

Request Form for Highway Historical Marker

REQUEST FORM FOR A PROPOSAL TO BE PRESENTED TO THE NORTH CAROLINA HIGHWAY HISTORICAL MARKER COMMITTEE: *(Please provide the information requested. Include extra sheets if space provided on this form is inadequate.)*

A. SUBJECT OF PROPOSED MARKER:

The August 13, 1940, flood in Watauga County, which ended rail service to Boone.

B. SITE TO BE MARKED:

Site of the former ET&WNC Railroad Depot at Boone.

C. PROPOSED LOCATION OF MARKER ON NUMBERED, STATE-MAINTAINED HIGHWAY: *(Be specific. Note whether the site lies within the corporate limits of a city or town. A sketch of the location would be useful.)*

New bulb out feature at intersection of West King St. (US 321) and Linney St. in Boone, NC.

D. DISTANCE AND DIRECTION FROM THE PROPOSED LOCATION TO THE SITE TO BE MARKED: *(for example, 100 yards S.E.)*

Approximately 200 yards SW of the location of the marker.

E. HISTORICAL SKETCH: *(should be documented with primary sources, i.e., original or contemporary records)*

Tuesday, August 13, 1940, saw record-breaking rainfall in Watauga County.¹ It was the culmination of a massive rain event that began over the weekend and continued to pound northwestern North Carolina for days. The relentless rain saturated the ground and raised rivers and streams far above their standard levels. Over 2,000 landslides were recorded in Watauga County alone as a result of the storm, although the storm also impacted other parts of Western North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina with flooding and landslides.² The resultant landslides and flooding eventually killed sixteen people and destroyed dozens of homes in Watauga County. Numerous children were killed in the flood and landslides, while many other individuals were gravely injured. The raging waters also wiped out farms, livestock, businesses, and other buildings throughout the county.³

This flood was the greatest disaster to touch Watauga County, far surpassing the 1916 flood, which had also wreaked havoc on the region. Ivery Greene, a native of the county who compiled harrowing accounts from the 1940 flood, wrote that the 1916 flood was “nothing to compare with the 1940 flood.”⁴ Andrew Jackson Greene, a professor at Appalachian State Teachers College, kept a daily journal for most of his life. His entries for the days around the storm and flood offer glimpses of just how frightening and devastating it was. On August 13 he wrote, “It is the most frightful time since July, 1916. Perhaps there is more damage now than then.”⁵

Beyond the horrific loss of life in the county, damage to roads and the railroad slowed the supply of aid. Shortly after the flood, the *Engineering News-Record* reported, “[H]ighway officials estimated that 90 percent of the secondary road bridges in Ashe, Watauga, [and] Wilkes [Counties] and the northern part of Caldwell County in North Carolina were lost.”⁶ The damage to the railroad was so severe that it was deemed too expensive to repair, and the owners decided to cut their losses entirely and abandon the line.⁷ While the highways were eventually repaired, with large sums of aid coming from the state and federal government, the railroad never returned to Boone.⁸ The Linville River Railroad had been hailed as a large part of Boone’s growth in the preceding three decades, but it would no longer factor into the town’s commercial success.

Trains first arrived in Boone in 1918 after nearly 15 years of attempts by the town’s citizens to bring rail to Watauga County. B. B. Dougherty, head of the Appalachian Training School and one of the town’s most influential citizens, personally made many unsuccessful attempts in the early 1900s.⁹ However, in February 1918, Dougherty and the other rail proponents finally succeeded when Boone’s residents voted in favor of a \$27,000 bond referendum to help finance the construction of the Linville River Railroad extension. The extension would run from Shulls

¹ “Hundreds of Thousands of Dollars Damage As Raging Waters Sweep Watauga County,” *Watauga Democrat*, August 15, 1940.

² Richard M. Wooten, et al., “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*, ed. Cathryn H. Greenberg and Beverly S. Collins (Springer International Publishing, 2016), 215; G. F. Wiczorek, et al., *An Examination of Selected Historical Rainfall-Induced Debris-Flow Events within the Central and Southern Appalachian Mountains of the Eastern United States*, US Geological Survey Open-File Report 2009-1155 (Reston, VA: US Geological Survey, 2009), 5-6; and Anne Carter Witt, “A Brief History of Debris Flow Occurrence in the French Broad River Watershed, Western North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Geographer* 13 (2005): 69.

³ “Sixteen Wataugans Lose Lives As Flood Waters Sweep Over County,” *Watauga Democrat*, August 22, 1940. For an in depth account of those who lost their lives and were injured during the flood see: Ivery Greene, *A Disastrous Flood: A True and Fascinating Story*, 4th ed. (Lenoir, NC: Smith Printing Co., Inc., 1976).

⁴ Greene, *A Disastrous Flood*, 99.

⁵ “August 13, 1940,” Volume 154, A.J. Greene Collection, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA.

⁶ *Engineering News-Record* 125 (August 22, 1940): 253, quoted in Water Resources Branch, *Floods of August 1940 in the Southeastern States*, Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper 1066 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1949), 9. This entire, comprehensive report nicely covers all aspects of the rainfall and subsequent flooding and landslide activity from the two storms in August 1940.

⁷ “Federal Funds Sought To Help Rebuild Roads,” *Watauga Democrat*, September 5, 1940; “Linville River Railway Seeks To Abandon Its Lines,” *Watauga Democrat*, September 12, 1940.

⁸ “Federal Funds Sought To Help Rebuild Roads,” *Watauga Democrat*, September 5, 1940

⁹ Ruby J. Lanier, *Blanford Barnard Dougherty, Mountain Educator* (Duke University Press, 1974), 74-79.

Mills, then the terminus of the road some eight miles southwest of town, to Boone. The completed line would run from Boone to Cranberry, North Carolina, where it would connect with the rest of the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad out to Johnson City, Tennessee. R. C. Rivers, editor of the weekly newspaper the *Watauga Democrat* in Boone, cheered the result of the referendum, exclaiming, “At last it seems that Watauga, the best county in the State, is to be connected with the outside world by rail.”¹⁰ Construction began soon after, with many locals actively participating in the construction. Construction on the line finished in October 1918. Regular mail service on the line began in January 1919 while regular passenger service began in May 1919.¹¹

While the arrival of rail was not the only factor that helped Boone grow, it was certainly a major influence. The train was able to bring vacationers straight into the city and was itself a large part of the draw. In a 1974 oral history interview, James Oliver reminisced about taking the “mighty good” train into Boone, “just for the trip you know, no business. Just for the trip.”¹² R. C. Rivers, while eulogizing the railroad after it had been dismantled, wrote, “. . .the [railroad] was one of the most potent factors in the development of the city.”¹³ Though filled with claims and praises riddled with boosterism, a town directory from 1925 argued that, “Boone is in the midst of a building boom. New brick store rooms and numerous fine bungalows are in the process of building.”¹⁴ This directory, however, also made far more mention of the then new roads into the town than it did of the six-year-old railway. While trains continued to service the town for another fifteen years, perhaps the greater impact of improved roads was already being observed by Boone’s citizens.

The challenges of the early 1930s were felt strongly by the Linville River Railway (LRR). The Cranberry Coal and Iron Company, which had operated in Cranberry, NC since the nineteenth century, closed in 1929. This closure, according to historian Lou Harshaw, left only, “the mail, some logging work, and passengers, who, in increasing numbers, purchased automobiles.”¹⁵ The economic downturn of the 1930s for the LRR made the decision not to rebuild the tracks after the 1940 flood much easier. Francis Ehl Ward, in his Master’s thesis on the history of the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad, also argued, “The mines had been closed, the May Tide of 1911 and the flood in the Boone area around 1940 had worked havoc to the line, and now with the paved highway the railroad could not continue.”¹⁶ The loss of the original reasons for building the railroad could not be made up by passengers, especially as these passengers became more likely to drive themselves into Watauga County as the roads were improved.

At a hearing before the Interstate Commerce Commission in December 1940 in Johnson City, representatives for the railroad estimated that it would cost over \$150,000 to rebuild the tracks and produced an audit that revealed that it had lost money for all but two years of its existence, and that those losses were increasing yearly.¹⁷ The Interstate Commerce Commission sided with the Linville River Railway Company to allow the abandonment of the line. Though there was strong public opposition from Boone, voiced eloquently by B. B. Dougherty during the December hearing, the ICC ruled that salvage operations could begin any time after February 27, 1941.¹⁸

¹⁰ “The Railroad Boone Election,” *Watauga Democrat*, February 14, 1918.

¹¹ For overviews of this timeline see Mallory Hope Ferrell, *Tweetsie Country: The East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad* (Pruett Publishing Company, 1976), 31; Cary Franklin Poole, *A History of Railroad in Western North Carolina* (Overmountain Press, 1995), 110-111; and Lanier, *Blanford Barnard Dougherty*, 79-83. For an in depth look at the history of the Eastern Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad, see Francis Ehl Ward, “A Historical Study of the ET&WNC Narrow-Gauge Railroad” (Master’s thesis, Appalachian State Teacher’s College, 1958).

¹² James O. Shell, interview by Barbara Greenberg, July 23, 1974, Appalachian State University Special Collections collection 111, tape 235, transcript, Appalachian Oral History Project Interviews, 1965-1989, *Appalachian State University Digital Collections*, <http://omeka.library.appstate.edu/items/show/7288>, accessed September 13, 2016, page 12.

¹³ “Salvage Crew Is Dismantling Narrow [Gauge],” *Watauga Democrat*, July 17, 1941.

¹⁴ “Directory of Boone, North Carolina--July, 1925,” *Digital Watauga*, accessed September 13, 2016, <http://www.digitalwatauga.org/items/show/934>.

¹⁵ Lou Harshaw, *Trains, Trestles, and Tunnels: Railroads of the Southern Appalachians* (Bright Mountain Books, 1977), 76.

¹⁶ Ward, “A Historical Study,” 76.

¹⁷ “Hearing Is Held On Scrapping Of Local Railroad,” *Watauga Democrat*, December 5, 1940.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Lanier, *Blanford Barnard Dougherty*, 82-83; “Narrow [Gauge] Is To Abandon Line From Cranberry,” *Watauga Democrat*, March 6, 1941.

The railway's assets were sold or transferred following the ICC's ruling. The Midwest Steel Company of Charleston, West Virginia, purchased the steel from the tracks for \$39,000 and began the salvage operations in the spring of 1941.¹⁹ The railway's rights-of-way reverted back to the original landowners, with the exception of the station site at the corner of River and Depot Streets in Boone. That station was sold to Herman W. Wilcox, the former station agent who had worked for the LRR for over a decade.²⁰ Wilcox began remodeling the station to "take care of the rapidly expanding needs of the Boone bus terminal."²¹ Indeed, the official end of rail into Watauga County did not come until mid-1941, even though the final train into Boone had arrived on August 13, 1940.

The devastation of the 1940 flood cannot be overstated. All of the main highways into Boone were closed due to washouts, bridge collapses, or flooding, and numerous sections of the Linville River Railroad had been swept away. Damage and landslides were recorded throughout the county. The Deep Gap area perhaps saw the worst of the damage, as it had the highest concentration of landslides and, perhaps coincidentally, the highest loss of life.²² All of Watauga County was susceptible to landslides, but for this particular event the eastern part of the county was the epicenter. The hurricane's path brought the center of the storm over Stony Fork and Deep Gap as it tracked north along the Blue Ridge Mountains.²³ Landslides, caused by the massive inundation of water in streams and rivers, tore through the area, washed away houses, and carried victims miles downstream.²⁴

The damage in the town itself saw North Water Street entirely washed away, houses and businesses on the south side of King Street flooded, the train depot separated from the main street by a washout, and access to the hospital rendered almost impossible.²⁵ Damage to the sewer systems required residents to boil drinking water, and children were cautioned against playing in the Boone Creek because it had been polluted by sewage seepage.²⁶

The flood knocked out all lines of communication into Boone, as well.²⁷ With no telephone or telegraph wires connecting the town to the rest of the state, aid was slow to arrive. The lack of communication spurred the hearsay and rumors in the aftermath of the flood. Greene, while surveying the damage in town, wrote, "Hales are along the street. Rocks are on the street. Damage to property increases... All the bridges from Boone are gone or damaged so that it is not safe to travel over them. No papers come. In fact the town is cut off from the world. All that we get is magnified rumors."²⁸

On August 14, the day after the flood, Andrew Jackson Greene recorded his feeling of fear and helplessness in his diary:

Man is helpless in the face of nature. With all his boasting his strength is insignificant compared to that of the elements. All that one can do is to trust in a more powerful being than himself. Really I feel an uneasiness with my soul, but I am as helpless as I can be I am hoping that tomorrow the weather man may bring gladness to my heart.²⁹

Greene's palpable distress throughout the storm provides stark evidence of the storm's effects. Many in town sought to understand exactly what had happened, and the fleeting rumors that filtered back into town only added to the panic.³⁰

¹⁹ "Salvage Crew Is Dismantling Narrow [Gauge]," *Watauga Democrat*, July 17, 1941.

²⁰ "Life story," AC.493: Herman Wilcox Collection, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA.

²¹ "Bus Station To Be Remodeled," *Watauga Democrat*, July 17, 1941; "Railway Bonds To Be Canceled," *Watauga Democrat*, March 13, 1941.

²² Wooten, et al., "Frequency and Magnitude," 220; Wieczorek, et al., *Examination of Selected Historical*, 5-6;

"Sixteen Wataugans Lose Lives As Flood Waters Sweep Over County," *Watauga Democrat*, August 22, 1940.

²³ Department of the Interior, *An examination of selected historical rainfall-induced debris-flow events*, 5-6.

²⁴ "Bulletin!" *Watauga Democrat*, August 22, 1940.

²⁵ "Hundreds Of Thousands Of Dollars Damage As Raging Waters Sweep Watauga County," *Watauga Democrat*, August 15, 1940.

²⁶ "Citizens Urged To Boil Water," *Watauga Democrat*, August 22, 1940.

²⁷ "Sixteen Wataugans Lose Lives As Flood Waters Sweep Over County," *Watauga Democrat*, August 22, 1940.

²⁸ "August 14, 1940," Volume 154, A.J. Greene Collection.

²⁹ "August 14, 1940," Volume 154, A.J. Greene Collection, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Initial estimates for damage to the town ran between \$50,000 and \$100,000, equivalent to as much as \$1.7 million in today's dollars.³¹ Aid eventually arrived in the form of the Red Cross to help those injured, while state and federal aid went toward rebuilding the roads and infrastructure around the county.³² Boone was able to return to normal in the months following the flood, although the railroad, a key aspect of its growth since 1918, would never return.

The 31 years of passenger and freight rail service into Boone helped spur economic growth, an expansion of population, and a building boom in the city. The Linville River Railroad is an important aspect of Boone's history that must be understood in the context of the town's growth in the first half of the twentieth century. The August 1940 flood wiped out many of the gains that the rail had provided and cost sixteen Wataugans their lives. The destruction of property and loss of life had a devastating effect on the region, which is still felt by many of the area's residents.³³ The town has continued to mature as the commercial center of the county in spite of the flood, and the growth of nearby Appalachian State University has led to population shifts that mean many of the town's residents today are not natives and are likely unfamiliar with the harrowing events of August 1940. Memorializing the flood with this historical marker will be an important step for the town and county to connect itself to its past and to allow all of its residents to more deeply understand this storied and harrowing chapter in the history of Boone and Watauga County.

Suggested Inscriptions: (The heading or title consists of one or two lines of approximately sixteen letters or spaces to the line; the text of the inscription is usually not more than five or six lines of approximately twenty-three letters and spaces each.)

1st Choice

Aug. 1940 Flood

Flooding killed 16 in
Watauga County, ending
31 yrs. of ET&WNC rail
service to Boone. Depot
and tracks were along
Rivers St., 200 yds. SW.

2nd Choice

End of Boone Rail

Aug. 13, 1940, flood
killed 16 in Watauga,
destroyed ET&WNC
train service to Boone.
Depot and tracks were
located 200 yds. SW.

³¹ "Hundreds Of Thousands Of Dollars Damage As Raging Waters Sweep Watauga County," *Watauga Democrat*, August 15, 1940. This figure is based on the 2015 "real price" of \$100,000 of commodities in 1940, as measured by the website <https://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>, accessed October 5, 2016.

³² "Red Cross Brings Speedy Relief To Storm Victims," *Watauga Democrat*, August 22, 1940; "Federal Funds Sought To Rebuild Roads," *Watauga Democrat*, September 5, 1940.

³³ Sherrie Norris, "Granny Greene and the '40 Flood," *Watauga Democrat*, November 15, 2015, accessed September 24, 2016, http://www.wataugademocrat.com/community/granny-greene-and-the-flood/article_61a84eac-2203-5c33-91f3-eb5c96d2a30b.html.

E. **SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLIOGRAPHY:** (*secondary sources may be included*)

Archival Collections

A.J. Greene Collection, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA.

Herman Wilcox Collection, W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA.

Books

Ferrell, Mallory Hope. *Tweetsie Country: The East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad*. Pruet Publishing Company, 1976.

Greene, Ivery. *A Disastrous Flood: A true and Fascinating Story*. 4th ed. Lenoir, NC: Smith Printing Co. Inc., 1976.

Harshaw, Lou. *Trains, Trestles, and Tunnels: Railroads of the Southern Appalachians*. Bright Mountain Books, 1977.

Lanier, Ruby J. *Blanford Barnard Dougherty, Mountain Educator*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974.

Poole, Cary Franklin. *A History of Railroad in Western North Carolina*. Overmountain Press, 1995.

Newspapers

Watauga Democrat, accessed via Chronicling America at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82007642/> for years prior to 1923 and via DigitalNC at <https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/watauga-democrat-boone-n-c/> for years after 1923.

Other Publications

Water Resources Branch. *Floods of August 1940 in the Southeastern States*. Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper 1066. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1949.

Wieczorek, G. F., et al. *An Examination of Selected Historical Rainfall-Induced Debris-Flow Events within the Central and Southern Appalachian Mountains of the Eastern United States*. US Geological Survey Open-File Report 2009-1155. Reston, VA: US Geological Survey, 2009.

Witt, Anne Carter. "A Brief History of Debris Flow Occurrence in the French Broad River Watershed, Western North Carolina." *The North Carolina Geographer* 13 (2005): 59-82.

Wooten, Richard M., et al. "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." *Natural Disturbances and Historic Range of Variation*. Ed. Cathryn H. Greenberg and Beverly S. Collins. Springer International Publishing, 2016.

Unpublished Works

Ward, Francis Ehl. "A Historical Study of the ET&WNC Narrow-Gauge Railroad." Master's thesis, Appalachian State Teacher's College, 1958.

G. SUBMITTED BY:

Town of Boone Historic Preservation Commission, with assistance from Paul Fuller
(name)

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Date: March 31, 2017 (Revised)

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