according to the religious and corporate goals of faith-based associations. Many of the developments, such as Lake Junaluska, Montreat, and Ridgecrest, indoctrinated members in a setting built for reflection and regeneration. Developers placed the centers close enough to Asheville for scheduled excursions and provisions but settled in remote areas far from city power and water. They built cabins nestled on the banks of man-made lakes that supplied water, power, and recreation to vacationers. Early twentieth century corporate resort colonies copied the religious retreat model of the late nineteenth century.<sup>84</sup>

### **Corporate Resort Colonies**

Nobody may ever know how many earthen dams ruptured as a result of the flood of 1916. In Henderson County, at least four burst during the late evening and early morning hours of July 15 and 16. The lakes at the Kanuga, Osceola, and Highland Lake communities burst in addition to the Jordan Mill dam.<sup>85</sup> Unlike the religious retreats of the previous generation, communities like Kanuga, Osceola, and Highland Lake grew from the second-home movement and represented the corporate resort communities, or

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<sup>83</sup> Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 93-105.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.; Jack Reak, *Kanuga: Story of a Gathering Place* (Hendersonville: Kanuga Conferences, Inc., 1993), 2-10; Jennie Jones Giles, "Osceola Lake and Inn," *Henderson Heritage*, <http://hendersonheritage.com/osceola-lake-inn/> (accessed November 15, 2015).

<sup>85</sup> Reak, *Kanuga*, 13-16; Frank L. Fitzsimons, *From the Banks of the Oklawaha, Vol: 1* (Hendersonville: Golden Glow Publishing, 1976), 282; Kermit Edney, *Everybody Talks About It!: The Kermit Edney Weather Book* (Hendersonville: Golden Glow Publishing, 1986), 110.

colonies, that sought semi-permanent withdrawal from Piedmont or Low-Country urban areas.

Wealthy businessmen, such as George Stephens, from the piedmont regions of the Carolinas looked to the mountains to develop resorts that served the entrepreneurial and recreation needs of their growing class. A Guilford County native, Stephens graduated from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 1896 and promptly moved to Charlotte. He became a successful banker and formed a development company that, in 1910, began work on the Myers Park real estate project. The park epitomized his desire to provide his class with a community of their own within the growing Queen City. He designed it to be a fortress meant to hold back the onslaught of urbanization.<sup>86</sup>

Inspired by similar resort clubs in the Adirondacks of New York, Stephens planned to build a community in his beloved Blue Ridge Mountains that provided an affordable summer retreat for “gentlemen of modest fortune or income.”<sup>87</sup> He sold memberships at the annual cost of \$150 to produce the capital needed for the construction of the colony that included a large clubhouse and a 100-acre lake on Mud Creek, a tributary of the French Broad River in Henderson County. Christened Kanuga, the colony became one of the first of its type.<sup>88</sup>

Highland Lake and Osceola grew from the same movement. Joseph Holt, representing a group from Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina, established a 500-acre community surrounding what was once known as Rhett’s Mill Pond, then the largest body of water in Hendersonville. The group called the resort the Highland Lake Club.

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<sup>86</sup> Reak, *Kanuga*, 10-11.

<sup>87</sup> As quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*



The community grew to include a large clubhouse, inn, and a 75 horsepower hydroelectric plant that powered the homes that surrounded the lake.<sup>89</sup>

At the same time, developers began construction on the Osceola Lake Club in the Valley Hill community of Henderson County. The community featured a 12-acre lake fed by four streams that branched off of the French Broad with a grand hotel designed to accommodate business middle-class families from all over the South. Local leaders and businessmen from Hendersonville invested in and developed the Osceola Lake Club. The majority of the investors however came from the Piedmont regions.<sup>90</sup> The Southern Railway built a line to Hendersonville to capitalize on the growth of second-home resorts in the area. The region grew exponentially as a result, which placed even more importance on the stability of resort lakes and the earthen dams that contained the waters of the French Broad.<sup>91</sup>

### **Dams of Questionable Integrity**

Virtually no historical and very little scientific data exists on earthen dams in nineteenth and early twentieth century Appalachia. Yet historians know the nature of engineering and mechanical sciences during this period regarding internal improvements such as roads, dams, bridges, and railways. The development of the Hendersonville business class communities coincided with great improvement projects that garnered significant historical discourse, such as flood prevention along the Mississippi River.

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<sup>89</sup> Fitzsimons, *Oklawaha*, 262-272.

<sup>90</sup> Tom Orr, "Ridge Lines: 'Piecing Together Bits of History,'" *Blue Ridge Now Times-News* (April 5, 2015): 1-3, <http://www.blueridgenow.com/article/20150405/ARTICLES/504051003?p=3&tc=pg>; Jennie Jones Giles, "An Inn's Rebirth," *Blue Ridge Now Times-News* (June 27, 2004): 1-6, doi: <http://www.blueridgenow.com/article/20040627/NEWS/406270377/0/search?p=2&tc=pg>.

<sup>91</sup> Alexia Jones Helsley and Dr. George A. Jones, *A Guide to Historic Henderson County* (Charleston: The History Press, 2007), 95-98.

General contractors who espoused limited skill with waterways, not engineers, erected the dams for each of the Hendersonville communities. Contractors were commonly chosen to construct dams throughout the nineteenth century due to the scarcity of trained engineers. The most capable engineers of the era were likely trained at Westpoint and worked for the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE). Only the large projects that served the greater military and economic interests of the federal government used the expertise of these individuals who understood mechanical and environmental engineering.

Developers hired men to design smaller projects whose work scantily compared to the reputation of dependability of ACOE engineers. The creators of the Henderson County dams barely compared to their contemporaries, which brings to question the integrity of their creations. The Henderson County dams burst within ten years of their construction. The part the dams played in the devastation deserves much more attention to firmly understand the depth of environmental manipulation during this pivotal period prior to the advent of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The earthen dams of the French Broad River basin represented the nature of near-sighted anthropocentric changes to the Appalachian landscape in the decades just prior to the flood. The social, economic, political and environmental conditions of the era inspired those changes. They contributed to the intensity, or “greatness,” of the disaster. Each of the dams that burst were constructed or enlarged at the beginning of the twentieth century, roughly between 1908 and 1911. When they ruptured during the evening hours of July 15 and early morning hours of July 16, they released walls of water, silt, and debris that started a domino effect of flows that proved catastrophic for downstream

communities. These occurrences highlighted the regional nature of the disaster and the tenuous relationship humans maintained with the Appalachian environment at the beginning of the century. They also exposed the growing demographic settlement trends in Appalachia during the period and the consequences they caused.

### **Conclusion**

The hurricanes that caused the flood of 1916 were rare. But the environmental practices of the people of Appalachia, unfortunately, became very common in the era. The problems of Appalachia, therefore, were the same in every region of the United States. At the dawn of the greatest natural disaster in North Carolina history the region's rivers were prone to flooding caused by man-made environmental degradation. The rains that filled the tributaries fell from the sky during natural events. Humans also carried blame for the disaster. Mountain climates were tenacious and erratic. Rains, wind, and quakes shaped the slopes of the Appalachians. People reshaped the landscape and disturbed natural processes. This increased the likelihood and intensity of regional floods.

The 1916 flood was a first of many "great" disasters in the twentieth century. It was a meteorological abnormality that occurred at a time and in a place where it destroyed enough people and property to be called "great." That significance however had more to do with the social, economic, and environmental context of the event than the water that fell on Appalachia. The "great" flood of 1916 connected an entire region of the United States in fear, destruction, and loss. The recovery, however, further separated communities because relief came in unequal proportion assigned by class and racial prejudices dictated by early twentieth century standards.

## CHAPTER 2: CLEAN SLATE: DISASTER AND MODERN ASHEVILLE

### **The Damage Done**

Not only Asheville suffered; the Great Flood of 1916 was so much more than a local disaster. The flood forever changed the landscape. As rivers rose, the mountains crumbled, shifting slopes into permanent slumps. Boulders, mud, and logs formed waves that thundered down hills and broke against communities. Like wrecking balls, debris flows removed homes from their foundations, dismantled rails, sawed through roads, toppled power lines, and swept babies from their mother's arms as they fled.<sup>92</sup> The storms flooded Southern Appalachia, which resulted in great devastation throughout the southeastern piedmont. Rivers overflowed and bled into the agricultural heartbeat of five states removing vital links between communities throughout the South. It had a direct effect on the national economy. The mountains and the piedmont of North Carolina flooded and leaders throughout the state faced a burden of response. In many respects, Asheville led the way. But the disaster warranted a response from all levels of government, which exposed the weakness of national, statewide, and Asheville's progressive values to secure the prosperity of all citizens.

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<sup>92</sup> For more on the effect of landslides caused by the storms, see; Anne C. Witt, Michael S. Smith, Kenneth A. Gillon, Jennifer B. Bauer, Thomas J. Douglas, Stephen J. Fuemmeler, and Richard M. Wooten, "A New Look at an Old Storm: The Landslides Associated with the July 15-16, 1916 Storm in North Carolina," *Geological Society of America, Southeastern Section, 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting* (Boulder, Co, March 2011); For oral history accounts about the devastation of debris flows, see: Weintraub, *Come Hell or High Water*.

Progressives took an unprecedented active role in the lives of citizens. The movement grew from a time when Americans experienced extraordinary fear, calamity, and oppression. Democratic freedom to progressives meant the promise of protection, progress, and plenty assured by a powerful government. They expelled officials and companies that failed to meet their moral, ethical, and political criteria in an effort to reform society. Asheville's leadership responded to the flood with a strict adherence to these progressive ideals and orchestrated an uneven recovery for citizens and businesses.<sup>93</sup>

Progressives became keenly aware of the social problems humans faced during the upheavals of the nineteenth-century. In the South, those dramatic situations included social ills caused by segregation, the increased importance of cities in political, social, and commercial life, and rapid industrialization.<sup>94</sup> Progressives sought superior efficiency, political transparency, and economic practices that served the public more than profit. They championed scientific effectiveness in governance. Public leaders aimed to lessen the negative effects of the environment on prosperity, especially for land and business owners. They fought to limit external effects on public and private property, such as crime, natural disaster, and economic fluctuation and found their ideal model in the modern city. Aside from a political movement spawned by ideology, progressives enacted policies that promised freedom from many conditions, both societal and

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<sup>93</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery* (New Jersey: Princeton-Hall, Inc., 1961), 68.

<sup>94</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, "The Contours of Southern Progressivism," 1036; For more on Asheville at this time, see: Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*; Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South*.

environmental. The Appalachian Flood of 1916 tested the strength of progressive policies at the federal, state, and local level.<sup>95</sup>

### **The Federal Challenge**

The summer of 1916 was a significant period in U.S. meteorological history. The year began with disastrous floods in southern California. It was the worst in the state's history and wiped out most of its fertile land and threw hundreds of homes into the Pacific Ocean.<sup>96</sup> There were also unrelated floods in New England and West Virginia that summer. The period between July 26 and July 30 produced the hottest temperatures on record for Chicago. Extremely high humidity caused the heat wave that led to minimum temperatures in the 80s for five consecutive nights.<sup>97</sup> Across the nation, one weather anomaly after another challenged federal, state, and local officials, but none more so than the southern floods of July.

The southeastern floods effected a larger portion of the nation than all other events that year. Even more suffered indirectly due to the region's prominence in the national economy. Cleaning up the mess proved to be an enormous task—too big for one institution. The Red Cross and Army Corps of Engineers intervened in disaster relief on behalf of the federal government. Rather than addressing local needs, the two organizations worked in tandem to ensure the protection of federal interests in the region, which resulted in uneven recovery for the citizens and businesses of North Carolina.

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<sup>95</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155-169.

<sup>96</sup> H.D. McGlashan and F. C. Ebert, "Southern California Floods of January, 1916," *United States Geological Survey* (Washington: Government Printing Service, 1918).

<sup>97</sup> National Weather Service, "A Comparison of Chicago and Rockford Heat Waves and Hot Summers," [http://www.weather.gov/lot/historic\\_heat\\_waves](http://www.weather.gov/lot/historic_heat_waves) (accessed July 27, 2016).

The federal government intervened in many national and international disasters prior to 1916. Those efforts, however, carried a variety of results. Congressional institutions were greatly limited in their capacity for aid. Although Woodrow Wilson and his progressive predecessors expanded the power of the federal government, they had not yet settled the issue of disaster relief. They worked from a bottom up approach and expected local municipalities to carry the heaviest burden before the state and federal government took responsibility. Acting within a nineteenth century interpretation of the commerce clause of the Constitution, Congress could allocate funds and mobilize the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) and Red Cross to protect the interests of the national economy.<sup>98</sup> Immediately after the southern disaster, the ACOE directed staff members to survey the afflicted areas to establish need. On July 11, less than a week before the second hurricane pummeled South Carolina, Captains Edward Schulz and C.L. Sturdevant began surveying the damage.

Environmental and political realities of the early twentieth century complicated the federal response to the floods of 1916. The ACOE contributed to the efforts of many of the disasters that year but also wrestled with conditions left by the devastating flooding of the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers in February. Added to the extraordinary humanitarian effort the Red Cross contributed to the Great War, the relief institutions of the United States had a very busy year. The ACOE and American Red Cross were also very much in the trial and error stage of their history. By the time of the Great Flood of 1916, the ACOE and Red Cross approached the recovery with more than thirty years of

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<sup>98</sup> Jessica A. Bandel, *So Great the Devastation: The 1916 Flood in Western North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2016).

experience. But their existence was neither logistically nor politically stable. Many believed their purpose was unconstitutional.<sup>99</sup>

Federal aid had a direct effect on humanitarian recovery after disasters, but the primary reasoning for their involvement was the national economic agenda. Because only the commerce clause of the constitution authorized Congress to intervene in disaster relief, the federal government was primarily interested in the economic recovery of the region, particularly those industries that directly contributed to the gross domestic product. The two primary concerns of the federal government was the damage to crops and the loss of vital supply chains to the northeast and rest of the South. The flood hit the agricultural sector particularly hard and the loss of rail lines threatened the stability of market prices throughout the states.

The ACOE and Red Cross were tasked to balance their often-conflicting efforts to restore economic systems through rebuilding infrastructure, jump starting agricultural output, and providing for workers left destitute by the disaster. The sheer magnitude of recovery needs, budget issues, and the unprecedented task the ACOE and Red Cross severely hindered their ability to help individuals and small businesses not integral to the national economy. A key conflict arose, however, over the arduous task of deciding who deserved federal aid. The impoverished conditions in which a large number of Appalachian residents lived made it difficult for ACOE and Red Cross officials to

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<sup>99</sup> The first incidence of federal disaster relief was the Venezuelan earthquake of 1812. President James Madison authorized the relief despite his belief that the federal government should not intervene in such situations because it helped establish diplomatic relations with the Bolivar administration without publically breaking the nation's alliance with Spain. There continued to be a large contingent that believed federal intervention in disasters was overreach up to the Civil War. Johnson explains, however, that after the Civil War a new impetus emerged for federal relief of Southern disasters as a means to secure the care of African Americans in the Union. For more on this history, please see: Leland R. Johnson, *Situation Desperate: U.S. Army Engineer Disaster Relief Operations Origins to 1950* (Alexandria: Office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2011), 7-8.



differentiate those devastated by the disaster and others who lived in such conditions before the flood.<sup>100</sup> The hindrance of the ACOE and Red Cross by political, financial, and logistical complications contributed to the lack of recovery for the region. The North Carolina state government, however, also assumed some responsibility for relief.

### **North Carolina Responds**

The worst hit section of the state was the Catawba River Valley. The magnitude of the damage in the piedmont section demanded the full attention of state legislators and Governor Locke Craig. Like the federal government, North Carolina's leaders focused primarily on the economic sectors of the state, which was driven by the agricultural lands of the eastern part of the state and the Catawba River Valley. While the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers flooded at approximately 20 feet above their banks, the Catawba exceeded 47 feet above flood stage. It destroyed every bridge, dam, and factory along its path. It was the Catawba that dismantled the rails into the mountains. It was the Catawba that severed every telephone and telegraph line connected to the coast. It was the Catawba that carried an immense torrent to the low country of South Carolina and Georgia. The Catawba turned an Appalachian storm into a national tragedy.<sup>101</sup>

Governor Locke Craig, marooned in Asheville, spent the majority of his efforts to help those within the Catawba basin to recover from the devastation because the piedmont of North Carolina supported the state's economy. Farmers outnumbered the groups devastated by the flood. Unlike the mountains, Agriculture dominated the economy of the southern piedmont of North Carolina. The flood destroyed major cash

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<sup>100</sup> Bandel, *So Great the Devastation*.

<sup>101</sup> "Death and Devastation by Floods; Carolinas and Virginia Ravaged," *Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, Georgia), July 17, 1916.

crops, such as corn, cotton, and tobacco, during a crucial time in the harvest cycle. In some locations the waters washed away five year's worth of valuable topsoil.<sup>102</sup> Large landowners weathered the disaster well, while small farmers suffered greatly. Like urban centers, class, race, and occupation relegated some to heavy losses while others suffered fewer. Like Asheville, the flood exposed entrenched socio-political inequalities that contributed to the effects. For many, the devastation was absolute.

The Governor looked to his hometown's local response to the disaster for ideas and inspiration. The state adopted the Asheville precedent of the Citizens Relief Committee, which gathered private funds to disburse to flood victims. North Carolina collected donations from the state's most prominent businessmen and families. The government formed a disaster relief committee that decided who should receive the aid. The majority of the funds went to devastated farmers and rural communities. But the decision about who should receive aid ultimately fell to institutional managers who often held office, ran prominent businesses, or had intimate connections with civic and business leaders. In other words, their personal and public agendas were inseparable and tethered to the southern business progressive values that dominated the state's politics and commercial endeavors. The political bias of supposedly separate organizations ultimately contributed to the uneven recovery.

### **Asheville Leads the Way**

A toxic stew of chemicals, carcasses, lumber, and the twisted steel of bridges carpeted the French Broad River basin, which sat at the feet of great Blue Ridge peaks. The City of Asheville sat on the hills just above the watershed; it was spared. But

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<sup>102</sup> "Where Farmers Suffered," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 26, 1916.

floodwaters devastated Biltmore Village and the Riverside District. Although the waters did not touch the city limits, the disaster severed it from local, state, and national support systems. As a progressive city, the loss of supply and communication networks was a central concern of its citizens. Asheville's leaders responded to the flood with these concerns and the core progressive values that catapulted the city into its modern boon. Many institutions intervened in recovery efforts, but Asheville's municipal government faced the lion's share of responsibility for the welfare of its businesses and citizens.

The city political system had a long history of established progressive institutions and policies designed to modernize the city, uplift middle class business progressives, and address racial and ethnic tensions in the community. A brief discussion of that history, however, reveals the underlying discrimination in those policies and institutions, which, when tested by the flood, failed to provide for Asheville citizens. Like the state and federal progressive governments, the Asheville civic government chose to force their political agenda rather than respond to the disaster with a true assessment of the needs of all citizens. The application of business progressive values to recovery efforts produced an uneven recovery for the City of Asheville, in which the wealthy recovered because they could incur the cost, but those who lived more marginal lives were left to fend for themselves on far fewer resources.

### **Charity, Cleanliness, and Communication**

The majority of narratives about the transition of Asheville into its more modern form either speed past, or utterly deny, the often-awkward steps the city took. Some make it seem as if the path the city followed into the twentieth century occurred without resistance or blunder and with the full support of citizens who all benefitted greatly from

the miniature metropolis. With every step, each opposition to a particular project, there were signs of unrest—indicators of error. Ultimately, the flood exposed deep seeded problems with the city’s social and economic priorities. Progressive ideology affected average citizens and those aspects of daily life worsened the effects of the flood of 1916.

Progressives set up systems that raised the values of the new business-minded middle class to an iconic status. In Asheville, and elsewhere, the effect was the suppression of every other outlook. They viewed certain ways to make money as lazy or inefficient. They judged economic and ecologically sustainable practices as savage or illiterate. Thomas Wolfe claimed that the city no longer tolerated creativity, individualism, and criticism of the new leadership.<sup>103</sup> What seemed on the surface to be the necessary pains of transition looked more like the replacement of certain cultures, industries, and communities. At the very least, the transition of Asheville into a modern city supplanted a plurality with one dominant way of life. Asheville’s leaders successfully reorganized the city into a clean, efficient, entertaining, and relatively safe destination for tourists coming from all over the country. Their efforts also set the city on a path toward financial debt, class and racial tension, and environmental vulnerability for individuals and small businesses.

### **Cleaning up the Organic City**

The progressive policies that transformed Asheville into a modern city did not represent the desires of all Asheville citizens. Like many cities, Asheville evolved as a community of mixed races, occupations, and classes. In 1916, the downtown district

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<sup>103</sup> Thomas Wolfe, *The Autobiography of an American Novelist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); For more of Wolfe’s commentary on the state of Asheville’s society around the time of the flood, see also: Thomas Wolfe, *Welcome to Our City: A Play in Ten Scenes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

housed businesses such as banks, law offices, and pharmacies alongside residences. Some residences had dairy cows, gardens, chickens, and other more “rural” signs of life that had, by then, become a nuisance to some. Although some Asheville citizens depended upon livestock and gardens for their food, others saw them as a detriment to the tourist industry. “Cleaning up the city” often meant eliminating these relics of pastoral life and the waste they produced. Historian Ted Steinberg called this process the “Death of the Organic City,” because it made the city ecologically imbalanced and increased dependence upon consumerism.<sup>104</sup> Contemporaries however viewed it as reparation for the accumulation of smog, silt, and refuse caused by the enterprises of Gilded Age barons.<sup>105</sup> A massive movement toward better roads, adequate sewer systems, garbage pick-up, clean streets, paved sidewalks, and citywide water and telephone service dominated the agenda of Asheville’s mayor. They felt the city had moved on from its rural past and believed its economic, communication, and transportation infrastructure could support a full transition to an urban center.<sup>106</sup>

By early twentieth century standards, Asheville was a clean city. Beginning in 1909, the Asheville City Health Department enacted ordinances to ensure public health. The department focused primarily on eliminating sanitary nuisances and preventing communicable diseases.<sup>107</sup> Public health policies followed mandates from the federal and state governments, which authorized city leaders to enact programs, tax citizens, and take out municipal bonds to cover the costs. Taxing and debt became an increased aspect of

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<sup>104</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 155.

<sup>105</sup> Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 14-17.

<sup>106</sup> “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners,” 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).

<sup>107</sup> “Bulletin Devoted to Health Laws Here,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), January 28, 1915, 12.

daily life for Asheville citizens. Curbing, paving, water lines, and garbage pick-up presented great costs to the city and taxes increased with each project. Each new development met resistance and revealed the type of political power the city's wealthy enjoyed at the expense of poorer communities.

Often, citizens resisted increased taxes, which forced compromises in the cost and quality of services and amenities. By 1914, Asheville's property owners vehemently opposed a sanitation tax meant to pay for trash pick up in the residential areas of the city. At three dollars per lot, citizens felt it was too expensive and embarked on a public campaign against the service. For weeks, city officials dealt with opposition from the public and newspaper editors until they took action to alleviate the negative tension. Civic leaders brokered a compromise in which the contractors for the work took a third of the original negotiated price.<sup>108</sup> In the end, Asheville's middle class benefited from a sanitized city, civic and business leaders took pride in becoming more like their elder siblings, like Charlotte, Knoxville, and Atlanta, and the city's sanitary department workers made less than originally promised.<sup>109</sup>

This marked a pivotal moment in the development of the complex, class-driven, occupational segregation of the city. The French Broad River had long been the dumping ground for Asheville's waste. But the advent of the sanitation department and the creation of a sanitary workforce, combined with the institutionalization of waste management in the Riverside District, changed the social dynamics of the city. Progressives wanted the downtown district cleaner and the Riverside District became more unsanitary as a result.

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<sup>108</sup> "Strong Opposition to the Sanitary Tax," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), May 26, 1914, 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

As the two districts developed separate and often opposing reputations, the people who lived in those sections became more opposed and a socioeconomic chasm grew between them.

### **Communication Network**

The flood of 1916 severed Asheville from its transportation and communication networks. Three days prior to the flood, one hundred and forty guests sat at the Southern Newspaper Publishers banquet at the Grove Park Inn of Asheville, waiting to hear the waves of the Pacific Ocean through a telephone for the first time. The southern publishers heard the Pacific thrashing below the Cliff House of San Francisco while moving pictures showed the Seal Rocks protruding from the coast below. Asheville's most prominent citizens mingled with the newspaper reporters and marveled at the new technologies that allowed this communication with a city that seemed a world apart. A representative from the California Governor's office played "Dixie" through a Victrola at the request of the southerners, who tapped their feet in rhythm to the boisterous confederate hymn that carried old meaning in the New South. And, "within a stone's throw of the Pacific," the Californians played "The Star Spangled Banner." W.T. Gentry, President of the Southern Group of Bell Telephone Companies, called the exposition a "perfect marvel of genius."<sup>110</sup> It was the culmination of an immense collective effort to modernize Asheville's communication infrastructure and establish itself as a central hub of commerce and tourism in the New South. When the flood of 1916 destroyed the Asheville transportation system, city leaders focused primarily on its restoration because the city had grown dependent upon external markets for essential goods.

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<sup>110</sup> "Asheville Talked to San Francisco," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 13, 1916, 2.

A broad trade network that included some of the busiest ports of the twentieth century intimately connected the Appalachians to the world. Asheville's role in trade tied local natural resources to external markets and intensified its citizen's dependence on open communication and transportation networks.<sup>111</sup> When the flood effectively cut the burgeoning metropolis off from its network of communities, civic leaders put great pressure on the city's public works officials, cleanup crews, and, most of all, the Southern Railway.<sup>112</sup> Civic leaders primarily focused on reestablishing Asheville's place in the national economy, not necessarily cleanup for retail merchants and families. They concentrated on the tourist pipelines that stretched as far north as Maine and west as California, the hotels and resorts, and the largest employers within the Riverside District.

Transportation innovations such as the railroad certainly improved economies by expediting the sale of import and export goods, but they also served as important elements in gossip and the exchange of ideas. The spread of knowledge in the early twentieth-century formed the foundation for the revolutionary progressive movement as well as the exchange of successful business and political models adopted throughout the nation. And railroads played a central role in the dispersal of knowledge in addition to economy. More locally, there would be no Riverside District in Asheville without the Southern Railway, but the railroad also contributed to stable market prices and helped Asheville stay connected with verifiable news from communities near and far. Without

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<sup>111</sup> For more on Appalachia's economic links to global markets, see: Wilma Dunaway, *Incorporation of Southern Appalachian into the Capitalist Economy, 1700-1860* (PhD Dissertation, The University of Tennessee, 1994).

<sup>112</sup> For more information on the condition of the Southern Railway after the flood and their response to the disaster, see: J.C. Williams and Matthew C. Bumgarner, *Floods of July 1916: How the Southern Railway Organization Met an Emergency* (Washington, D.C.: Southern Railway Company, 1917).



them, the city filled with gossip and intrigue, which led to exaggerated death reports, amongst other inaccuracies about the flood conditions in the city.<sup>113</sup>

### **Railroads and Roadways**

The Southern Railway published a book in 1917 that detailed the corporation's monumental efforts to rebuild after the flood. It was a time of great hubris on the part of the Southern and the book was a study in self-congratulation. The authors of the book, J.C. Williams and Matthew Bumgarner, who were also employees of the railway, painted a very different effect the disaster had on the region. "The Southern is big, has always been big," they wrote:

But this matter of size has seldom been demonstrated more strikingly than when this gigantic problem of the flood suddenly confronted it. And the Southern rose with a giant's strength to wrestle with and speedily overcome the menace.<sup>114</sup>

While the organization of the Southern Railway after the flood contributed to the recovery efforts of the entire region, the narrative within their official record did not fully discuss how devastated the loss of the Southern was on the people of Asheville and how that had long term effects.

In Asheville key aspects of their economy and lines of communication centered on the supposed reliability of the Southern Railway. This produced social and political tensions that the flood ultimately complicated. Railroads always exasperated the nation's road problems and the divide between farmers and the city's that purchased the majority of their crops. Roads, too, became a preoccupation of Asheville's leadership class in the Progressive Era. As a growing metropolis, Asheville's civic and business leaders became

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<sup>113</sup> "What Mark Twain Said Applies Here," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 21, 1916 10.

<sup>114</sup> Williams and Bumgarner, *Floods of July 1916*, 4.

preoccupied with concerns about the cost of living, especially the price of retail grocery products, in the days after the flood.

Appalachians suffered from a lack of an adequate transportation system that had more to do with political battles than geography.<sup>115</sup> For centuries, mountaineers prospered and perished at the whim of great rivers such as the French Broad and Swannanoa. For them, geographic separation from North Carolina's eastern fluvial ports and navigable streams hindered economic prospects. Additionally, early eighteenth century attempts at control of waterways and roadways produced limited results. Although railroads promised a new respite from these limitations in the 1820s and 1830s, North Carolinians suffered multiple setbacks along with the rest of the South, which culminated in the complete abandonment of railway construction at the beginning of the Civil War. But technologies born on battlefields provided the impulses needed to finish the projects. With Union victory came the dominance of northern concepts of progress and propriety and new sources of capital for railroads.<sup>116</sup>

For better or worse, railways defined the nineteenth century, epitomizing the conquest of time and space through the subjugation of nature. They represented the promise of modernity with all the hyperbolic sentiment of economic prosperity espoused by the technology's early promoters. Despite those promises, however, the reality of life sustained by rails hardly produced a more democratic economy. As historian Richard White argued, railroads "created modernity as much by their failure as their success."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> David L. Cockrell, "East-West Rivalry," *NCpedia*, 2006, <http://ncpedia.org/east-west-rivalry>.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>117</sup> Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011) xxi.

The cold, hard truth of a society dependent upon railroads is that the technology primarily served the upper echelons of social hierarchy—the owners and proprietors of the rails and cars, the governments that permitted the system, and the capital financiers who funded the projects. Rather than gaining the benefits of a closer-knit world of resources for consumption, average Americans found themselves, and the cost of their living, subject to “the whims of distant corporations.”<sup>118</sup>

While roads certainly allowed more tourists to travel to the area via Model-T’s in the 1920s, they also allowed for a more affordable and consistent method for supply deliveries and, most importantly, provided a connection between farmers and urban markets by 1916.<sup>119</sup> The Good Roads Movement culminated in the 1920s with a definite focus on automobiles, which promoted democratic travel and the tourist trade in remote sections of the country, such as Asheville. The movement birthed Asheville’s participation in the Dixie Highway in the early decades of the twentieth century, but the Progressive Good Roads movement began in the late nineteenth century as a reliable route for urban bicyclists and a consistent means for farmers to deliver their products to market while bypassing the high costs of rail transportation due to the monopolization of the industry.<sup>120</sup> Only after the decline in the cycling craze and the advent of affordable automobiles did the trend shift.

Still, market transport in the countryside remained a key tenet of good roads supporters in the mountain south. In 1899, Asheville citizens concerned with the lack of

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., xxix; See also, Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 8-10.

<sup>119</sup> Isaac B. Potter, *The Good Roads Gospel: A Letter to the American Farmer* (New York: The Evening Post Job Printing House, 1891), 8.

<sup>120</sup> For more on the Dixie Highway, see: Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway*.

proper roads founded Western North Carolina's first Good Roads Association. They were concerned with the lack of adequate roads outside of Asheville and the Biltmore Estate. The association focused first on educating citizens on the need for better roads outside of the city to allow for "larger loads and fewer trips" with "less wear on man, beast, wagon, and harness," for "better attendance at church and school," and "better market [and] better prices."<sup>121</sup> If anything, tourism, alone, did not spawn the infrastructure movement in Asheville. The flood further disrupted the complex transportation problems in Appalachia, which had as much to do with the dying railroad industry and the inherent costs involved.

By 1916, Asheville area farmers competed with suppliers from all over the country and prices set by markets far away, which resulted in a high cost of living for both consumers and farmers. The flood provided civic and business leaders an opportunity to reconsider their commitment to railroads in the long run because of its immediate impact on the price of goods. Shortly after the flood, city leaders began to look at alternative methods to provide essential goods to citizens while circumventing railroad variables. They looked to regional examples and found one in the open-air market of Knoxville, Tennessee.<sup>122</sup>

Taken from that model, the open-air market in Asheville, which was proposed and adopted later in 1916, sought to support local farmers by prohibiting the city's businesses from selling goods not purchased from the market. By law, only local farmers and artisans sold products at the markets. These efforts sought to eliminate the role of

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<sup>121</sup> "Delegates are Enthusiastic for Proposed Highway Through State," *Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, NC), Oct. 7, 1909.

<sup>122</sup> "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).

procurer and distributor in the supply chain to drive costs down. By shortening the distance products travelled, less was spent on its transport because there was less need for the railroads. However, another more reprehensible purpose for this shift in economics was the elimination of peddlers.<sup>123</sup>

While roads offered a better alternative for the tourist and food industry, the enterprises in the Riverside District found themselves wholly dependent upon the railroad. Despite the high costs of transportation, many businesses in Asheville relied upon the Southern Railway Company for inter-factory transportation of goods. After the flood destroyed those lines, businesses, such as the National Casket Company, appealed to the Asheville City government to negotiate and partially fund temporary rails to assist with clean up efforts and allow factories to relocate products from harm's way.

Ultimately, city officials refused to subsidize these lines and placed pressure on the Southern to repair them in addition to the monumental rebuilding of the lines throughout the state. This resulted in a long delay in the recovery of riverside businesses. This episode underscored the tenuous relationship between Asheville's municipal government and the Southern Railway after the flood. It also sheds light on the lack of urgency city

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<sup>123</sup> In Appalachia, peddlers were often Jewish immigrants. Large wholesalers deployed them throughout the region along rail lines and into coalfields. They served important roles as merchants but also as arbiters within a vast Jewish network that supported the tightknit but spread out community. Many became small shop owners with businesses seen as more legitimate by white Appalachians, but those that remained peddlers often gained the animosity of their competition. The nature of their job, alone, put them at risk as lone travellers strapped with cash. Their obvious foreignness attracted ridicule that ranged from racial stereotypes to violence. In Asheville, they were cast amongst a growing class of people seen as outside of the ideal and were charged with contributing to the resistance against the progressive way of life. The decision to create the open-air market as a means to chase them out of Asheville underscored the presence of racial tension that spilled over into class competition and the nature of progressive capitalism. For more information, see: Deborah R. Weiner, *Coalfield Jews: an Appalachian History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 17-25.

leaders exhibited when it came to riverside recovery when compared to the same of the tourist businesses.<sup>124</sup>

Tourism, commercialism, and communication became intertwined with the railroad industry in the early twentieth century. Railroads became integral in connecting communities. Telephones provided market information that merchants and financiers used to stabilize the economy. These technologies evened out markets, which for the first time allowed for uniformed pricing. This ultimately led to a decrease in price divergence on products across the continent. In Asheville, it provided a crucial element to the region's economy. For such a burgeoning city, this technology allowed merchants to trade goods according to market prices in New York and other major cities, limiting local factors in pricing, which had a devastating effect on local small farmers. While this certainly led to higher costs to the consumers of Asheville in proportion to their income when compared to the citizens of New York City, it also worked to prevent price gouging due to local events—except for when the technology failed.<sup>125</sup>

### **Fear in Asheville**

The loss of the majority of Southern Railway lines in the region put tremendous pressure on the quality of the lives of Ashevilleans through the need for supplies and visitors for the city's economy. The destruction of the communication network allowed grocers and retailers to raise prices for essential goods without reports on outside market prices.<sup>126</sup> With a shortage in many essential items, such as coal, ice, produce, milk,

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<sup>124</sup> "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," July 19, 1916, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina), 4.

<sup>125</sup> David Crowley and Paul Heyer, *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2011), 125-137.

<sup>126</sup> "Flood Ghouls," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 18, 1916, 4.

gasoline, flour, and eggs, city and business leaders faced unprecedented demand on the few supplies left. When the Citizens Relief Committee formed to aid flood victims, a large percentage of their work was to provide these items to victims at no cost, which took great cooperation and charity on the part of some of the city's most prominent citizens. But fear ran rampant throughout the city with relation to these shortages and other concerns due to the loss of traditional and newer forms of communication.<sup>127</sup>

It took months to understand the extent of damage to roads and rails. The three-mile journey to Biltmore Village was virtually impassible. The best the citizens of the Asheville merchant district could do was travel to the West Asheville Bridge where scenes of inundation and carnage awaited them. Rumors, gossip, and stories of intrigue substituted verifiable reports for newspapermen, which led to the spread of embellished accounts of the damage.<sup>128</sup> Responders needed accuracy in reporting to properly aid those in need, which was impossible. This carried broad effects on the response to the disaster by city leadership. Without reliable information about the extent of the damage and the needs of the area, city leaders could not adequately respond.

### **The Stench and Public Health**

The flood of 1916 destroyed farms, buildings, and other materials in the Asheville area. It also replenished aquifers, fresh groundwater, and fertilized riverside farms in the rural parts of the region. In the city, the water and sediment proved toxic and became a nuisance for those trying to piece Asheville back together. The Riverside District, once

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

rows of fertile farmland, now collected the city's waste.<sup>129</sup> Floodwaters gathered pollutants from factories, homes, trains, automobiles, and other human enterprises and deposited them in sediment throughout the region. Issues with sediment also exposed the tenuous relationship between civic leaders and the riverside industrial managers.

Cleaning up Asheville in the early twentieth century resulted in the displacement, rather than the elimination, of waste. The Riverside District represented the best of Asheville's industrial backbone, but the city also dumped its waste in the area. Despite city government efforts, some city dwellers clinging to the older way of life kept livestock in the merchant district. Feces and urine ended up in terracotta pipes or ditches that ran through the city and dumped its contents into the French Broad. Garbage picked up by the sanitation department in the merchant district found its resting place alongside the west bank of the river near Craven Street, or was incinerated in public furnaces, which at the time was just outside of city limits. Whenever it rained, storm drains filled with potentially hazardous materials and pools formed and flooded streets in the downtown district, which caused hundreds of complaints to the city mayor's office in the days of the flood.<sup>130</sup> The flood made these issues much worse and provided the most lingering physical aspect of the disaster.

The force of water flow dredged the sediment from the bottoms of the rivers and spread it wherever the water rested. The sediment proved fertile in the long term for area farmers but devastating for Asheville's citizens. From Biltmore Village to the northern boundaries of the Riverside District, sediment piled high inside businesses and homes

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<sup>129</sup> "Asheville Industries and What They are Doing: No. 4—The Carolina Wood Products Company," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), September 3, 1916, 3.

<sup>130</sup> "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).



and on the streets of Asheville.<sup>131</sup> With such proximity to the river, a flood event like that in 1916 had the potential to release tons of saturated material downstream, which rivaled the discharge of raw sewage or industrial waste.<sup>132</sup> The “Town Ditch,” with its collection of waste from the tannery and other factories, spilled over and deposited its contents in the streets and homes in the district. The terracotta pipes that separated potable and discharge water overflowed and joined the turbid and terrible mixture, which rested in Asheville’s homes, streets, and businesses in the flooded district. When the waters subsided, several leaks damaged the city waterworks. Throughout the area, the corrosive force of the floodwaters exposed pipes, leaving them vulnerable to further damage.<sup>133</sup>

The merchant district, the majority of the housing areas, and the tourist resorts and hotels were spared from the potentially toxic floodwaters and sediment, but the flood disrupted the water supply to the homes and workplaces of Asheville’s leadership class.<sup>134</sup> More than just dirt, the deposits contained a potentially dangerous mix of chemicals and refuse, predominantly caused by various factories and the nature of the City of Asheville’s waterworks, sewer system, and vast network of drainage ditches. It made people sick. Even the threat of disease in the early twentieth century fueled a lucrative local business in pharmaceuticals. The flood posed a direct threat and the city’s public health officials placed pressure on the river district to fix the problem.

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<sup>131</sup>“Asheville Industries and What They are Doing,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), August 27, 1916, 10.

<sup>132</sup> David Laner, “Flooding of Municipal Solid Waste Landfills,” *The Encyclopedia of the Earth*, August 31, 2012 (accessed March 2, 2016).

<sup>133</sup> Sanborn Company, “Insurance Maps of Asheville, Buncombe County North Carolina, January 1913,” *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Asheville, North Carolina* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1913), *North Carolina Collection*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>134</sup> “Facing the Situation with Optimistic Spirit, Asheville Recovers Rapidly,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 21, 1916, 1.

*The Power of the Threat of Disease*

The standard narrative concerning disease in the South details how low-country middle and upper class families traveled to the clean air and water of the Appalachian Mountains to avoid the malarial seasons of summer and fall. But every disease found in the piedmont and coastal regions of the South also made appearances in Asheville. Additionally, flood conditions were known to cause sickness. Area hospitals reported an increase in patients suffering from a variety of ailments in the days after the flood.<sup>135</sup> Exactly how many and whether or not their conditions were definitely caused by the conditions of the disaster are unknown, but there is evidence of a growing concern about communicable diseases in Asheville at the time. The concern of the citizens empowered public health officials to place significant pressure on businesses, farmers, and citizens to clean up their properties. This pressure contributed to the stress small business owners suffered during the disaster but also exposed the tenuous relationship between city leaders and certain enterprises.

The year of the flood marked the height of the “War on Malaria” in the South. Doctors, medical associations, and state and local health officials drained swamps, filled ditches and tirelessly worked to educate the general population on the nature of the disease. Certainly the lower south housed a larger percentage of vectors than the mountains, but floods attract mosquitoes. In Asheville, daily advertisements for cures for malaria implied a persistent concern with the disease among the population.

Civic leaders, too, grew increasingly worried about the prospect of an outbreak of disease in the days following the flood, which contributed to the formation of the Citizens

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<sup>135</sup> Milton Ready, “Illustrated Talk on the Flood’s Causes and Devastation” (presentation, Symposium on the Great Flood of 1916, Asheville, NC, July 15-16, 2016).

Relief Committee. Citizens throughout Asheville complained to the Mayor about the carcasses, silt, and other refuse left behind by the floodwaters around the businesses in the Riverside District.<sup>136</sup> In the name of public health, the sanitation sub-committee spearheaded a campaign to clean up the effects of the disaster, but while the city rounded up crews of convicts and the unemployed to aid in the reparation of city and county maintained properties, the enterprises in the Riverside District had no official assistance. While business managers struggled to dig themselves out from sediment left by the flood, the city of Asheville expected them to clean the overwhelming amount of debris the river washed downstream from their stockyards, which rested against area bridges and the shoreline causing health and infrastructural concerns.<sup>137</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As a catalyst for change and a shock to Asheville's progressive economic, social, and political systems, the flood of 1916 shed light on the often contradicting relationship the city's leadership had with their citizens and environment. To seek reparations to which they felt entitled from the social, economic, and environmental upheaval of their father's generation, Asheville's civic and business leadership created a well-managed city according to the progressive ideologies of the early twentieth century. Their goal was to increase the quality of life for the middle class by focusing on comfort and amenities that further separated them from the natural world, and the sources of their food and material culture. They no longer wanted their city to have dirt, livestock, or other relics of the struggles of previous generations of southerners. Pipes carried their sewage to the river

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<sup>136</sup> "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).

<sup>137</sup> "Remove the Lumber Commissioners Say," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 29, 1916, 5.

from which other channels carried water directly to their homes. Electricity lit their lights and powered their automobiles, which they drove on paved roadways. Others carried their garbage to the landfill by the river. The grocer, doctor, and pharmacist came to their door. And in the Riverside District, an area segregated by its way of life and industry, the people that supported their economy lived, breathed, swam, and fished in polluted surroundings so that those in the downtown district should not.

Asheville's civic and business leaders lived lives so separate from their environment that they lost the ability to heed the threats so long associated with the Appalachian region. Despite several major floods in their recent past, the flood of 1916 caught them completely off guard. Their strict adherence to the new urban way of life was not sufficient enough to manage the social, environmental, and economic consequences of the flood. Their unwillingness to waiver from those predilections set the city on an immediate path for hard times. The contradictory nature of their progressive tenets led to an uneven response to the complex and local nature of the needs of the areas families and businesses. Instead of the control they promised their citizens, the city spiraled into a period gripped by fear and the worries of their times, which led them into a very dark alley that included the police department's abuse of power, the negligence of city recovery committees toward African Americans and immigrants, and the abandonment of the Riverside District's industrial enterprises at a time when they need help the most.

## CHAPTER 3: THE ASHEVILLE SPIRIT: DISASTER, RACE, AND CLASS

### **Not the Man of the Hour**

The flood of 1916 tested the late-nineteenth century social and economic programs and policies created by Southern business progressives. Southern leaders struggled to balance economic prosperity, the environment, and polarizing social policies. Those leaders limited their concept of freedom to what historian Dewey W. Grantham referred to as “*Herrenvolk* democracy”—meaning a society for whites only.<sup>138</sup> Segregation, according to Grantham, “cleansed” the political process of non-whites. In Asheville, discrimination expanded during the progressive movement. By 1916, Asheville’s all white civic leadership challenged non-white communities to control and provide for their own despite having far fewer resources. Like many progressive plans, segregation and boosterism were meant to ensure efficiency and quality of life for all. But the flood resulted in the marginalization of thousands of individuals and hundreds of businesses. The great flood of 1916 proved to be a far bigger challenge than the progressive political and social systems could handle appropriately.

### **The Fever and the Ideal**

Novelist Thomas Wolfe expressed deep concern for his hometown and the boosterism that took hold by the beginning of the twentieth century. He described the Asheville tourism agenda as a “fever” and criticized the city’s plans to rise to economic

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<sup>138</sup> Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xvii.

prominence. He could not ignore the strategies the city's leaders imposed on poor and non-white citizens.<sup>139</sup> His writings angered many of Asheville's elite class, including some of his relatives. In Wolfe's works, Asheville was not only the beautiful, providential Land of the Sky; it was a dreary, fog-ridden urban center known for racism, classism, and greed.

Wolfe believed his profession caused the resentment toward his works. He claimed Asheville's leadership class viewed creativity as unproductive. They believed all occupations that did not serve the southern progressive economic agenda did not contribute to Asheville's prosperity. In an effort to produce progressive individuals, civic and business leaders created a caricature of the ideal Asheville citizen. The Asheville ideal citizen was often a contradiction that never fully balanced the dueling agendas of progress and segregation. This conflict was never more apparent than in the days following the flood of 1916.

The Asheville Board of Trade created the concept of "The Man of the Hour" and laid out attributes such a man should have. The perfect citizen served the community above himself and aspired for continued prosperity for Asheville.<sup>140</sup> Those who did not fit this mold complicated recovery efforts after the Great Flood. The issue was not the proposal by the board of trade, which espoused common southern business progressive values. The problem was the decision to create an antithesis to the character, which marginalized a sizeable portion of the Asheville population. In particular, if one was not "The Man of the Hour" they were:

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<sup>139</sup> Wolfe, *Welcome to Our City*.

<sup>140</sup> The author fully acknowledges the gendered approach to this character but only repeats the lack of non-male attributes of "The Man of the Hour." The character was designed to be distinctly male in a time of the deliberate disenfranchisement of women of all classes.

The man who constantly takes from his community and accepts benefits derived from the efforts of others, without giving back something to the community or adding to the constructive efforts of others...like the farmer who constantly takes from the soil but gives nothing back to the soil...”<sup>141</sup>

Asheville’s leaders labeled some members of society as productive and others as parasites. They identified those who did not participate in “essential” occupations as the latter. Asheville’s elites shamed those who sought aid after the flood and did not fit the progressive mold for their assumed laziness. This bias against large segments of the population by the southern business progressive leaders of the city led to the relative abandonment of riverside laborers, despite their great amount of need following the flood.

With these and other biases, progressives enacted policies in Asheville at the end of the nineteenth century that set the stage for the social, environmental, and economic consequences of the flood of 1916. City leaders created policies meant to ensure the greatest possible quality of life for the rising middle class, which were predominantly white and worked in specific occupations. Progressive leaders aligned with national and state trends and restructured the Asheville city government to take unprecedented responsibility for its citizens and to modernize the region’s political, social, and economic systems. The creation of the Associated Charities, efforts to sanitize the city, and the expansion of communication networks dominated the agendas of leaders in an effort to create an ideal location for the burgeoning tourist economy. Each program further ostracized minority communities. Those who lived or worked just outside of the

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<sup>141</sup> Ernest H. Miller, “Asheville, North Carolina City Directory” (Piedmont Directory Company: Asheville, 1916), 13.

commercial or merchant district downtown, which included the majority of black and immigrant communities, suffered from political and geographic marginalization. They were not only in direct harm of floodwaters because of their proximity to the French Broad; they also failed to fit the southern business progressive ideal and did not receive fair aid or attention during flood recovery.<sup>142</sup>

### **Occupational Segregation**

There had always been two worlds in Asheville: elite and laborer. The most direct influence the progressive movement had on Asheville citizens was the development of specialized labor and the creation of a new socio-economic hierarchy based on occupation. With the cultural, political, and economic revolution by progressives, the middle-class occupied a new segment of the social and economic classes in Asheville. Southern business progressives worked primarily as merchants, bankers, real estate brokers, and lawyers. Thus, a new class emerged and staked claim on leadership roles in business and politics in Asheville, which pushed those on the bottom of the spectrum further down. Many of those on the bottom lived along the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers.

Since the mid- to late- nineteenth century, Asheville's Riverside District served as a location for factories, utility providers, ice producers, lumber mills, furniture factories, and other industrial enterprises. The workers and proprietors of those companies lived near them within company-owned homes, most often in areas south, west, and east of downtown. The same was true of the new middle class, who established their presence heavily in the downtown district. Out of this byproduct of modern urbanization came

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<sup>142</sup> Milton Ready, *The Tar Heel State* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina, 2005), 301-303.



distinct occupational segregation, adding to the racial segregation that grew more prominent throughout the South. This process placed laborers and managers for industrial enterprises into floodplains while the new southern business progresses lived and worked on the hills of Asheville—safely above the floodwaters of 1916.

At the time of the flood, factories dumped industrial waste into rivers and streams without concern, which complicated agendas in cities like Asheville that depended upon surface water for water supply for factories and tourist hotels.<sup>143</sup> Asheville also maintained a vast sewage system that spread for more than sixty thousand miles and carried waste to the rivers.<sup>144</sup> Additionally, several drainage ditches crisscrossed the city, with the largest running from the French Broad River, through the Southern Railway station, parallel to Depot Street, into which the Asheville Tannery discarded chemically-treated carcasses left over from the tanning process. This sanitation system grew increasingly more complicated as Asheville experienced dramatic population increases at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth-century. Asheville's water and sewer system never caught up to the city's population increase, which placed exponential importance on the French Broad River for its prosperity.

The vast differences between the Riverside and Merchant districts ultimately led to the uneven response to the flood. Questionable environmental and social realities in the Riverside District remained separate from Asheville's leadership class. Progressives responded according to ideals set by the ethics of their class, not the unique needs of the

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<sup>143</sup> Moses Nelson Baker, *The Manual of American Water-Works*, Vol. 3 (New York: Engineering News Publishing Company, 1892), 164.

<sup>144</sup> "The Contract for Sixty Thousand Feet of Sewer Pipe Given Yesterday," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), October 10, 1888, 1; "The Sewer Question," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), February 29, 1888.

people and business owners of the Riverside District. Those ideals came from essentially new middle class priorities that hardly considered the needs of extractive industrial managers and their employees, despite the fact that the factories maintained a pivotal role in the area's economic health. As the Riverside District became the "flood district," the social ills of Asheville played out in the form of class and racially charged fears and abuse arose throughout the city.

### **Uneven Recovery: The People**

#### **Isolation Beneath the Veneer<sup>145</sup>**

Asheville's leaders segregated the races because they believed it made all citizens safe. It was a response to racial events across North Carolina, such as the Wilmington Riots of 1898, not the needs of the city's communities.<sup>146</sup> In fact, Asheville enjoyed relative peace between its communities before the implementation of segregation. The rigid response to the flood was a step in the long path of social ills Asheville's civic and business leaders played upon the peripheral communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>147</sup>

Separate was not equal in the South, especially in times of disaster. The "Spirit of Asheville," the harmony promoted by newspaper editors and civic leaders at the time, only represented the white effort to rebuild the community. The black response to the disaster is all but forgotten. Aside from a few oral histories, a handful of mentions in the

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<sup>145</sup> Historian Darin J. Waters titled his dissertation *Life Beneath the Veneer* to emphasize the two-faces of Asheville at the time: reality and the narrative created by boosters. Please see, Darin J. Waters, *Life Beneath the Veneer: The Black Community in Asheville, North Carolina from 1793-1900* (PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012).

<sup>146</sup> LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot* (Raleigh: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2009).

<sup>147</sup> For information about the African American community, please see: Waters, *Life Beneath the Veneer*. For information about other communities, please see: Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South*.

mainstream news, and reports of the work of a local colored convict-working group, the voices of the black population in Asheville did not exist. The African American community represented a sliver of the city's economy and population, which meant that the "colored" branch of the Associated Charities and the Y.M.I. operated on far fewer resources within the community to help their own.

The flood occurred at a time of social transition in Asheville and further complicated ongoing processes, such as the increased legalization of "Jim Crow" policies. The pressures placed on the community by white civic leaders exposed the tenuous connection between those who led and followed. Only three decades before, whites and blacks served as alderman together and cooperated. Asheville had been a beacon of civility in the reconstructed south. Whatever partnership existed between the races in Asheville in the years just after the Civil War unraveled at a rapid rate during the first decades of the twentieth century, culminating in the formation of the Color Betterment League of Asheville in 1917 and racial violence in the economically tumultuous 1920s. The events surrounding the flood exposed how desperate social relations had become in the Appalachian hamlet under progressive government.<sup>148</sup>

### **Charity in the Land of the Sky**

In a land with great relative poverty, it became difficult to decide the difference between those suffering from the flood or from the realities of southern life. Like the floods of 1911, 1912, and 1913, the flood of 1916 washed away the topsoil of farms throughout the region. In Alabama, many families with enterprises large enough to employ tenant farmers wrote to the Army Corps of Engineers seeking relief because they

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<sup>148</sup> Waters, *Life Beneath the Veneer*.

could no longer provide for their sharecroppers.<sup>149</sup> Similar problems persisted in the piedmont sections of the region, which pushed the federal government toward passing a congressional bill in August that allocated funds toward flood relief. Carried out by the Corps, the federal government parceled the funds out to many sectors of the population via fast-growing seeds for farmers, shelter, and food. The ACOE favored funding farmers because of their importance in the national and state economies.

Relief funds, however, were reserved solely for those left destitute because of the flood. Throughout the Asheville area, however, many individuals and businesses too small to matter to the ACOE struggled. Before the Great Flood, there had long been a tradition of poverty in Appalachia.<sup>150</sup> The social conditions throughout the region highlighted the ineffectiveness of local aid programs spearheaded by progressives in the late nineteenth century.

In urban centers like Asheville, poverty often led to crime and vagrancy. In the Progressive Era, civic leaders created institutions to work with business and community leaders to combat this trend by serving the needs of those on the lower rung of the economic ladder. Asheville's leaders also placed unprecedented pressure on black leaders to maintain control of their population, which contributed to the formation of the Asheville Colored Betterment League, despite the fact that it was well known the majority of criminals were outsiders drawn to the community to capitalize on tourism.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Johnson, *Situation Desperate*, 116-122.

<sup>150</sup> Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>151</sup> One driving force to form the league was the response of African American leaders to pressures from the white establishment to control their population, who was blamed for crimes in the downtown area. This was despite the fact that the majority of the criminals were known to have not been residents of Asheville but outsiders drawn to the city by the opportunities offered by the tourist industry. Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 84.

Racial and class prejudice weakened the humanitarian programs started by Asheville progressives, including the Associated Charities and flood relief efforts.

Three aspects of Asheville's society contributed to the social tension that existed before the flood. The creation of a social archetype that excluded many citizens, the formation of the Associated Charities, and occupational segregation within the city made recovery after the disaster incredibly complicated and led to social and racial fears in the flood torn city. Asheville's city government created the Associated Charities to care for all citizens to prevent vagrancy and other poverty-related crimes. But the organization was not financed or managed well enough to withstand conditions left by the flood of 1916.<sup>152</sup> The result was a biased attempt at recovery for individuals and families that had more to do with espousing southern business progressive ideals than addressing the needs of the entire community. Charity in the days following the flood carried over the weaknesses of the programs set by the progressives in Asheville in the late nineteenth century.

#### *The Creation and Function of the Asheville Associated Charities*

In 1884, Asheville's civic and business leaders organized the Associated Charities in an attempt to eliminate city beggars by keeping poor without want. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, whites became the primary recipients of charity funds. The organization received financial support from individual subscriptions and municipal

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<sup>152</sup> There was a long history of the Associated Charities running short on funds during times of great need in Asheville. The Mayor and Board of Commissioners requested the formation of the Citizens Relief Committee under the assumption that the Associated Charities did not have the adequate sources and was stretched too thin to address the flood needs. See, "Suffering in Asheville," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), January 18, 1883, 1; See also: "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).

contributions, which led to its semi-governmental status. The Associated Charities also aided prisoners, especially during Thanksgiving and Christmas, which was one of the only times it touched African American lives.<sup>153</sup> The exclusion of African Americans led to the formation of a black branch of the Associated Charities founded by members of the Young Men's Institute (YMI).<sup>154</sup> This new organization found it difficult to support the black community through the economic and social hardships caused by increased marginalization under Jim Crow laws and population shifts driven by regional depression at the turn of the century.<sup>155</sup>

In Asheville, the lines between government and private organizations were either unclear or non-existent, which led to the dominance of the progressive agenda on citizens. Charities, businesses, and private groups, such as the Asheville Board of Trade, placed high-seated government officials in leadership positions.<sup>156</sup> The Associated Charities blurred the lines between government and private sector by operating from funds generated by municipal and county offices and functioning according to progressive values. The organization depended upon the charity of civic and business leaders for its resources. Asheville's leadership organized charity drives, public celebrations, and fundraising events throughout the year that provided the majority of the

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<sup>153</sup> Board of Public Charities of North Carolina, *Annual Report of the Board of Public Charities of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 1911), 53-54.

<sup>154</sup> "Officers Elected by Colored Branch," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), June 19, 1915.

<sup>155</sup> For more on the African American community in Asheville, see: Waters, *Life Beneath the Veneer*.

<sup>156</sup> Among other conflicts of interests, Mayor J.E. Rankin also served in a leadership position in the Asheville Board of Trade. There are many other instances of nepotism seen in the way Asheville's progressive leadership consolidated power in many aspects of society. Although early progressives pushed for a separation between the government and social services, Asheville, and the rest of the South for that matter, certainly set up their institutions as extensions of the progressive agenda into all avenues of public and private life. Because their agenda segregated African Americans, immigrants, and poor people, all institutions in the city must be viewed as what they were: the extension of middle-class, white supremacy.

association's operational costs. The Asheville government, the Associated Charities, and business leaders forged a co-dependent bond during this period. Hand-in-hand, they all worked to turn Asheville into a modern progressive city. Although they operated as separate entities, the marriage of civic and private interests and appointment of politicians and businessmen on the boards of charities allowed leaders with southern progressive agendas to fully realize their objectives even at the expense of a sizeable segment of the population. Even worse for marginal populations, the dominance and success of white businesses produced substantial funds for white charities while the decrease in prominent black businesses and population meant a much smaller pool for relief funds. Because Asheville's leaders modeled the Citizens Relief Committee from the Associated Charities, the effect of segregation on personal aid expanded during the flood.

#### *The Creation and Function of the Citizens Relief Committee*

Civic leaders last met on the Friday before the flood. They remained in their districts during the worst of the disaster. Everybody worked from home to organize the relief efforts that took shape within hours of the catastrophe in the form of a Citizens Relief Committee, organized by Mayor James Eugene Rankin and city commissioners. Still, reports reached the offices of the editor of the *Asheville Citizen* depicting heroic efforts of city commissioner D. H. Ramsey, the chief of police, and the sheriff. It seemed that despite the loss of communication and the inability to convene in a more formal setting, Asheville's city leaders acted swiftly and formed a governing unit designed to meet the needs of those affected by the disaster. But many of their efforts fell short of serving the needs of all Asheville citizens.

Those leaders, despite their best intentions, formed their committee without any clue of the true extent of the destruction. More importantly, the Citizens Relief Committee convened to primarily aid the white members of their society, leaving the black, Jewish, and immigrant communities to fend for themselves. The committee served as the city government's executive branch for flood recovery and espoused the policies and philosophies that had progressively disenfranchised certain social groups in Asheville since the end of the nineteenth-century. Because of the great need in the days after the flood, the inadequate response created noticeable consequences. Most businesses, no matter how small or large, received little or no aid. Only Asheville's burgeoning tourism industry received adequate support from civic and business leaders.<sup>157</sup>

In times of great need, the Associated Charities acted through their relief committee. But the Great Flood of 1916 required a bigger response than any previous event. The limited budget and small staff of the Associated Charities could not sustain the needs that arose after the disaster.<sup>158</sup> Still, the basic formation of the Citizens Relief Committee followed the successful example of the Associated Charities. The Asheville Citizens Relief committee included a majority of the city's well to do and thrived on their donations. It was organized like a bureaucracy and included commissioners, school nurses, lawyers, merchants, and bankers in the city.

For Committee Chairman, Mayor Rankin chose Thomas J. Harkins, partner in the Van Winkle Law Firm and son of former mayor Herschel Springfield Harkins. Harkins formed several sub-committees, including one focused on employment, to which he

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<sup>157</sup> "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).

<sup>158</sup> *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), Oct. 12, 1912.



appointed his law partner Kingsland van Winkle. Miss Pearl M. Weaver, the head of the Associated Charities, served as Vice-Chairman. Within two days Asheville's community of civic, business, and white church leadership contributed nearly ten thousand dollars to the cause.<sup>159</sup>

The success of the committee depended upon the vast resources of its members as the most prominent business and political members of Asheville. Eventually, the Asheville Coal and Ice Company provided vouchers for free coal through the relief committee to flood sufferers. Businesses and individuals provided the materials gifted by the commission, which placed the workers of the committee in the role as the validator of claims. A vouching process existed, as best one could in those days, and individuals could only receive aid if they could prove their destitution was a result of the flood. If the adequacy of aid depended upon the wealth of contributors, and the segregation of philanthropy challenged marginalized members of the society to provide for their own, then the ability for the African American and immigrant communities must have struggled to support the members of their community effected by the disaster.<sup>160</sup>

The committee was not a general response to the disaster intended to help all who needed aid. The organization focused on two types of aid: supplies and shelter. While the Red Cross created temporary shelters out of public buildings, such as All Souls Church in Biltmore Village, the flood relief committee placed victims in private homes throughout the city. M.V. Moore, a prominent Asheville businessman who owned a men's outfitter

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<sup>159</sup> "Relief Committee Meets at City Hall," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 17-18, 1916; Biltmore Lodge, "Thomas J. Harkins," *Lodge Gate Newsletter* (July 2013), 7-8.

<sup>160</sup> The accounts of how much the committee received in donations and what the needs and available resources were can be found in every issue of *The Asheville Citizen* for several weeks after the flood beginning on July 17, 1916.

on Patton Avenue, took in a family during the recovery. His nineteen year-old daughter Pauline kept a diary that mentioned a family coming into their care on the evening of the July 16<sup>th</sup>. She barely mentioned their condition or descriptions—just that they were to stay until the father found work and that they departed on the afternoon of July 19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>161</sup> The committee placed many families in the homes of those spared from the floodwaters until the men could find employment or a more permanent place to stay.<sup>162</sup> But the exact terms of their care, the length of their stay, the type of work they found, even the amount of families placed in homes, is unknown.<sup>163</sup>

By all accounts, the loss of factories, electricity, and transportation severely affected business in Asheville, which, meant very little work happened. The city attempted to solve some of the labor issues by hiring day laborers for flood clean up and rebuild projects at \$.25 per day, which was approximately a quarter of their normal pay. Some workers refused to work for so little, which only caused city leaders to threaten to arrest them for vagrancy.<sup>164</sup> Like so many victims of the flood, the men who refused to clear debris and rebuild roads and bridges for government pay were viewed as lazy troublemakers.<sup>165</sup>

Lower class Appalachian laborers, especially people of color, lived a relatively mobile life, moving wherever work was available. Some workers likely joined the Great

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<sup>161</sup> Pauline Moore, *Diary of Pauline Moore*, "July 16<sup>th</sup>, Sunday" and "July 19<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday," Pack Memorial Library, (Asheville, North Carolina).

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> In the spirit of the type of government transparency promoted by southern business progressives, Thomas Harkins published the proceedings and financial accounts of the Citizens Relief Committee to be put on file in the mayor's office. However, the author of this thesis found no such document. The Asheville mayor's office believes that if a document existed it is long gone. The hope is that a copy sits in some box of some attic somewhere.

<sup>164</sup> "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Migration of black southerners who followed promises in newly industrialized western and northern cities. Prior to the flood, Asheville had become such a magnet for migratory workers for the Appalachian region. The flood had caused an exodus, however, especially for immigrants and African Americans. With increased racial tension due to progressive segregation policies, the black population of Asheville experienced a decline in prominence and numbers just prior to the flood. By the time of the disaster, the black community of Asheville was heavily under-employed, impoverished, and underrepresented. Although black citizens had once served as Alderman in the city's government, by 1916 blacks had been pushed to the margins of Asheville's society as sacrifices for the greater cause of an aesthetically pleasing tourist center.<sup>166</sup>

The Citizens Relief Committee also assisted victims by providing material needs. The organization secured bed linens, clothes, food, and furniture for those whose houses remained. The process of acquiring these supplies was very similar to other modern charities during disaster recovery. The committee secured donations deemed essential from area businesses. Those supplies included coal for cooking and heating, bed linens and other cloth-based products ruined by floodwaters, and food. The committee opened a site downtown and began accepting applications for aid. They reviewed the applications and awarded supplies. The full criteria and amount of rewards is unknown, but the central requirement was that individual needs must have come as a result of flood damage. For the first few weeks only white families could apply for aid. Once African Americans were allowed to apply, rumors of black families scamming the process circulated in local papers. But the stories that appeared resembled the trickster narratives found in southern

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<sup>166</sup> Waters, *Life Beneath the Veneer*, 48-98.

folklore that capitalized on racial stereotypes. Just a few weeks later, the Citizens Relief Committee disbanded and turned over all proceeds to flood victims in Asheville, about \$5,000 of the \$13,000 donated, to the Associated Charities, which only aided white families. From there the Associated Charities disbursed the surplus to the Lindley Training School, the Salvation Army, and the Compton Children's Home, none of which served the African American community.<sup>167</sup>

It may never be known whether or not the accounts of black scammers were part of this folklore or factual reports of wrongdoing. But the caricaturization of black individuals underscored the racial tension in Asheville at the time of the flood and how the disaster heightened or contributed to the issue. The existence of such bias and the relative anonymity of the black community in Asheville contributed to a void in the historical narrative of the flood. But broad social phenomena that occurred at the time of the flood could explain how the disaster affected the community.

Black flood sufferers depended more on their community than the government for recovery. The black population of Asheville had long taken care of itself as they found themselves more and more marginalized by progressive policies and the changing dynamics of urban life. Like most black communities of the South at the time, churches and schools served central roles in the recovery. Black people of all ages also traveled to Asheville to volunteer for the physical recovery of the community.<sup>168</sup> The black community was all but abandoned by Asheville's city leaders, but many members benefitted from the work of these black volunteers from areas like Chunn's Cove and

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<sup>167</sup> "What to Do with the Flood Fund Surplus," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), September 10, 1916, 4.

<sup>168</sup> Louis D. Silveri, Interview with John Baxter, August 5, 1975 (Chapel Hill: Southern Highlands Research Center, 1975).

Swannanoa. But because officials did not participate in the recovery of black families, very little evidence can be found on the extent of the aid and the nature of black needs. What is known is that Asheville at the time of the flood was a city divided by class and race and all efforts to reestablish the city's economy and assist individual recovery was hindered by segregation.

More is known about the extent black workers participated in recovery and the rebuilding of Asheville. In April 1916, the state government endorsed the use of convict crews on good roads and railway construction in a cost-saving maneuver to relieve the burden from local municipalities.<sup>169</sup> The majority of convicts in the county were black. Convict crews worked from sun-up to sundown to rebuild bridges, roads, and buildings and clear the area of debris from floodwaters and mudslides. They also assisted the Southern Railway in clean up. In addition to more than one hundred black convicts, private crews of black workers also assisted the Southern Railway in its monumental recovery process.<sup>170</sup> Much like the construction of some of Asheville's most extravagant tourist attractions, crews of black and immigrant workers made the recovery and rebuilding effort of the city after the flood of 1916 possible.<sup>171</sup>

### **Martial Law**

Twenty-year old Burgin Davis and a friend walked through the darkened flood district at about 10 o'clock on the night of Wednesday, July 19, 1916, when they heard a commotion. They were in the cotton mill area of the Riverside District, one of many area

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<sup>169</sup> "State Convicts on the Roads Endorsed," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), April 21, 1916, 5.

<sup>170</sup> Williams and Bumgarner, *The Floods of July, 1916*.

<sup>171</sup> "County Roads are Greatly Damaged," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 18, 1916, 4.

neighborhoods notorious in the merchant district for nefarious activities. The city, in an effort to discourage idleness and crime, hired fifty temporarily unemployed streetcar men as “special” deputies during the tenuous period just after the flood.<sup>172</sup> Their primary mission was to round up the homeless, place them in shelters, and patrol the unlighted flood district to discourage crime.<sup>173</sup> Everybody was aware of the heightened security and many reports focused on a fresh sense of fear that permeated society in the flood’s wake.

After the disaster, city officials reacted to the severance of transportation lines for goods and the loss of public streetlights by enacting a series of short-term policies to ensure peace and continuation of high-need functions in the city. Officers seized the only gasoline for city-use, including the private tanks of some citizens, out of fear that supplies would not reach the city before they ran out.<sup>174</sup> Citizens were urged to lock themselves up after dark. Official advertisements to discourage theft and vandalism in the flood district warned of “Deputies on Guard and Ready to Shoot” for even lighting a match. The toxic mixture of sediment and floodwaters included accelerants and officials feared a great fire, like the one that had severely damaged Riverside Park in the previous year.<sup>175</sup> City officials claimed Asheville was not under “martial law,” but to Burgin Davis, the police

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<sup>172</sup> “Asheville Guarded by Fifty Officers,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina.), July 18, 1916, 8.

<sup>173</sup> “Extra Vigilance,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), date unknown, found in Pack Memorial Library, Newspaper File Collection, Asheville Buncombe County, Vol. 57, No. 53: Floods, page 2.

<sup>174</sup> “Police Seize Gas; Hold for City Use,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 17, 1916.

<sup>175</sup> Chas. Lee Sykes, “Martial Law,” Letter to the Editor, *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 20, 1916.

crossed a line that night.<sup>176</sup> He and his companion were where they did not belong at the wrong time of night.<sup>177</sup>

In the distance, he saw two officers, later revealed to be J.C. Ledford and J.N. Bradley, beating a black man they had under arrest. Davis' companion made a remark at the police, which incited them to respond in a violent outburst. The police wanted to know what was said. Davis refused to repeat it unless the officers let the black man go. The policemen told the men they should leave. They did. A short time passed and the officers caught up to Davis and his friend. According to Davis, Patrolman Bradley grabbed him by the mouth and smacked him in the face, which bloodied his nose. He then punched him three times in the back of the head.<sup>178</sup>

Davis and his companion pressed charges for “conduct unbecoming officers,” which led to a trial before the city’s commissioners and Mayor Rankin that began on July 25th. During the trial the prosecution called forty witnesses. The trial became a showcase for underlying racial and class tensions centered on the different neighborhoods in Asheville. A collection of Asheville’s elites, such as M. Pearl Weaver, testified to the impeccable character of Ledford and Bradley.<sup>179</sup> Cotton mill workers, elderly laborers, and a thirteen year-old girl represented the likes of those who testified on behalf of Davis and his companion. The name, condition, and statement of the black man the officers abused were never discussed. Many times the proceedings focused on the “incurability

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<sup>176</sup> “Asheville Not Under Martial Law,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 26, 1916.

<sup>177</sup> “Charges against Two Policemen are Heard,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 26, 1916.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> “Evidence in Hearing of Patrolmen Taken,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 27, 1916.

of the neighborhood where the policemen were on duty.”<sup>180</sup> It was a case of rich whites versus poor whites with a black man caught in the middle and rather than discussing the brutal nature of the offense or presence of such an unprovoked force of patrolmen in the neighborhood, the defense decided to slander the character of Davis and his friend as ne’er-do-wells from the west side of town.

At the trial, some witnesses discussed the need for a heavy hand in the cotton mill neighborhood because of its reputation in the merchant district. Bradley and Ledford regularly patrolled the Cotton Mill area in the Riverside District, which housed families associated with the mill and factory workers of mixed races. The area was known for vagrancy and lacked the amount of street lighting in the business district downtown. This led to a general attitude from civic and business leaders, as well as from citizens who lived in other districts, that the area was prone to crime and other immoralities. Aside from that, the community also contained the most dangerous enterprises in the region. Sawmills, the train depot, landfills, the river, and the power and light plant made this section of the city, simply, the part of town you only went to for a distinct purpose.<sup>181</sup>

George Pennell, representing the prosecution, requested that the officers be removed from the force. Generally, the commissioners felt the charges against the policemen were “trumped-up” by the defense, despite several witnesses, both white and black, that claimed similar abuse at the hands of the patrolmen on their beat in the cotton mill area. Just three months prior to the trial, J.C. Ledford threw profane insults toward Mary Dalton, a sixteen-year old cotton mill worker, which came up during the trial and

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners,” 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).



provoked the commissioners to force upon him fines after he plead guilty.<sup>182</sup> The back and forth between the defense and prosecution underscored class animosity and discontent with the way city leaders responded to the disaster.

In the end, the commissioners and mayor found the officers guilty. Mayor Rankin announced the decision in which he explained that:

In view of the abnormal conditions existing on the night of July 19<sup>th</sup>, the great difficulties under which they worked and of their previous reputation as efficient, energetic officers, we hereby order as the minimum penalty for their misconduct that patrolmen Bradley and Ledford be suspended from the Police Department without pay for fifteen (15) days.<sup>183</sup>

The commissioners believed the contradicting testimony on behalf of the officers by some of the more prominent members of society. And, despite the incidences that arose concerning their prior conduct, the area itself, in both flood times and not, took the blame for the actions of the officers. In Asheville, it seems, different districts required a heavier hand than others and Ledford and Bradley only barely crossed the line that Wednesday night.

Even the realities of the flood-torn city were up for dispute. The police chief at the time claimed “there [had] been no crimes of any importance committed in the city since the flood of July 1916.”<sup>184</sup> He asserted the gasoline swallowed up by the French Broad River would surely evaporate before fires could occur and that only a handful of officers were sent to the flood district.<sup>185</sup> Commissioner D. H. Ramsey also decried the notion of

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<sup>182</sup> “Evidence in Hearing of Patrolmen Taken,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 27, 1916, 10.

<sup>183</sup> “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners,” 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina).

<sup>184</sup> “Few Violations,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 20, 1916.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

“Martial Law” and only asked citizens to conserve water since the full extent of pipeline damage was unknown and to preserve enough for the flood district to clean up muddy silt.

Regardless of what city officials proclaimed in the newspaper, some Asheville citizens believed city leaders managed the fear of crime with a much heavier hand than necessary. As one citizen explained in a letter to the *Asheville Citizen* editor, “the situation is surely bad enough without any additional scare stuff.”<sup>186</sup> Conditions throughout the city did more than imply the nature of the fear that circulated at the time. Panic gripped the city and civic and business leaders responded to that by attempting to secure the comfort and the safety of the more vulnerable individuals within the progressive hierarchy, those left completely tethered to their system of urban management within the downtown district. This was at the expense of those on the outskirts in danger of direct harm and destitution who posed a threat of mob violence even though they never attempted the sort. Such conflicting reports from the city’s leadership told more of their desire to suppress any potential for mob violence as a result of the conditions left by the flood than the reality of those circumstances. It was an era defined by racial violence in the South that validated their fears caused by what progressives believed was an inability to manage city districts.

Just over a year prior to the flood, race riots broke out in Atlanta over the Leo Frank case. Frank, a Jewish man arrested for murdering a child named Mary Phagan in 1913, was convicted in June of 1915 and promptly lynched. This set the Atlanta white population on a racial rampage in defense of white women that was stirred up by

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<sup>186</sup> “Voice of the People: ‘Martial Law,’” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 20, 1916, 4.

invalidated claims of threats from the black community. The mob murdered many black people over the course of three days and Georgia's governor declared martial law in Atlanta.<sup>187</sup> The *Asheville Citizen's* newspaper editor acknowledged the mob's "justifiable public outrage" in the case, but also praised the city of Atlanta's police and the State of Georgia's militia in the way they stamped out the riots. The editor praised a general rule exemplified by the Atlanta case; that "law and order" can conquer mobs, especially "when backed up by a show of official determination and vigor which the mob cannot displace."<sup>188</sup>

When Police Chief Perry, Commissioner D. H. Ramsey, and the editor of the *Asheville Citizen* spoke publically about the flood, they worried about the consequences of the news and kept quiet about the worst conditions. The newspaper never published the results of Bradley and Ledford's trial, although they covered the trial extensively. When a concerned citizen wrote to the editor of the paper about his experiences with "martial law" the following page boasted a rebuttal about the situation from the police chief himself. The paper filled its columns with stories of heroism and unity at a time when the city had never been so disjointed. Not since frontier times had families been so separated from each other and businesses so marooned from their client base.

Fear certainly prevailed amongst the leadership class but they had many examples of what fear in the hands of the powerful can do. Asheville's leadership class defied the notion that social shocks in any form must result in racial violence in the South. Despite the reality of a city sitting upon an economic, social, and racial powder keg, no fires were

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<sup>187</sup>Leonard Dinnerstein, "Leo Frank Case," *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, [www.georgiaencyclopedia.org](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org) (last accessed March 10, 2016).

<sup>188</sup> "Mobs and the Law," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), June 23, 1916.

set, and nobody died aside from those drowned in the waters of the French Broad and Swannanoa. But the racial and class tensions made worse by the uneven response to the flood planted seeds of discontent in Asheville communities that later surfaced in the city's worst period.

Asheville leaders responded to the flood of 1916 with an uneven and sometimes brutal hand. This resulted in at least one incident, but most likely several subtler cases, where racial and class profiling and the unmitigated circumstances of the flood-torn city led to an abuse of social power and the forfeit of the inherent rights of the labor class. By November 1916, the black community organized the Color Betterment League to promote the “general uplift and promotion of the best interest of the colored people of Asheville and to foster the law and order of the colored community . . . and encouraged peace and prosperity of the city.”<sup>189</sup> Whether or not this was a direct result of the racial tensions caused by the flood, the timing implied that incidences, such as the Bradley and Ledford affair, certainly did not produce the type of peace and uplift they desired or deserved.

### **Conclusion**

The storm and flood were unprecedented, which required an extraordinary effort from the city's leadership that, despite many tales to the contrary, never surfaced. The rhetoric that spewed from the mouths of the city's leaders and the pages of newspapers aimed to keep the supposed southern racial mob at bay. The leadership had no control over the weather or the mobs, but they implied otherwise with their statutes of urban living. To keep the narrative going, they dispelled all rumors of martial law and skirted

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<sup>189</sup> Lenwood Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina* (Asheville: University Graphics of the University of North Carolina-Asheville, 1980), 29.

the true extent of the devastation. They instead focused on the heroism of commissioners and police officers and the many white people who helped each other but spared very little concern or help for those with different accents and skin tones.

What was left out of the front pages was a story of environmental destruction caused both by the natural ways of mountain rivers and the negligence of man. The term “flood” falsely implies a single event that has a definite beginning and end. In reality, floods occur within a system of cycles that are ever adapting to both natural and man-made conditions. This flood began as two hurricanes far from the Blue Ridge Mountains but resulted in walls of thrashing water filled with the broken, twisted remnants of bridges, homes, and businesses. The force alone carried massive boulders from where they sat for millennia and spread them throughout the region, where they sit one hundred years later.

## CONCLUSION: THE FLOOD, THE LESSONS, THE FUTURE

### **One Hundred Years Ago**

One hundred years to the day, in an auditorium at Asheville-Buncombe Technical College, more than fifty people sat to listen to the opening remarks of a commemorative symposium on the flood of 1916. Many of the presentations focused on disaster management and the possibility of a similar event in the future and what, if anything, North Carolinians could do to prepare. A century earlier, under much different circumstances, not too far from where they sat, a congregation of Biltmore Villagers stood and watched Katherine Lipe clinging for her life on that tree at Lodge Gate. The scene of the flood was chaotic and horrific, quite different from the symposium, where most panelists failed to capture a sense of urgency.

The presenters delivered sobering assessments of the extent of the damage and the lessons to take from it to ensure that history does not repeat. They seemed happy with the symposiums two basic conclusions: 1) An event of the magnitude of 1916 will happen again; and 2) Societies are better prepared to face that tragedy. Still, many failed to address the key issues this thesis discusses. Modern disaster managers certainly have more resources at their disposal than the leaders of Asheville in 1916. Still, the prejudice that led to the lack of corporate or political responsibility for the conditions in marginal communities before, during, and after these events, and the hubris within leadership concerning their ability to respond to disaster is akin to what is known about Asheville in 1916. The chapters of this thesis tell but a small portion of that story.

## Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste

In November 2008, one month after the beginning of the recent Great Recession, incoming White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel told a conference of top chief executives “you never want a serious crisis to go to waste.”<sup>190</sup> Although representatives from the media and both sides of the political aisle criticized this seemingly calloused proposition, he only repeated a common political motivator throughout history. Whether on a large or small scale, disasters present opportunities that did not exist before. The only difference between Emanuel and the political and business leaders of Asheville in 1916 is that he divulged the information. By pulling the curtain back, Emanuel jeopardized those agendas by exposing them to a population that may or may not have been able to understand that both good and bad can come from not wasting a crisis. In reality, pushing through agendas during a time of calamity usually results in both outcomes.

Although it may be difficult to imagine, some good did come from the flood of 1916. In the aftermath of the disaster, Asheville began to look into how to make the city less vulnerable. Much of the push and pull that resulted in the marginalization of the most fragile communities of the region came from a strong desire to rebuild the area’s infrastructure and landscape to better absorb future disasters. Where wooden and steel bridges failed, the government erected concrete structures. They replaced wooden buildings with red brick and continued their steadfast efforts of paving over dirt roads to prevent wash out. City leaders also began to look forward to the transportation of goods over roads instead of costly and risky rails. Leaders also looked into bigger, better dams

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<sup>190</sup> Gerald F. Seib, “In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122721278056345271>.

to provide electricity to the city without interruption and looked into measures that would prevent, or lessen the damage from future floods.

The flood also seemed to make the city's leaders renegotiate their relationship with the surrounding landscape. Leaders looked at the devastation caused by the failure of earthen dams upstream, in Hendersonville, and called for governmental regulation of the construction of dams and for them to be erected with concrete instead of structures too crude to withstand the region's regular torrents. Later, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) did just that. The importance of the call for dam regulation in 1916, however, had more to do with private projects rather than any call for regional exploitation of natural resources. In a very progressive sense, the leaders of Asheville felt that only the government could ensure that dam construction would not contribute to natural disasters but could, possibly, help prevent them.

While the leaders of Asheville applied positive lessons after the flood of 1916 and certainly saved many lives during the recovery, they also played a major part in the economic struggles of the region in the decades after the flood. Certain city leaders saw the disaster as an opportunity to settle a long debate over the direction of the region's industries and to solve the commonly perceived threat of outside influences by both foreign investors and immigrants. Racism and xenophobia are relative conditions that should be defined by contemporary understanding. The racist attitudes of Asheville's leadership were commonly held beliefs by the dominant class and race of the United States. Even worse, their beliefs were backed by contemporary science, in the form of social Darwinian beliefs that permeated all levels of academic pursuits, including



historical research.<sup>191</sup> In short, the general populace and the leaders of both government and business sectors espoused racist beliefs that they considered to be supported by scientific research the “proved” the superiority of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant people who became very successful during the industrial revolution. Success equaled divine providence. The poor and different communities were seen as incapable of prospering on their own.

Almost every move, and most policies and procedures, which stemmed from progressives in Asheville, promoted these social beliefs that became economic reality by 1916. The social, economic, political, and environmental degradation caused by the industrial revolution created a movement focused on progress for all Americans that had revolutionary results in every corner of the nation. That nation was so driven by those economic and social policies that divided its people that it could not sustain the shock of disaster. By 1916, the success of the progressive movement resulted in transitions at every level of government. These changes ensured that the weaknesses in progressive ideology permeated the federal, state, and local responses to the Great Flood of 1916. The citizens suffered great corporal, material, and economic losses.

### **An Act of God or Man?**

Not enough attention has been placed on the uniqueness of the storms that caused the flood of 1916. There were two central elements involved that underscored the

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<sup>191</sup> Social Darwinism refers to the application of Darwinian theories on natural selection to society. Within this framework, progressives believed that businesses and individuals thrived according to their “fitness” and believed that aid interfered with natural processes. Although progressive leaders had loosened their adherence to this theory with individuals, they still very much believed that businesses should not receive aid. For more on Social Darwinism, see: Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).

unlikely occurrence of two such storms so close together. Although scientists are reluctant to confirm, it is highly likely that 1916 marked the middle of an El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), which is known to increase tropical cyclones in the Atlantic basin with a higher percentage of east coast landfalls. ENSO also strengthens storms in the Gulf of Mexico. The 1916 hurricane season is one of the most active in recorded history.

The second rare element is the fact that the combination between the likely work of the Jet Stream and Bermuda High pressure system forced a trajectory of those two storms that led to their settlement over the Southern Appalachians and kept them there long enough to drop historic amounts of rain. As hurricanes move inland and approach higher elevations, precipitation increases, which explains why the second storm dropped five inches of rain on Charleston but twenty-two inches at Altapass Orchard. Additionally, the summer of 1916 was one of the wettest on record for the Appalachian region. For weeks leading up to the storms, the ground became nearly saturated with unseasonable rains at the end of the spring and early summer. With an historic amount of water, soil saturation proved pivotal in the amount of runoff into the region's streams and the chance of mudslides in the area. Although this inundation alone would have proved devastating to the region, the changes in the landscape perpetrated by humans in the region in the decades leading up the flood made the disaster worse.

Floods and landslides were a regular occurrence in Appalachia before the flood of 1916, but as more people moved to the region and changed the landscape to fit their needs, these regular events became more intense and deadly. There were three basic aspects to those changes that had dramatic effects on Asheville in 1916. Widespread

deforestation contributed to the inability for the region's soils to absorb the rainfall and increased mudslides on certain slopes. Between 300 and 1,000 mudslides devastated the region and contributed to the majority of displaced rural inhabitants and deaths. The failure of earthen dams upstream from Asheville turned a rapid but gradual flood into a fourteen-foot wall of water and debris that slammed into Biltmore Village and the Riverside District. Some villagers were in the process of evacuating when the wall of water hit. They knew floods, but this was the first of this magnitude since the deforestation had hit its peak and the earthen dams that supported second home communities had been constructed. Finally, the dramatic increase in population in sections of the region such as the Riverside District of Asheville proved fatal since so many people then lived in direct harm of floodwaters. Certainly, the storms that slammed the region that July were unprecedented, but so was the extent of damage caused by humans and the vulnerability of communities placed where they were in direct harm. This combination of factors made the flood of 1916 "greater" than any previous or subsequent flood, but it also marked a new era of disasters for the region.

Contemporary critics also linked the devastation to these manipulations and challenged those in leadership roles to rethink their commitment to their actions. In the days after the flood, newspaper editors, local politicians, and business leaders began a campaign to investigate the rumors about the dam breaches upstream. If those dams failed because of men, then Asheville's leaders wanted the owners to pay for the damage downstream. Also, observant citizens noticed a pattern in the Riverside District that implicated deforestation in the worse of the damage. They noticed that businesses and homes that stood on banks that had tree cover were not damaged but those that were on

barren sections of the river suffered great losses. This led to a drive for green space along the river to create a buffer for future floods.<sup>192</sup>

The notion that an outside force caused such devastation infuriated some citizens and led to seek restitution. Still, there was no connection to the social, political, and economic policies that pushed some people closer to the river and in direct harm of the flood. The people of Asheville often guarded themselves from outside entities that sought to do harm to their community, which is not surprising considering the long history of absentee landowners, the federal government, and individuals from other parts of the country and world who ultimately took advantage of Appalachian inhabitants. Very few thought to be more introspective in figuring out whom to blame for the disaster. Those who did were quickly shut down as deterrents to the planned prosperity and protection the progressive leaders promised the citizens of Asheville. To ask whether progressive policies contributed to the devastation was considered a betrayal by city leaders.

### **Costs of Progress and Prosperity**

One of the defining causes of the progressive movement was the economic hardship of the majority of Americans. From 1825 to 1914, the United States suffered a major economic crisis every 12.9 years and non-major panics on a cycle of one in every six years.<sup>193</sup> It was a period of great transition and fear and political leaders at every level of government who shared those beliefs built careers on populist ideas. Among those figures were some of the most famous people of their era, such as Theodore Roosevelt.

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<sup>192</sup> "Lessons from Recent Flood Drawn by Asheville Board of Trade," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, NC), July 27, 1916, 3.

<sup>193</sup> Andrew J. Jalil, "A New History of Banking Panics in the United States, 1825-1929: Construction and Implications," *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics* 7, no. 3 (July 2015): 295-330. *EconLit with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 7, 2016), 309.

Many of the largest figures of the progressive visited Asheville in the decades before the flood because the city was a hotbed for progressive ideology.

Asheville had long been a destination for outsiders due to the area's natural resources and proximity to wealthy rural and urban communities. The city's location also made industrial pursuits more complicated than in the rest of the southeast.<sup>194</sup> Still, by 1916, Asheville boasted a bustling industrial district along the banks of the French Broad River. The city government supported the Riverside District and the tourist industry by funding the Asheville Board of Trade and requiring a fifty percent split of those funds between the two pillars of the city's economy. But tensions within the elite class of Asheville led to a growing coalition that favored tourism over industrial pursuits. The debate centered on which industry could sustain the Appalachian mini-metropolis and ensure continued growth in what seemed to be an era of unmitigated prosperity. After all, with the ashes of the Civil War behind, Asheville could only gain momentum after such destruction and economic ruin.

Asheville, however, fared well after the war compared to other sections of the former confederacy. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the exodus of the rural sections of the South that flowed into the nation's urban centers filled the city with potential laborers. Coupled with a dramatic increase in middle class citizens with expendable cash, visitors not only came to Asheville for relief from various lung ailments, such as tuberculosis, they now began to travel to the "Land of the Sky" for recreation purposes. Amenity-focused businesses opened throughout the downtown district and catered to the influx of tourists and new residents. To many, Asheville

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<sup>194</sup> Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*.

seemed to offer limitless opportunities. Although, like so many other urban centers in the South, the city's dedication to ideologies born from racism, classism, and greed hindered its progress and prosperity. Still, many came to Asheville seeking an ideal, which was one designed by the city's promoters, politicians, and businessmen.

Asheville was both non-fiction and tale, and the popularity of the latter far outweighed reality. Again, Asheville was not unique in this respect. Tourist attractions suffered from identity crises that often resulted in unfortunate social, economic, and environmental policies. The "vener," as Darin Waters put it, represented an ideal city for relaxation, recuperation, and riches. City boosters decided to promote a narrative that appealed to a broad spectrum of potential visitors. To accomplish this, they focused on the aspects of Asheville that attracted tourists while suppressing the less-appealing nature of the city. To match the ideal, city leaders began "cleaning up" the city in the late nineteenth century. Throughout the process, Asheville grew more divided and tensions often led to public battles, some of which were violent.<sup>195</sup>

Visitors came to Asheville from all over the country. By the twentieth century, northerners and southerners held many similar beliefs but differed greatly on others. Progressive leaders generally espoused more inclusive tenets of social mobility, a greater responsibility of government toward its people, and political reforms to ensure those ideals lasted. But there were progressives in both major parties and each region loosely adopted some of the major movement's platform while wholly ignoring others. This was

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<sup>195</sup> "Street Car Men Go on Strike Demanding Increase in Pay; Service Partially Stopped," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), April 27, 1913, 1; Also, for a description of the violence that ensued please see: David Whisnant, "Family Challenges in the 'Teens: A Strike, a Flood, and an Epidemic," *Asheville Junction: A Blog by David E. Whisnant*, March 4 2016, <http://ashevillejunction.com/family-challenges-in-the-teens-strike-a-flood-and-an-epidemic/>.

especially true of the adoption of “Jim Crow” laws in the South throughout the era. Southern Business Progressives championed an aggressive program aimed at perpetual prosperity based on collective wishful thinking more than analysis. Externalities, such as the flood of 1916, simply were not calculated into the economic plan, despite the fact that Asheville had been, and will always be, a flood-prone city. Asheville leaders simply wished that they could create a city that included segregation, disenfranchisement of immigrants and other minority communities, and provide an aesthetic and amenity focused industry to serve people from all regions of the nation, despite their social beliefs.

The Great Flood of 1916 challenged the “Land of the Sky” narrative. It exposed the lie that progressive policies were adequate to ensure prosperity and protection for all citizens, even though the population was more divided and dependent upon the urban food and service supply chain than ever before. These conditions, set in place many years prior to the flood of 1916, led to the failure of regional, state, and federal leaders to respond to the disaster in a manner that aided a majority of the region’s inhabitants.

By 1916, the victory of Progressivism permeated every level of government. In Asheville, this resulted in the divisions based on class, race, and occupation. Those divisions came from within, not from outside influencers, but the result was the displacement of long-held Appalachian ways of life. From agriculture to industry, the progressive revolution tossed many to the margins of early twentieth-century society. The world had changed around them and some suffered the consequences. Others took opportunities.

This shifted citizen dependence onto supply chains that were dependent upon the social, economic, and political systems of the progressives. It increased adherence to prices set by outside markets and the cost of transportation on rails. It meant that taxes became an increased part of life in exchange for the services provided by the government. It meant that those who once grew herbs for cures now had to pay the likes of E.W. Grove and his company for pharmaceuticals delivered to their door in capsules. At first, this transition was seen as reparation for the time in the wilderness. For the toil and abject poverty of their ancestors, and their presumed suppression by American aristocrats, the rising southern business progressives felt entitled to a better life provided for them by the government, not by hard work in the fields of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

All of this, of course, fell in line with the dominant economic theories espoused by progressives. An integral part of their revolution, they championed an overthrow of the more classic *laissez faire* mechanism in place before the Civil War that placed a tremendous amount of freedom on individual enterprises without regulation from the government. Instead, progressives supported “private economic freedom coupled with governmental regulation, social protections, and the control of public goods.”<sup>196</sup> It was thought that the only power that could ensure public good and private prosperity was a stronger centralized government. As the city government in Asheville expanded its strength into many aspects of the lives of Asheville’s citizens, the result was the growing dependence of people on the government. The problem was that the government could not ensure protection or prosperity, especially when the flood of 1916 exposed the weaknesses in their policies caused by the disenfranchisement of minority groups. Much

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<sup>196</sup> Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, “The Origins and Evolution of Progressive Economics: Part Seven of the Progressive Tradition Series,” *Center for American Progress* (March 2011), 1-10.



harm was done in the name of protection and prosperity, but the promises of progressives failed the citizens of Asheville during the recovery from the flood of 1916.

The failure of the agricultural sectors throughout the United States during the beginning of the twentieth century had many causes but one major effect. Urbanization was often touted as the alternative to rural living, but the reality is that it was much more complicated. Urban centers thrived on a network, or “nexus” as historian William Cronon reported, that linked cities to the country in an economic web that kept consistency in supply chains.<sup>197</sup> By 1916, the network that supported Asheville spread far, but it included farmers, mills, and factories from within the region.

There was no clear divide between the growing metropolis and the countryside, for better and worse. Having a supply network that spread as far as Asheville’s made the city for stable during periods of local crisis, like the flood of 1916. However, it also meant that consumers in Asheville paid prices based on the high costs of transportation and market rates from afar. Also, it meant Asheville citizens were tethered to the railways for their food and basic material needs. The most detrimental effect of the flood on Asheville was the loss of that network due to the dismantlement of the railroad and roadways.

The city of Asheville suffered little direct damage from the flood. The majority of the destruction occurred in independent municipalities surrounding the city, such as Biltmore Village and Marshall. Still, the effect of Asheville being closed off from the world had devastating effects on the fragile urban system in place. Asheville’s citizens and leaders were keenly aware of their dependence on the railroad for their food and

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<sup>197</sup> Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, 2-19.

basic material needs. Additionally, the flood damaged the dam at the city light and power plant, which cut off electricity for all citizens for weeks. Progressive leaders promoted city lighting as a method to prevent crime in Asheville. Fear gripped the city under these conditions. They did not know whether they would starve or when things would be back to normal. With decades of rhetoric concerning the link between the black and immigrant communities and crime in Asheville, there was a real fear that the vulnerable state of Asheville after the flood would lead to widespread chaos. It is important to note that although this fear was very real, no crimes were reported during the post-flood period, except for the Burgin and Davis case of police brutality.

Segregation and xenophobia in Asheville drew its inspiration from events that occurred mostly outside of the region.<sup>198</sup> Still, the social policies inspired by prejudiced racial and ethnic beliefs fit the need for the city of Asheville to promote an ideal citizen to encourage participants in the work needed to ensure prosperity and protection in the early twentieth century. Asheville was a relatively docile and industrious urban center in 1916. However, it was very divided. Those divisions led to an uneven recovery after the flood. Not all citizens were included in the prosperity of the city, and not all people were considered valuable to its future. City leaders prioritized aid based on those values and fell short of adequately helping the black, immigrant, and lower-class communities. As a result, many within those communities were left without homes, jobs, or their basic

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<sup>198</sup> The most significant episode of violence that involved a racial element in Asheville before the flood was the so-called "Negro Killer" incident of 1906. A black, drunken escaped convict from Charlotte named Will Harris opened fire on the people of downtown Asheville in November, ten years prior to the flood. He killed 5 people in 10 minutes. His victims included whites and blacks. The races came together and formed a mob that hunted and eventually gunned down Harris in a thicket of Rhododendron. The case heavily affected many in the city, including a young Thomas Wolfe, who later wrote of the incident in a short story entitled "The Child by Tiger." For more on the Harris Incident, see; David J. Krajicek, "Deadly Drunken Rampage," *New York Daily News* (New York, New York), June 7, 2008.

material and food needs. It was a systematic problem that extended into flood recovery because of basic progressive principles. Where they went is also up for speculation, but the most likely thing to happen was their participation in the Great Migration.

### **Once Divided**

People of color were blamed for the city's crime wave and the effect it had on the tourist industry. Dissenters of the progressive agenda, such as Thomas Wolfe, were ostracized from their community and seen as weaknesses in the Asheville economic system. If progressives viewed the social, political, and economic agenda as a machine, these two groups were seen as the wrench in the gears. They could only hinder progress and, therefore, were unwanted. All programs and policies that were set in place to support the white middle class before, during, and after the flood underscored this notion and the favoritism showed to that single group of society because the civic and business leadership felt that only through that group would prosperity come to Asheville.

The flood had a profound effect on all Appalachian citizens. But the social, economic, and political systems established by southern business progressives to protect citizens favored the white and middle class citizens over all others. This bias meant that victims' ability to recover after the disaster depended mostly upon their own ability to absorb the losses, which came down to personal finances. The elites who were not direct benefactors of public aid certainly had the capital or connections with lenders to support their rebuilding. Countless immigrants and people of color had neither the connections to banks nor personal wealth to sustain their recovery. Because progressive policies primarily supported middle class merchants, rural farmers who lost their crops and years

of fertile topsoil were left to depend on federal and state relief.<sup>199</sup> Relief organizations such as the Red Cross and Army Corps of Engineers were inadequate to properly address the needs of the region due to political setbacks centered on the constitutionality of their existence and the sheer magnitude of the work to be done.<sup>200</sup> Despite a tremendous amount of effort on the part of the state and federal governments and public welfare organizations, the marginalized communities in Asheville and the rest of the region were left with few options.

### **Tourism and the Great Flood**

Regarding tourism, this work adopts the notions C. Brenden Martin outlined in *Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double-Edged Sword* (2007). The predominant discussions about industry in the Appalachian South deals more directly with the role of railroads, timber, and mineral extraction than with tourism, despite the reality that tourism has dominated southern highland economies for the majority of the twentieth century. Although it hardly compares to the effect extractive industries had on the environment, society, and the economy, tourism also capitalized on low-wage labor and an abundance of natural resources, to detrimental effects. As Martin acknowledged, the double-edged sword of the tourism and the environment is the effect it had on the growth of commercialism, development, and population increases in Appalachia.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> "Craig Calls of State to Aid Flood Sufferers," *The Times Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), July 23, 1916.

<sup>200</sup> Kosar, *Congressional Charter*.

<sup>201</sup> For such works as mentioned, please see: Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: the Modernization of the Appalachian South 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*; and Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), and others.

“New South” boosters throughout the lower south promoted single-industry agendas to finance the modernization of the region. In Asheville, the overwhelming majority of city leaders believed the rhetoric of former Tennessee governor Ned McWherter, who once stated that “it’s a whole lot easier to pick tourists than to pick cotton.”<sup>202</sup> This could not be truer in higher elevations, such as Asheville, which could hardly depend on agriculture for their economy.

Although tourism had been a key element of the Asheville economy since the antebellum period, the decision to focus primarily on it for the prosperity of the city was a break from the norm. Like the rest of the South, Asheville had spent much of the post-Civil War period developing a thriving industrial sector along the banks of the French Broad River. Contrary to some accounts, the sector represented a large portion of the economic diversity of the city. The growing resentment between promoters of the Riverside District and the tourist industry resulted in the estrangement of many flood-torn factories and their workers. The flood only seemed to fuel the promotion of tourism as a more sustainable industry to support the southern business progressive promise of prosperity and protection.

What more of a juxtaposition was needed than the water-logged factories along the French Broad and Swannanoa and resort hotels that sat on the hills within and surrounding Asheville? Of course, this narrative ignores the severe detriment the loss of all major transportation paths played on the tourist industry. It also belies the fact that two people died while trying to get supplies to the marooned visitors at the Battery Park Hotel. The need for a narrative that promoted the more positive aspects of the city while

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<sup>202</sup> As quoted in Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South*, 139.

withholding the unsatisfactory, and sometimes dangerous, aspects of life in Asheville in 1916 led to a publicity battle that resulted in widespread rumors about the true extent of the devastation. While some business owners exaggerated the damage in a bid for public support, tourist magnates downplayed the effects of the flood in an effort to not deter summer time visitors. Because newspapers like the *Asheville Citizen* served as the primary source of news for the nation and locals, it took several months to recover from such misleading information and likely contributed to the uneven recovery of the city. The flood represented a clean slate for the tourist promoters of Asheville, who capitalized on the disaster to siphon more financing from the city government than was legal and to gain public support for their proposals.

The longer view of the effects of tourism on the economy of Asheville includes a history of social maladies and economic instability. Promotion of the region as a recreational “Land of the Sky” led to a real estate boon that went bust in the late 1920s and plummeted Asheville into the Great Depression.<sup>203</sup> It has taken Asheville the rest of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century to recover from the depression, which underscored, as elsewhere, the fallacy of single-industry promotion. But the point of this discussion is to examine how ideals, even progressive ones that promise democratic prosperity, can lead to economic depression and social disorder.

It is also important to seek out how single events like the Great Flood of 1916 can alter the trajectory of societies. Certainly, this one flood played a part of a scheme of motivators for the social, economic, and political outcomes of Asheville and the Appalachian region. But disasters have long been viewed as anomalies in history rather

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<sup>203</sup> Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 88.

than events that have long-lasting effects on society. Especially for a region with a long history of such events, Appalachian history should include how disasters shaped specific locales. Additionally, there is still much to be known about the region as a whole that cities like Asheville can teach.

## **Looking Forward**

### **Why Urban Appalachia**

Among the lessons learned by the citizens and leaders of Asheville in the days after the flood was the rethinking of the relationship between the city and the country. There was real concern about the dependence upon the railroad for basic needs. There, too, was a reticence against industries that depended upon the rivers for power and transportation due to pollution and its interference with tourism, which fueled arguments for tourism as a single-industry for the area. This led to conversations about the food supply chain in Asheville and whether dependence upon crops outside of the region and the transportation necessary to get them to the tables of Asheville's citizens. This resulted in parallel conversations about throwing more support toward regional farmers and a weaning off of railroads. The good roads movement had shifted its focus from purely supply-driven to considering tourists and visitors with new automobiles. This ultimately led to Asheville's participation in the Dixie Highway and the opening of an open-air market in the city's center, which came along with policies that supported local producers over outside markets. The flood exposed the vulnerability of Asheville's connection to outside markets and relative dislocation with the region.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> There are important precedents for urban research in Appalachia. Scholars such as Phillip J. Obermiller focused on the urban Appalachian history of the northern section of the chain. In the Southern Appalachians, preceding works on company towns highlighted the similarities between

All of that supports the notion that Asheville, although seemingly on a completely different trajectory, existed within an urban/rural nexus. The city depended upon the country, whether local or abroad. For supplies such as timber, food, and basic needs like coal, the city imported goods from other locales both within and outside of the region. For good reason, the majority of the works in the Appalachian Studies and History focuses on rural communities. But in some areas, that only tells part of the story. Because Asheville served as a large purchaser of rural products, contributed to the cultural legacy of the entire region, and became a destination for rural Appalachians who had fallen on hard times and were seeking opportunities elsewhere, urban Appalachian centers must be brought into the narrative of the region. Even the accepted term “Urban Appalachian” is understood as a noun that describes Appalachians who migrated to an urban center in the Midwest, West, or North, anywhere but within the region. The term “Appalachian” means to most “rural,” “country,” or “backwoods.”

Certainly, there are enough reasons to set urban centers apart from rural Appalachian communities. When one thinks of “Appalachia” the idea, it is difficult to reconcile the vast differences between the rich rural culture and the more cosmopolitan atmosphere of cities. Places like Asheville have always served as a junction that host visitors from a full spectrum of locales alongside “natives,” who are mostly transplanted

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them and urban centers throughout the region. The difference between Asheville and company towns is that its leaders distinctly modeled the city from metropolises such as New York and Chicago and had a different social history. Asheville did not begin as a housing community for the workers and managers of extractive industries, it was a crossroads of trade and community between many different peoples over several centuries long before its first skyscraper was erected. For a study on company towns, see: Shifflett, *Coal Towns* and Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*. Still, some scholars tackled urban centers like Asheville and their unique contribution to the region’s identity, culture, and economic history. An overwhelming majority of research on the region focuses on rural communities, but there is a growing interest in the urban history of Southern Appalachia. Please see: Tom Lee, *The Tennessee-Virginia Tri-Cities: Urbanization in Appalachia, 1900-1950* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010).



settlers just a few generations deep into Appalachian habitation. But there was always a rich presence from Appalachians in Asheville whose long-term ties to the land drove them to become very active in the city's social, economic, and political design. The anomalous nature of Appalachian urban centers makes integration into the established narrative of Appalachia difficult. Still, one should not ignore the intimate connection Asheville had with its surroundings and the effect that had on the entire region's cultural, social, economic, and environmental legacy.

### **Natural Disasters and Appalachian Society**

This thesis falls in a long line of investigations into how natural disasters shaped communities throughout the world. However, as is the case so often in historiography, there are far more blank pages on the topic that should be written. This is especially true of the Southern United States. Appalachia is a region wrought with environmental destruction. Still, there is no comprehensive study on how those disasters, no matter how singular, shaped the culture, economies, politics, and landscape of the region. Even further, the flood of 1916 begged far too many questions than could be answered in the scope of this text. In short, there is a much bigger story available than in the preceding pages, although there are peeks throughout that hint toward the larger narrative.

As discussed in the first chapter, two hurricanes traipsed across the Southeastern United States and settled over Appalachia within a week of one another. It is highly unlikely that two such hurricanes so early in the season would have their individual trajectories, but it has happened before and since. The potential presence of the El Niño Southern Oscillation and its effect on the fury and path of the storms also made the disaster unusual. Still, despite a history of such storms and the damage that they cause in

the Appalachians historians mostly failed to discuss what happens when the remnants of hurricanes head inland and to the highlands. Long-time inhabitants are well aware of the dangers of the occurrence of hurricanes in the mountains. It is time for academics to catch up.

When historians discuss flooding in the Appalachians they also tend to fail to put a proper spotlight on mudslides.<sup>205</sup> This may be due to a comparative lack of data to support their claims. However, recent research on historical floods in the region by NOAA and independent scientists sheds light on the probability of mudslides and create data that can pinpoint with extraordinary accuracy specific slopes throughout the region that have and likely will continue to experience slides. Those scientists now estimate that number of slides that occurred during the flood of 1916 may reach into the thousands. Based upon oral histories and newspaper accounts detailed the devastation and immense loss of life due to debris flows, it is likely that mudslides contributed to the majority of deaths and loss of property in the region. When the waters rise the mountains come down during floods in Appalachia.<sup>206</sup>

If floods incorporate both soil and water, environmental historians should explore how they shaped the landscape of the region and how humans throughout Appalachian history induced or made disasters worse. There is surprisingly little research, both

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<sup>205</sup> Among those are: Silver, *Mount Mitchell and the Black Mountains* and Davis, *Where There are Mountains*.

<sup>206</sup> James Fox, Chris Crew, and John Gerber, "Lessons Emergency Managers Have Learned 1916-2016" (presentation, Symposium on the Great Flood of 1916, Asheville, NC, July 15-16, 2016). See also: Rick Wooten, Anne C. Witt, Chelcy F. Miniat, Tristram C. Hales, and Jennifer L. Aldred, "Frequency and Magnitude of Selected Historical Landslide Events in the Southern Appalachian Highlands of North Carolina and Virginia: Relationships to Rainfall, Geological and Ecohydrological Controls, and Effects," in *Natural Disturbances and Historic Range of Variation: Type, Frequency, Severity, and Post-disturbance Structure in Central Hardwood Forests USA*, ed. Cathryn H. Greenberg and Beverly S. Collins (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

historical and scientific, on the vast deforestation of the early twentieth century and its role in regional disaster. From a watershed's perspective, nobody knows exactly which tracts of land were denuded and which had cover. When discussing extraction and its effect on rivers and tree species there is little need for a tract-by-tract assessment of deforestation. But when investigating flood events it becomes much more important to know whether a particular peak up or downstream from the point of overflow had healthy forest cover or not.<sup>207</sup>

The number of deaths attributed to the flood of 1916 is still a highly debated topic, with a range from the mid-40s to 80s.<sup>208</sup> This is in part due to the propensity for homesteads to not be traceable through deeds and other municipal documents as a result of the long history of squatting that preceded the more legitimate period in land acquisition. It also potentially had something to do with the unlikelihood of reporting deaths due to the practice of family burials on homestead lands. Knowing where landslides potentially occurred could inspire a new generation of anthropologists and archeologists to conduct studies and digs on specific downslope plots of land to seek the remnants of structures covered by mud and debris.

Natural disasters expose the vulnerable aspects of societies. Like chopping off the top of an anthill, disasters shock systems and send communities into turmoil. How societies respond to that chaos is a measure of the stability of their political, economic, and social systems. Disasters expose the fallacy of those systems for historians, but they also taught their contemporaries about the need for adjustments. Those adjustments,

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<sup>207</sup> See Davis, *Where there are Mountains and Silver, Mount Mitchell*.

<sup>208</sup> Bandel, *So Great the Devastation* took a purely archival approach to place the number of dead around 45, but contemporary newspaper accounts put the numbers up to 80.

however, did not always result in the protection and prosperity of all citizens. Almost always, natural disasters resulted in the further marginalization of minority communities due to prejudiced economic, social, and political systems.

### **Inter-industry Tension**

Appalachian scholars have focused unevenly on the history of tourism in and around Asheville. The city's economy had always been diverse, except for the a few decades prior to the Great Depression. That diversity, as argued here, is the primary cause for the city's economic stability in years before and after the Civil War. Still, the rhetoric that emerged from the city could make one believe that the city has always and will always survive or die upon the success of its resorts and attractions. This thesis took a deeper look into the economic, social, and political context of Asheville in 1916 and turned up a previously ignored aspect of the city.<sup>209</sup>

The uneven recovery of individuals and families fell along class and racial lines because of progressive policies that favored the middle class. The uneven recovery of the city's businesses was the result of more established wealthy elites stonewalling efforts to assist middle-class business owners who had been in Asheville less and had much less wealth and political clout. More established elites, such as E.W. Grove had committed to the city's tourism and folk-craft industry and used the flood to further their agenda at the expense of those like Sigfred Sternberg, a Jewish Immigrant junk dealer who had clients

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<sup>209</sup> This is a judgment based upon the lack of historical research, both academic and popular, that focused primarily on Asheville's tourist industry during periods of diversity. Although the tourism industry maintained a central role in the area's economy beginning as early as the eighteenth century, the Riverside District developed during the same period and proved to be vital to the communities of Asheville. For an example of a popular history, see: Nan K. Chase, *Asheville: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007). For an example of an exemplary but hyper focused (on tourism anyway) academic history, see: Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*.

ranging from Carl Schenk to lower class metal recyclers. The tension between these two classes of entrepreneurs came to a head in the days after the flood as the community decided that something should be done about the desolation of the Riverside District.<sup>210</sup>

Just as the community had been concerned about the recovery of families after the flood, the city of Asheville grew troubled by the damage to factories and other businesses along the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers. It is interesting that the discussion begun by the editor of the *Asheville Citizen* asked whether the riverside industries should be saved. It implied that the public or government of the city of Asheville did not inherently value the industries. A gathering of the most prominent businessmen in the city met on July 24, 1916 to decide the fate of the Riverside District. Governor Locke Craig served as convener and asked the citizens whether “they want these industries here or not.”<sup>211</sup> A delegation of members from the Asheville Board of Trade and the Western Carolina Lumber and Timber Association proposed a \$150,000 public corporation to aid the industries. Civic leaders failed to reach a consensus and abandoned the proposed Asheville Cooperative Industrial Association. Supporters meant it to be the industrial equivalent of the Citizens Relief Committee in which an entity would be created to seek aid through public subscription that could be disbursed to the riverside industries devastated by the flood without increasing their debt. Governor Locke, the Asheville City Government, and the *Asheville Citizen* supported and professed the genius of the proposal as a means to help the greatest number of businesses to properly recover. Although there was an agreement that something should be done for the industries, the plan promoted by

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<sup>210</sup> “Citizens at Mass Meeting Start Movement to Offer Financial Aid to Firms Affected by Recent Flood,” *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 25, 1916, 1.

<sup>211</sup> “Citizens at Mass Meeting,” *The Asheville Citizen*, 1.

the committee met resistance from members of Asheville's millionaire elites. The debate that ensued, however, became more telling of the class and racial tensions that dominated Asheville's civic and business organization in 1916.<sup>212</sup>

Sternberg's proposal met immediate resistance from some of the city's more established, and some would argue legitimate, business leaders. The day after the mass meeting, the newly formed committee met in the meeting room of the Board of Trade to make plans for the co-operation. Fred Loring Seely<sup>213</sup>, who had opposed the plan, submitted his own, which brought the committee to a halt. Rather than put the burden of recovery on the public, Seely proposed that businesses take lines of credit from him, with the backing of an anonymous local bank, to fund their recovery. The proposal seemed too good to be true for Sternberg's committee. They had no idea how right they were.

Seely's proposal appealed to the committee, whose only purpose was to aid the flood stricken industries by the most efficient means possible. It also bolstered a growing sentiment in Asheville's government that industries engaged in more traditional endeavors did not align with the city's broader progressive plans. By extending credit through him, the factories would not be subject to the unpredictable whims of banks, therefore providing immediate relief with minimal long-term risk. Because the bank Seely allegedly struck a deal with was local, his plan did not invite outside capital, which

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<sup>212</sup> At the mass meeting, prominent businessmen, politicians, and citizens chose Sigfred Sternberg as chairman of the proposed corporation. Prominent Asheville elite Fred Seely, E. W. Grove's son-in-law opposed the Sternberg proposal. For sources on the Seely/Sternberg debate, please see: "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Commissioners," 1916-1917, Book 12.5, Records of the Office of Mayor (Asheville, North Carolina); "Citizens at Mass Meeting Start Movement to Offer Financial Aid to Firms Affected by Recent Flood," *The Asheville Citizen* (Asheville, North Carolina), July 25, 1916, 1; Rob Neufeld, "Visiting our Past: The Junkman Cometh," *Asheville Citizen-Times* (Asheville, NC), February 8, 2016; Rob Neufeld, "Scrap Yard Prince Surveys Depot History," [www.thereadonwnc.com](http://www.thereadonwnc.com), April 15, 2011 (Last Accessed on April 14, 2016).

had become a growing concern amongst civic leaders. Finally, Seely, an accomplished and respectable local magnate, seemed to be competent enough to address this issue. But, F. L. Seely did not speak with any local banks before writing up his proposal. In fact, no banks in town were willing to extend credit lines to the devastated businesses except on a case-by-case basis and certainly not through a proxy. In the end the committee disbanded without a dollar of aid given to the industries. But the underlying reasons why the cooperative proposal failed underscored the inter-industrial tension in Asheville born from class and ethnic differences.<sup>214</sup>

Sternberg's Jewishness never made headlines in the debates concerning the committee's proposal. But Asheville was a violent place for immigrants and African Americans at the time of the flood. Representatives of marginalized communities, such as Sternberg, served in prominent positions in some of the city's influential organizations. But individuals like Seely and Grove represented the Anglo-Saxon hegemony of the millionaire elites, whose power far outweighed that of civic organizations. The competing visions for Asheville's future economy represented by Seely and Sternberg never played out on a level battlefield in the class and racial warfare of the burgeoning metropolis. Seely and Grove planned to reinvent Asheville's industrial organization with folk-based enterprises tied intimately to tourism objectives that heavily played upon regional stereotypes of people and the environment, which left little room for the factories struggling in the weeks after the flood. The Seely and Sternberg stories epitomized twentieth century Asheville and underscore a final point concerning the need to dig deeper into Appalachia's progressive heritage.

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

## **Progressive Mountaineers in an Age of Invention**

One possible explanation for why scholars have so far focused primarily on rural Appalachia is the anomalous nature of urban centers during the Progressive Era. The popular narrative of outside landowners wreaking havoc on the people, culture, and environment of the region during industrialization does not fit into the Asheville narrative. In the rural story, locals play a middling role in the worst of the travesties. In the city they are front and center. Also, the idea of a local in the city is a vague and often contradictory notion that can be reduced simply to somebody who was there before whatever entity is attempting to force change.<sup>215</sup>

To the city of Asheville, the term “foreign” had a simple and broad definition. It meant outside and had a very short-term focus. Within a year of the flood, the city looked to take out municipal bonds to fund the building of infrastructure such as roads, telephone lines, and sewers according to national trends. When the mayor and commissioners began their debates, a schism emerged between those who felt that looking toward banks in the Mid-West and North put Asheville’s future in jeopardy because of the invitation to “foreign” sources of money.<sup>216</sup> Yet, if one such as George Vanderbilt decided to move to the area and construct a new enterprise, one was welcome. Asheville was a place that was open for business, but the city wanted its investors to remain in the city keeping its interests at the center of the company’s objectives. A foreigner was one who remained outside of Asheville and whose goals did not include an investment in the city’s future prosperity. The term had less to do with geographic location of origin than ideals and allegiance to the city’s future.

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<sup>215</sup> Shifflett, *Coal Towns* and Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*.

<sup>216</sup> “Minutes of the Proceedings,” Book 12.5.



The “outsider”/”insider” debate within modern Appalachian societies has the tendency to obscure potential resolutions to the region’s social, economic, and environmental issues. It seems that it was also a concern of early twentieth century leaders. The difficulty with such debates is the fluidity of the definitions of such complicated terms such as “native” and “foreigner.” Southern business progressives harbored various ideals attached to labels throughout the South that included local prejudices. In Asheville, a city long associated with travellers and trade, the appropriate person, regardless of origin, had to embody progressive ideals to take the benefits of the city’s prosperity and great resources. The diversity that once defined the city became a burden under the single-minded progressive leadership of 1916. As rural communities suffered the fate of agriculture-dependent societies through the industrializing nation, cities such as Asheville became more important than ever for regional stability. This meant that urban centers extended their influence much farther than their municipal boundaries. Little research has been done on the effect southern business progressivism had on the social, economic, and political history of Appalachia’s rural communities in particular.<sup>217</sup>

Even less research has been done on the role of progressivism in the creation, or invention, of the idea of Appalachia. At about the time of the flood, outsiders serving in various positions were in the process of inventing a narrative of the region as a strange

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<sup>217</sup> However, in addition to the work of George B. Tindall, some historians studied southern progressivism during the era of the flood, which proved useful to understanding how southerners as a whole grappled with the paradox of progressive policies and racial segregation. See, William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

land with strange people.<sup>218</sup> The creation of the popular assumptions of Appalachia had more to do with the rest of the country rather than the realities within the mountains. Urban centers such as Asheville contrasted the notions of homogeneity, backwardness, violence, and general otherness espoused by color writers and self-aggrandizing missionaries.

While the city government of Asheville executed an uneven recovery based upon contemporary prejudice, much of what they did underscored the similarities they shared with the rest of the nation. Asheville was different than the rural communities within the region, just as the coal towns of West Virginia differed from Hot Springs, North Carolina. The point is that there were many “Appalachias” at the turn of the century. Color writers focused on the differences the region held from the mainstream American culture and blew them out of proportion. Progressive Appalachians shared many beliefs with the rest of the country. They also held regional differences based upon local economic, social, environmental, and historical experiences. Progressivism arose as a consequence of the industrial revolution, which affected all citizens of the United States. Believers in the movement struggled to set things right, which included programs for both town and country. Asheville’s civic and business leaders chose solutions based upon the needs and flaws of their Appalachian home. The ways the city’s leaders responded to the flood and the consequences of their shortsightedness and prejudice were not unique to the Appalachian metropolis. In fact, it was not even unique to the era.

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<sup>218</sup> Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*.

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*The Los Angeles Times*

### **Archives**

Biltmore Estate Archives  
Hendersonville Historical Preservation Society  
Pack Memorial Library  
Records of the Office of Mayor, Asheville, North Carolina  
Southern Highlands Research Center  
University of North Carolina-Asheville D.H. Ramsey Library  
W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection at Anne Belk Library, Appalachian State University

## Vita

Anthony received his BA in History from the University of Georgia in 2013. He was born in Tampa, Florida, but lives in Boone, North Carolina with his wife and two cats, Chloe and Zooney. He has presented dozens of papers at conferences in the United States and abroad on topics relating to the environmental history of southeastern rivers and natural disasters. In the fall of 2016, *The Bulletin of the University of Transylvania, Brasov* published an earlier version of the introduction of this thesis, entitled “Response and Consequence: The Asheville Flood of 1916.” He is pursuing a career in education and writing.