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## Who Were the First Settlers of the Smokies? A View from the Primary Sources By Don Casada, August 25, 2024<sup>1</sup>

Who were the earliest legal white settlers on lands that would later become the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) and where did they settle?

Both historically published scholarly and popular accounts consistently indicate that the Oconaluftee (“Lufty”) Valley was the area first settled, and more specifically, the broad level bottoms area near the Park Visitor Center just north of Cherokee, NC – surrounding the confluence of the Oconaluftee River and Raven Fork. Most often, some combination of Mingus, Walker, Enloe, and Hughes families are mentioned as the first settlers. Claimed arrivals range from the early 1790s to shortly after the turn of the 19th century.

Various writers on the Smokies have put forward candidates for first settlers. Wilma Dykeman and Jim Stokely<sup>2</sup> wrote, with respect to the Oconaluftee area and Felix Walker:

*“(Walker) lawfully received in 1795 a sizable land grant to the valley. Young Walker was more than willing to let settlers attempt development of the wild area. Two North Carolina families decided to try. John Jacob Mingus and Ralph Hughes took their wives and children and journeyed into the ‘Lufty’ region of the Smokies. They cleared small homesteads by the river.*

*In 1803, Abraham Enloe and his family moved up from South Carolina and joined the growing families of Mingus and Hughes.”*

Michael Frome observed<sup>3</sup>:

*“The 1790s opened the way to settlement, land grabbing, and speculation. Choice lands were taken along the Oconaluftee River, pressing into the hills past the Raven Fork to the Bradley Fork, where the river flows down from Laurel Top. At the mouth of a fast-flowing creek, John Jacob Mingus built his home and later a mill.”*

More recently, historian Dan Pierce echoed<sup>4</sup> Dykeman and Stokely:

*“John Jacob Mingus and Felix Walker, the first white settlers within the current boundaries of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, established permanent homesites in the 1790s, in the area around the Oconaluftee (sic) River.”*

These are typical of the standard Lufty litany. Primary sources, including census, land, and court records tell a considerably different version of the early settler story. A brief review of the primary source evidence related to Jacob Mingus, Abraham Enloe and Ralph Hughes follows.

### **Jacob Mingus**

“John Jacob Mingus” is used by Dykeman/Stokely, Frome, and Pierce. Yet he is consistently just Jacob Mingus in multiple independent primary sources. [It was a standard practice in German baptisms of the era](#) to prefix the given name with that of a saint; John and Maria were particularly common. The baptismal prefixes were never used after the baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an update and extension of an abbreviated article which first appeared in University of Tennessee [Great Smoky Mountains Colloquy, Spring 2015, Vol. 16, No. 1](#).

<sup>2</sup> *At Home in the Smokies* as well as *Mountain Home – A Pictorial History of Great Smoky Mountains National Park*. The former is published by the National Park Service and the latter by the Great Smoky Mountains Association.

<sup>3</sup> *Strangers in High Places*, published by The University of Tennessee Press.

<sup>4</sup> *The Great Smokies: From Natural Habitat to National Park*, published by The University of Tennessee Press.

In the 1800 census, a Jacob Mingus was recorded as living in Lincoln County, NC, well over a hundred miles from the Oconaluftee Valley. That census was completed on May 2, 1800. Circumstantial evidence suggests this is the same Jacob Mingus who later came to make his home in the Lufty drainage. If so, Jacob had recently arrived in Lincoln County, since his youngest child, Elizabeth, was born in Tennessee in 1800. Elizabeth and her older brothers Jacob, Jr and John Mingus consistently (with one exception) listed their places of birth as Tennessee in multiple census records. The one exception is that John, who was in between Jacob, Jr and Elizabeth; he listed North Carolina as his place of birth in the 1850 census, but Tennessee in the 1860, 1870 and 1880 censuses.

Exactly when the Mingus family arrived in the Lufty region is uncertain. In the April 1804 Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, Jacob Mingus was named overseer of a road to be constructed “from the ridge dividing Richland and Scott’s Creek [Balsam Gap] to where the war path leaves the foot of Judaculla Mountain.” Road overseers were local to the area they oversaw for obvious reasons.

A pair of 100-acre tracts in the upper Scotts Creek section, comprised of Buncombe County Land Grants 1436 and 1437, were deeded to Jacob Mingus in October, 1807 (Buncombe County Deed book B, pp 34-35) by the original grantee, William Sloan; in the deed Sloan was listed as a Lincoln County resident. Both tracts had been surveyed by John Fergus, District Surveyor, on August 22, 1803. His chain bearers were Jacob Mingus and John Mingus. This John Mingus was clearly not the son of Jacob; it was another John Mingus.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, while the deed from Sloan to Mingus is dated October 2, 1807 (Buncombe County), Mingus sold the land embraced by grant 1436 to Amos Brown a year and a half earlier – on April 12, 1806. In 1812, Jacob Mingus acquired a 50 acre tract by Haywood County Land Grant 40; it adjoined the Sloan lands. No deed has been located for the transfer of either this 50 acre tract or the land covered by Land Grant 1437.

Scotts Creek is over twenty miles from the Lufty area where the Minguses later settled. The facts that Jacob Mingus: 1) acquired Scotts Creek land in 1807, 2) assisted in the 1803 survey of the land on Scotts Creek acquired by William Sloan, and 3) as noted above, was named road overseer for upper Scotts Creek in 1804 combine to provide strong circumstantial evidence that Jacob Mingus didn’t arrive on Lufty until well into the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

An October 1808 deed between Benjamin Parks and Jesse McFarland mentions “the Ravens fork above Jacob Mingus, including a place called the Plumb Orchard.” Mingus was indisputably among the earliest settlers, but primary source evidence refutes the pre-1800 claims.

By the 1810 census, his family was in newly-created Haywood County, NC, which included the section of Lufty inside the Park boundary.

### **Abraham Enloe**

Marriage records for Rutherford County, NC indicate Abraham Enloe married Sally Edgerton in 1795. As a Rutherford County citizen, in 1807, he purchased land from Felix Walker along “John Hyde’s lower line.” In 1810, the Enloes were still in Rutherford County, a hundred miles from Lufty (the census confirmed that Walker himself had relocated to Haywood County). In 1815 Enloe paid

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<sup>5</sup> This was almost certainly the same John Mingus who contracted with Jacob Mingus in 1819 to provide Jacob Mingus with 200 acres of land (which John Mingus had purchased from Jacob Mingus) as well as a host of iron tools, furniture, spinning wheel, and other goods. In exchange, “*Jacob Mingus shall and will appropriate and apply the above described property to the use and benefit of my wife Hannah Mingus and the children forever.*” John, Hannah and children were listed in the 1820 Haywood County census. John died around late 1826 or early 1827. Hannah, who administered the estate and subsequently had several dealings in land, remained in the area until the 1850s. She and her children removed to other parts, including Cherokee County and Iowa, where Hannah died and is buried.

\$1,500 to John Hyde for 450 acres on three adjoining tracts, and eventually acquired most of what became known as the Enloe-Floyd Bottoms. Although Enloe owned some of Lufty's finest bottom land, he came from North, not South Carolina, and arrived well after the claimed 1803.

### **Ralph Hughes**

Multiple census records and his relatively new tombstone in the Hughes Cemetery indicate that Rafe or Ralph Hughes was born in 1786. In 1810, the young Hughes couple was living in Buncombe County, dozens of miles from Lufty. An 1824 land grant to Hughes along the Raven Fork indicated existing improvements of his making. Ultimately the Hughes family accumulated around 500 acres across Raven Fork from the Cherokee Central School, but their arrival was after 1810.

### **Felix Walker**

As something of an aside, the reference in *At Home in the Smokies* that "Young (Felix) Walker" (emphasis mine) would "let" Mingus and Hughes tame the wilderness is beyond strange, since Walker was serving the cause of his country during the Revolution when Jacob Mingus was an infant, and was in his thirties when Ralph Hughes was born. He explored Kentucky with Daniel Boone, and braved the wilds of three terms in Congress, "talking for Buncombe." A land speculator writ large, including in the Lufty area, Walker by his own account first moved to the mountains of Haywood County in 1808. However, his Haywood home was not on Lufty (which was in Haywood County from its founding in 1808 until the formation of Jackson County in 1851), but in Maggie Valley, as denoted by a North Carolina highway historical marker. Walker noted that he lost "10,000 acres of the best land" he had speculated on because the Meigs-Freeman line, the survey which determined the Cherokee boundary based on the 1798 U.S. – Cherokee cession treaty, placed his land within the Cherokee-controlled area.

### Early Lufty Settlers: primary source based-evidence

John Hyde (or Hyde), who is not mentioned by Dykeman/Stokely, Pierce or any other of the popular or scholarly sources, is a far better candidate for earliest white settler than any of those named in the writings noted previously. Cases can also be made for others, such as Robert Turner and others. In *Heritage of Swain County*, Elaine Sherrill Beck suggested some nineteen individuals among settlers for whom there is some evidence of arrival before 1810 (including Hyde and Turner). Evidence for John Hyde, who I consider to be arguably the strongest candidate based on a combination of primary sources is discussed below.

In August, 1799, Hyde purchased 321 acres of land from Felix Walker in 1799 (Buncombe County deed book 4, pages 425-426). The deed boundary call reads:

*"...a certain tract or parcel of land situate, lying & being in the said County of Buncombe, on Oconolufy or the Ravens Creek branch of Tuckeyseegey River about nine or ten miles above the mouth. Beginning at a point & stake south of a poplar corner forty-five poles which poplar stands about 4 poles west from the bank of said creek, Walkers Corner. Running thence from said point and said stake one hundred and sixty poles to a stake on Walker's line, thence north two hundred & fourteen poles to a stake, thence east two hundred & forty poles to a stake, thence south two hundred and fourteen poles to a stake, thence west to the beginning."*

A state grant to Hyde entered in 1802 references "on his own beginning corner black oak." Further substantiating his presence in 1802 is the survey for state land grant 1399 (Buncombe County) to John Fergus, located "on both sides of Nantahala Johns Fork of the Oconey Luftee Creek" surveyed on October 26, 1802; John Hyde was one of the chain bearers for surveyor John Patton. Chain bearers were almost universally selected from available neighborhood men. It might be noted

that the Nantahala John Fork was the name assigned in early years to the Oconaluftee above the mouth of Raven Fork.

In 1805, the Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions named Hyde overseer of a road from Soco to Oconaluftee, indicating that he was living in the area. At the time, the land in question was part of Buncombe County. This independently confirms Hyde's presence in the Lufty area.

In 1808, Haywood County was formed and all of Oconaluftee northeast of the Meigs-Freeman Line became part of Haywood County. As noted above, in 1810, Abraham Enloe was a resident of Rutherford County. That had changed by 1815, when Abram Enloe of Haywood County purchased three tracts of land totaling 450 acres from John Hyde (Haywood County deed book B, pages 91, 92), the first tract's boundary was thus described:

*"...a certain tract or parcel of land situate, lying & being in the said County of Haywood on both sides of a watercourse called Ocona Lufty, including the mouth of Ravens Creek. Beginning at a poplar on the west side of the river or creek about 4 poles from the bank running thence south 45 poles to a stake; thence west one hundred and sixty poles to a stake; thence north 214 poles to a stake; thence east 240 poles to a stake; thence south 214 poles to a stake; thence west to the beginning containing three hundred acres more or less."*

With the exceptions of the fact that the second deed indicates that it includes the mouth of Ravens Creek (Fork) and that it understates the actual area (the 321 acres listed in the Walker to Hyde deed is correct), the boundaries are identical; this is clearly the same tract sold by Walker to Hyde more than a decade and a half before selling it to Enloe. Another 150 acres was conveyed by Hyde to Enloe, including land on the west side of Lufty and the east side of Raven Creek (Fork).

A likely reason that Hyde has not been recognized as one of, if not the earliest white settlers is that he left the area. Hyde married Elizabeth Shook, daughter of an early Haywood County settler. After selling their land on Lufty in late 1815 to Abraham Enloe and purchasing four slaves from Enloe in the same year, the Hydies moved to Missouri. His life away from the Smokies was brief; in 1818, he was murdered by a slave named Frank (see last source below).

## Sources

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Buncombe County Deed Registry, including both deeds and Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, available for on-line search at:

<https://registerofdeeds.buncombecounty.org/External/LandRecords/protected/v4/SrchName.aspx>

Haywood County Deed Registry, available for on-line search at:

<https://search.haywooddeeds.com/index.php>

John Hyde and "Negro Frank": <https://tangledhistories.org/slavery/john-hyde-and-negro-frank/>