

## Logging on Deep Creek, the Bryson Family, and all Sorts of Rabbit Trails

Don Casada, November 15, 2022; updated August 21, 2023

### About this article

The matter to be delved into in this piece, as indicated by the first part of the title, was originally intended to be a narrowly focused piece about logging on Deep Creek. The low intensity logging on Deep Creek was intertwined with relatively short-lived developments in the young town of Bryson City, and also directly connected to the town's namesake, T.D. Bryson and his family. Logging on Deep Creek stands in stark contrast with operations which occurred at an industrial scale in other Park drainages in the county.

As the full title suggests, matters went well astray. Traveling history's highway often leads to intriguing intersections which might at first glance seem unrelated to the road traveled. But those crossroads are threads in a tapestry; to fully appreciate one thread, let alone the whole piece, it's needful to get at least a bit of sense of those interconnections. Beyond that, traveling country roads can be flat out fun.

So there you have my excuse for rambling and roaming well beyond the originally planned course. Call them rabbit trails, if you will, but as a boy who grew up going rabbit hunting every Saturday (in season) and more often during holidays, I reckon it is part of my heritage. As a youngster, listening to the beagle choir harmony was sheer joy. It's been four decades since I've been on a rabbit hunt, but still today, the now rarely heard music of hounds on the trail kindles warm memories of cold mountain mornings long ago.

More philosophically, I've come to think of these intersections which beget rabbit trails not as coincidences, but *planned* serendipity. That's a biblical perspective, by the way. The New American Bible version of Ecclesiastes 3:1 reads:

*There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens.*

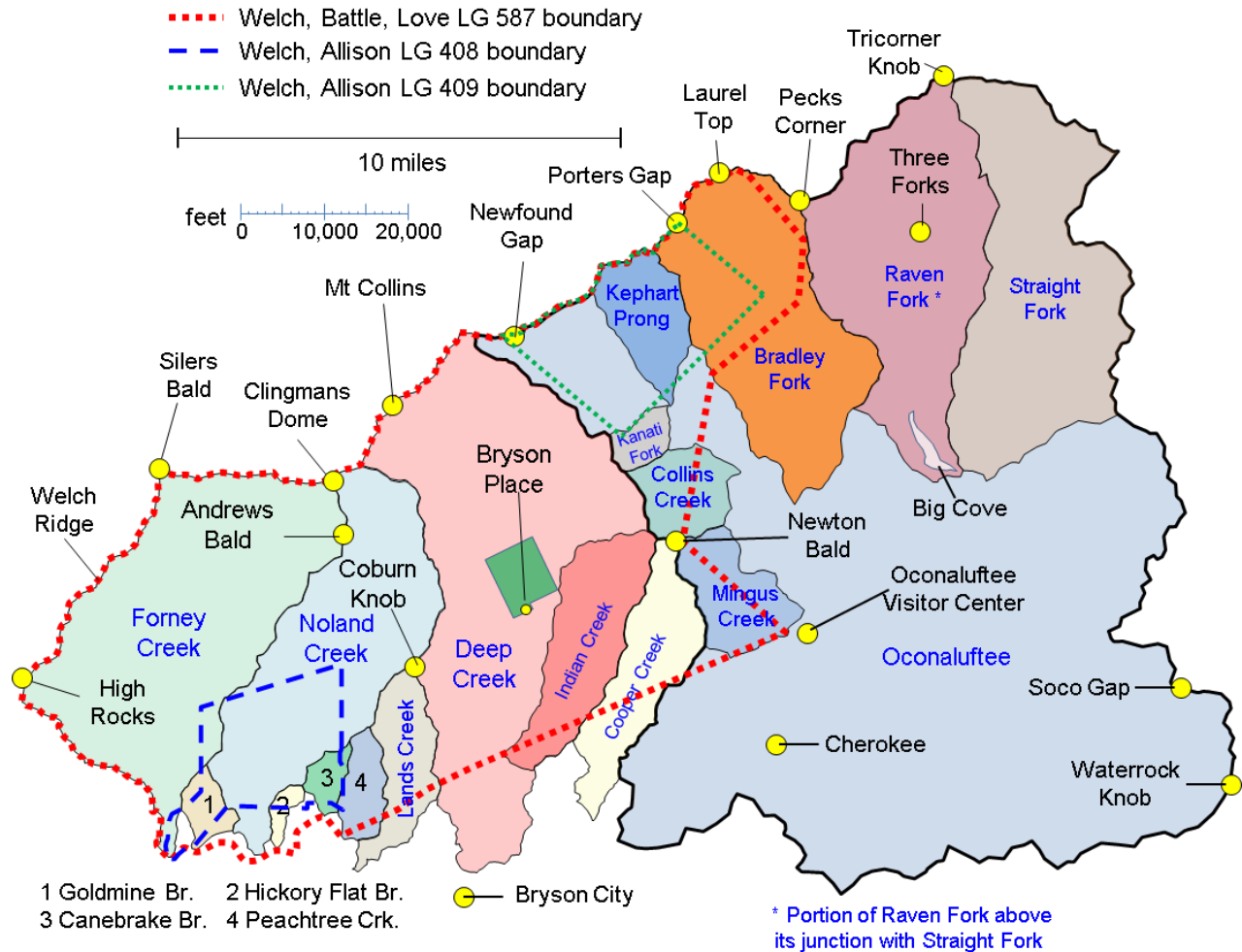
The passage doesn't say there's a time set aside for world-changing or life and death matters. There is a time for every affair. What is more, let me suggest that wandering down rabbit trails of the past, is even a Godly thing to do; my authority for that claim is Ecclesiastes 3:15, which reads:

*What now is has already been; what is to be, already is: God retrieves what has gone by.*

Off the philosophical pedestal and on to the rabbit trails....

## North Carolina Land Grant 587

On December 8, 1859, three men from Waynesville – Robert Vance (R.V.) Welch, William Wayne Battle, and James Robert Love – paid \$5,000 for nominally 50,000 acres in North Carolina Land Grant (LG) 587<sup>1</sup>. The boundary (dotted red line, Fig. 1) covered the majority of the land between the upper section of Bradley Fork in the east and Welch Ridge in the west. Parts or all of entire major and minor drainages were within the boundary, as illustrated below. Previously issued land grants were called out as exceptions. Two tracts acquired by the same R.V. Welch and his partner, John B. Allison,<sup>2</sup> were the largest of these; their bounds are shown in Figure 1 as well.



**Figure 1. Land Grant 587 boundary overlaid on Swain County drainages**

Nine years later, on September 21, 1868, William Holland Thomas and Thaddeus Dillard Bryson struck an agreement whereby Thomas agreed to sell property in the heart of the Deep Creek drainage to Bryson at a price to be determined by three referees, William Lee Morris, John A. Millsaps, and William Hillman Cathey<sup>3</sup> – all of whom lived and owned property on Deep Creek. The

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the owners and history, see discussion in [Land Grant 587](#).

<sup>2</sup> John Baird Allison married Rebecca Bryson, a first cousin of T.D. Bryson. Mary Enloe, who married Bill Moody and together made their home in Bryson City for many years was a great granddaughter of John B. & Rebecca B. Allison.

<sup>3</sup> Hill Cathey and family were living on Indian Creek by 1880, but the 1870 census had them in the Qualla District of Jackson County.

acquisition and multiple surrounding elements are covered in a pair of articles on Wendy Meyers' *Reflections of Olde Swain*: [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

The 1100 acre tract was located squarely in the heart of both LG 587 and Deep Creek, as can be seen in Figure 1. In making the agreement to sell the Deep Creek property, Thomas was not representing that he owned the property; he did not. Rather, it was in his role as one of the four executors of the estate of his father-in-law, James Robert Love, who had died in 1863; the others were the elder Love's sons Robert G.A. and Samuel L. and another son-in-law, William L. Hilliard. R.V. Welch was, in addition to being part owner of the tract, also a son-in-law of J.R. Love. The elder Love had left explicit instructions in his will that "*in relation to the Speculation Lands (of which LG 587 was a part) it is my will and desire that the sales shall continue under the management of my Executors as though I was living.*"

The deed to Bryson – which Thomas was not a party to – was recorded in the Swain County Registry on Nov 4, 1879. Thomas would have normally been a party to the deed, as one of the executors of the J.R. Love estate. But he had been declared insane<sup>4</sup> before the 1868 agreement. The price was \$483 – 1000 acres for \$0.33/acre and a 100 acre section with improvements for \$1.50/acre. From the purchase until the land was taken for the Park over half a century later, the tract remained in the Bryson family. The cabin located in the southern edge of the boundary (denoted by the yellow dot in Figure 1), became known as "The Bryson Place." It was treated as a community commons. The Bryson family shared its use with a broad array of folks – both locals and visitors.

Sam Hunnicutt's classic documentation of the egalitarian nature of backwoods society at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is cleverly disguised as a series of several dozen tales about hunting, fishing, and general outings: [20 Years Hunting and Fishing in the Great Smoky Mountains](#). The majority of the episodes take place on Deep Creek; the Bryson Place is the venue for many. The photo of a group of hunters with a large bear skin flanking Mark Cathey (6<sup>th</sup> from the left of group in front; Sam is 3<sup>rd</sup> from the right) hanging from the Bryson Cabin porch is a prime example.



**Figure 2. Bear hunting group at the Bryson Place, early 1920s. Photo courtesy of Jim Estes.**

The [Bryson tract](#), which occupied a little less than 4% of the Deep Creek drainage, was purchased by the North Carolina Park Commission in 1931.

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<sup>4</sup> William L. Hilliard, a medical doctor and brother-in-law of Thomas, was Thomas's guardian.

### The Bryson family in Bryson City

T.D. and Mary Bryson owned essentially all of Bryson City that is north of the Tuckasegee River. That includes lower Bryson Branch and Toot Hollow, Black Hill and Hospital Hill as well as lower Deep Creek, where Bryson operated a mill. The mill building is seen in the photo on the left side of Figure 3. The wagon load of poplar logs were on the bridge over Deep Creek at its mouth – at the same location as today’s bridge. The logs were headed for the Bryson City Pump Works, where they would be turned and hollowed to manufacture porch columns. President of the Pump Works was Jeremiah Shank. In the photo on the right, young I.K. Stearns, the only grandson of the Shanks (who raised him, with help from their daughters) is sitting in the same area with what appears to be a small bow in hand. Behind him are the dam and flume which impounded and delivered the motive power to operate the mill.



**Figure 3. Bryson mill and dam on lower Deep Creek. From [Hunter Library’s Stearns-Grueninger Collection](#); Photographer unknown; likely date c. 1903 - 1904. Photo IDs: Left - HL\_MSS20-02\_553; Right - HL\_MSS20-02\_304. Click each for a larger version.**

The photos in Figure 3 were taken about two miles below the Park line and 8 miles below the Bryson Place, but they reveal an intriguing aspect about the logging which took place on the Bryson tract and other locations within the Deep Creek drainage. See a [larger version of the image](#) on the right of Figure 3 and conjecture about how the logs floated down Deep Creek found their way past the mill.

The Bryson couple built a two story home (Figure 4) about 1/5 mile north of the Bear Ford, which was just below today’s lower bridge in Bryson City – the Bear Ford Bridge. The home was sited near a bold spring which had also served as the water supply for Cherokee head man Yonah Equa, or Big Bear. In fact, Yonah Equa had taken out a 640 acre reserve in accordance with the 1819 Cherokee cession treaty terms which allowed individuals to set aside land within the ceded territory for a one square mile homestead. Yonah selected a square-shaped tract which covered much of Bryson City of today (Figure 5)



Figure 4. The original Bryson home. Source: *The Bryson Family*, Edwin C. Bryson manuscript

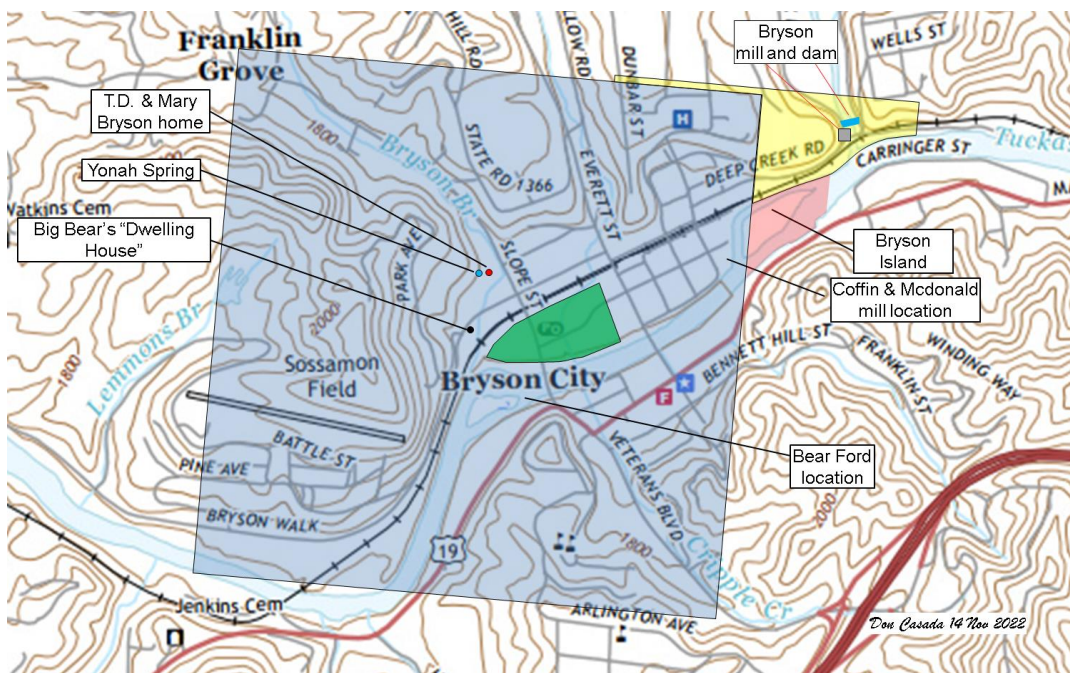
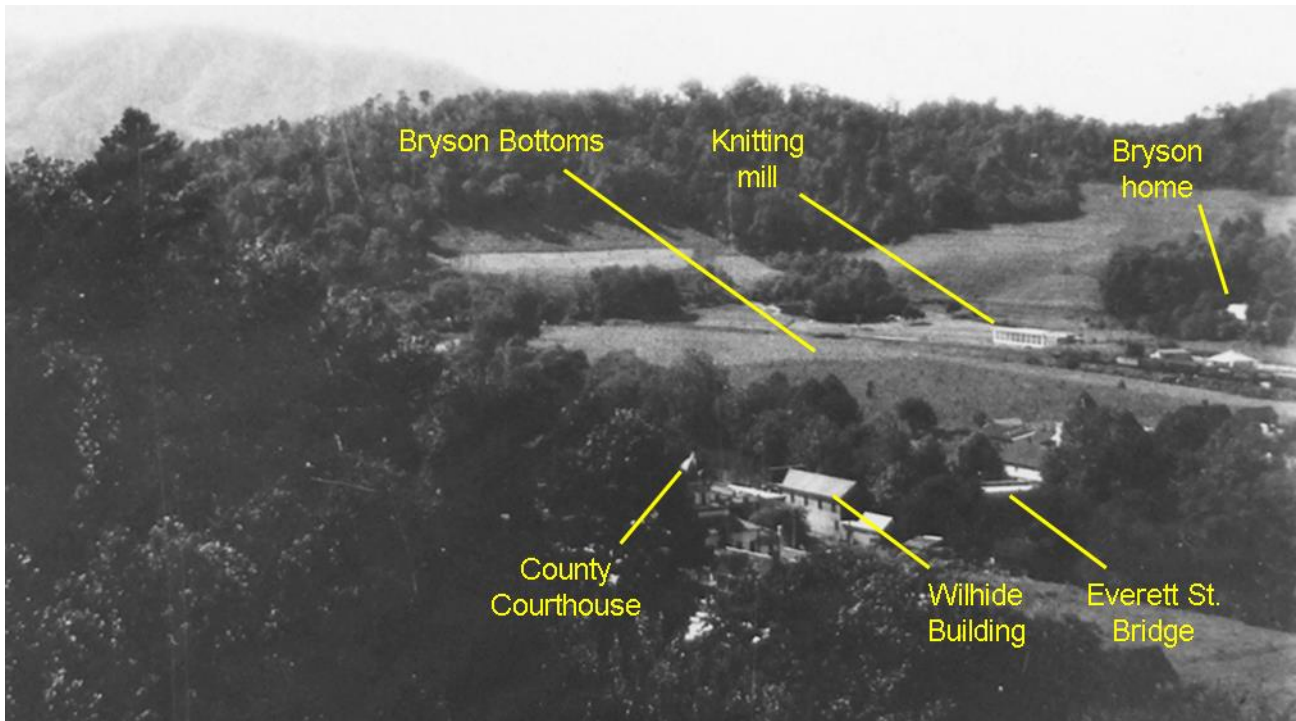


Figure 5. Yonah Equa's 640 acre reserve, Bryson mill and island tracts. Click [HERE](#) or on map for a larger version with annotations.

The family farmed or leased the Bryson Bottoms – the land between today's Toot Hollow and Bryson Branches (formerly known as Stockade and Bone Yard Branches) just north of the Tuckasee for decades – up into the 1960s; the approximate area is marked in green in Figure 5. The Bottoms, once in corn each summer, are now occupied by Great Smoky Mountain Railroad parking and turntable, the Bryson City Post Office, Swain County administration building as well as the area between Slope Street and Bryson Branch (Yellow Rose Realty, United Community Bank, etc). In Figure 6, the Bryson Bottoms are seen from the opposite (south) side of the Tuckasee River. This photo was likely taken in late summer, as fodder or shuck stacks dot the bottom land which lies between the tree-lined Tuckasee River and the railroad (which is just this side of the Knitting mill). It is likely that corn was also grown on the slopes beyond the bottoms in Figure 6.



**Figure 6. View of part of Bryson from west of Bennett Hill. My speculation: This photo, from the Kephart Collection at [Hunter Library](#), was taken by Kelly Bennett after 1920.**

A wintry (and sharper) view of part of Bryson City from Bennett Hill in the late 1920s or early 1930s which better shows the relationship of the Bryson home and Bottoms to the town can be seen in [this Kelly Bennett photograph](#).

#### Locating a saw mill in Bryson City

T.D. Bryson became the namesake for the town of Bryson City on January 21, 1889, when the General Assembly of North Carolina changed the town name from Charleston to Bryson City. Bryson had served nine terms in the NC House of Representatives, and in fact was serving as Jackson County's representative when Swain County was established from parts of Jackson and Macon in 1871. Since he was living in what is now Bryson City at the time, he would have been a primary force behind the creation of the new county. Bryson served as Swain's representative for its first dozen years, retiring in 1883. He was first elected to the NC House in 1854; he was 25 years old. During that 1854 to 1856 term, and in another in 1858 to 1860, his Jackson County counterpart in the NC Senate was Will Thomas, so the men who struck the deal on the Deep Creek property had known each other long before. In fact, the Bryson Place tract was not the first business that T.D. Bryson had conducted with Thomas. In 1867, Bryson purchased 150 acres on Judaculla Ridge in the Caney Fork section of Jackson County; the deed was signed by Thomas, Samuel L. Love, W.L. Hilliard and R.G.A. Love – the Executors of the J.R. Love estate; it was yet another part of the Love Speculation Lands. As it turns out, that was a family exchange; Bryson was a second cousin of R.G.A. Love, Samuel L. Love and the wives of Will Thomas (Sarah Jane Burney Love) and William Hilliard (Margaret Elizabeth Love). See a [Partial family tree of Love-Bryson family connections and relations to the Bryson Place and other properties lying in Swain County](#).

In 1885, four years before the town was named for him, T.D. Bryson employed engineer and surveyor H.M. Ramseur to mark off the part of land he owned which lay east of Everett Street and

south of the railroad to the Tuckasegee River; it represented less than half of the level land on the north side of the river which he owned. Bryson had both personal and altruistic interest in promoting the welfare of the town which would take his name. When he sold three lots to James Fensom in 1888, Fensom must have indicated plans for a saw mill operation, because the deed explicitly granted him "the right to use the water of Deep Creek leading down so as to include the channel running down the north side of the island as far as the main river for the purpose of floating logs so long as he may need it for that purpose but is not to erect any dam or anything else that will interfere with the fishing on the south side of the island or to cause the waters to run down on the north side of the island so as to endanger the town."

T.D. Bryson must have had at least a bit of mixed feelings regarding the proposed sawmill, because he already owned a saw mill. The Bryson mill shown in Figure 2 was both a grist and saw mill. That is known because in 1884, Mary and T.D. Bryson deeded three tracts of land to their then living children, Harriett<sup>5</sup>, T.D., Jr, Dan, and Mary. The first two tracts were the 1,000 acre and 100 acre tracts in the heart of Deep Creek. The third tract was also on Deep Creek, but at the mouth. It was 27 ½ acres which included the mill and mill pond seen in Figure 2. The deed call for the tract began:

*"Lying and being at the mouth of Deep Creek – including the Saw Mill and Grist Mill."*

It is highly likely that this was a sash saw operation, much like those seen in these videos:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCGBUqv1RvM&ab\\_channel=MrShoptaw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCGBUqv1RvM&ab_channel=MrShoptaw)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBPI1PcckGY&ab\\_channel=herbcrosby](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBPI1PcckGY&ab_channel=herbcrosby)

The wooden teeth and pinion arrangement seen in the latter video was similar to a [grist mill on Chambers Creek which was operated by Roxie McClure](#).

But mixed feelings regarding saw mill competition would have been far more than offset by an agreement that he and Fensom made a couple of years later.

### Logging on Deep Creek

On January 1, 1890, James Fensom and F.M. Macdonald struck an agreement with T.D. Bryson whereby they would purchase marketable timber on Bryson's tract on Deep Creek, paying Bryson four dollars for each acre cut. Up to 600 acres could be cut; harvesting was to be done on one acre at a time, and payment for that acre was due as soon as the timber was cut and on the bank of the creek. Given that Bryson had paid 33-1/3 cents per acre for the 1000 acres of unimproved land just eleven years earlier, for each logged acre, he would earn twelve times what he had paid. He likely knew that he personally wouldn't collect, however; this was a deal set up on behalf of his children (his wife Mary had died on November 25, 1887). The day after the deal was consummated, T.D. Bryson died. Income from the logging provided financial support for the couple's children T.D., Jr, Dan, and Mary, whose ages ranged from 16 to 11 at his death. The three led exceedingly productive lives as jurist, M.D., and missionary, respectively.

The logs cut on the Bryson tract on Deep Creek were sent down the creek to the Tuckasegee by the combination of heavy rains and splash dams.

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<sup>5</sup> Harriet, the oldest child of T.D. and Mary, died on October 15, 1887 at the age of 15; her mother died a month and 10 days later. A single monument marks the grave for them and T.D. Bryson at the north end of the Bryson City Cemetery.

There were at least two such dams on Deep Creek. One dam was located just below the mouth of Pole Road Creek, on the main creek. Pole Road Creek's name derives from a pole tram road built up the creek to assist in removal of the Bryson timber. Hiram Wilburn, in an unpublished manuscript,<sup>6</sup> wrote this about Pole Road Creek:

*This is a tributary of Deep Creek. It rises just south of Round Top Knob, and flowing southeastward joins the main stream about midway between source and mouth, just below the junction of the two main headstreams. The name became fixed from the following facts: John G. Thomas, in the 1890s, constructed a pole tram road up this creek for the purpose of bringing out the timber. The pole road consisted of two lines of poles (small trees), parallel, laid end-to-end. The poles were 4" to 6" or 8" in diameter, and were supported underneath by cross ties, or laid flat on the ground where level and smooth enough. The car or carriage on which the logs were hauled consisted of a log framework with four cast iron wheels. The wheels had flanges that formed a semi-circular groove that would conform to the shape of the poles. The axles were so arranged that the wheels could spread apart or become narrow in order to conform to the width of the rails (crooked poles). Much timber was hauled out over this road. This information was given by Stokes Thomas, son of John G. Thomas. He, as a small boy, assisted his father in constructing the pole road and in cutting and hauling out the timber. These logs were floated down Deep Creek by means of Splash dams.*

Wilburn took a photo of the remains of the [splash dam below Pole Road Creek](#). Another splash dam, called [Little Dam](#) by locals, was located on Left Fork.

The extent of logging of the Bryson tract is not known. Photos of the area suggest it was quite limited. In Figure 7, the area immediately around the Bryson Place home is clear – and had been for two decades or more, based on the size of the fruit trees in the foreground. This Kelly Bennett photo was likely taken around 1910, well after known logging was finished. According to the unpublished manuscript of Edwin C. Bryson, son of T.D. Bryson, Jr, the small girl in Figure 7 was the adopted daughter of Bob and Sarah Barnett, who lived there as caretakers for a time. This is the same Barnett couple who had been caretakers at the copper mine on Sugar Fork where Horace Kephart stayed for about 15 months between late 1904 and early 1906.

But it appears likely that more timber was harvested from the LG 587 boundary on Deep Creek than the Bryson land. A document was recorded in Swain County's Deed Registry on December 19, 1894 to acknowledge that in addition to 400,000 board feet that Coffin<sup>7</sup> & Macdonald had cut from the Bryson tract, they had cut another 2,000,000 board feet from the Whittier land. The document noted that George Hagemeyer had advanced them \$4,500 to expedite the processing of the timber into lumber. The "Whittier land" refers to LG 587 since Clarke Whittier had acquired the boundary from heirs of the original grantees in 1885.

The exact boundaries of the logged portion of LG587 on Deep Creek are even less well known than the Bryson tract portion since so much of the drainage was a part of it. Champion Fibre owned the Deep Creek portion of LG587 when the land was taken for the Park; around 80% of the entire Deep Creek Park drainage was Champion Fibre land.

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<sup>6</sup> Copies of Wilburn's Place Names manuscript

<sup>7</sup> Edwin G. Coffin, who affiliated with F.M. MacDonald, was a native of Maine. He and his wife Anne Maria came to the area in the 1890s and remained. Both are buried in the Bryson City Cemetery.



**Figure 7. The Bryson Place; photo by Kelly Bennett, likely 1910-1920.**

It seems very likely that all of the logging done by Coffin & Macdonald (or their contractors) would have been above the Turnaround, close to the creek, and likely below the Bryson tract. The [1909 map of Forest Conditions](#) by the US Forest Service and NC Geological Survey indicated that 99.5% of the Deep Creek boundary above the Bumgarner Bend, which starts a short distance above the Turnaround, was in timber of excellent quality – over 7000 board feet per acre. At the time that assessment, the land was owned by Harris-Woodbury Lumber Company; Sylva area industrialist C.J. Harris had bought the land at auction in August, 1906 for \$449,024.05. He assigned it to Harris-Woodbury (of which he was a principal).

Using the 1909 map's timber quality of 7,000 board feet per acre as the denominator, the 2,000,000 board feet cited in the Hagemeyer – Coffin & Macdonald document as the numerator, an area of around 300 acres had been cut on the LG 587 portion of Deep Creek.

I can find no record of Harris-Woodbury, or its successor to the Deep Creek portion of the LG 587 boundary, Champion Fibre, having ever logged in the drainage. With the exception of upper Raven Fork (above its junction with Straight Fork), Deep Creek was the drainage least affected by timber operations. There was certainly some logging of sections of lower Deep Creek which were reachable by road; the wagonload of poplar logs shown in the left photo of Figure 3 might well have come from lower Deep Creek or Indian Creek, where multiple sled and wagon roads are suggestive of such.

The timber companies which operated in the Swain County portion of the Smokies were predominately from areas to the north – Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Delaware. The loss of timber on Deep Creek had roots from even further north – New York. But it came not in the forms of timber takers armed with saws and axes, but as a fungus, *Cryphonectria parasitica*, the cause of

the American Chestnut blight. The blight was, ironically and poetically, a temporal contemporary of the major logging operations in the Smokies. [Here is a reconstructed map](#) based on a Park Service publication's assessment of the extent and nature of logging in the Swain County portion of the Park.

### Timber turned to Lumber in Bryson City

Logs which made their way to Bryson City were captured in a boom set up for a [mill operated by McDonald and Coffin](#) on the west side of the Bryson Island; the boom was set up and operated by Swain Lumber and Boom Company, which the [State Legislature incorporated in 1895](#). The rock wall which still stands at the head of the Bryson Island is a century and a quarter old relic which dates to the Coffin and Macdonald days – a means to minimize the likelihood of logs floated down Deep Creek would create a log jam on the upper end of the island. Splash dams themselves weren't sufficient to do the job; swollen creeks from heavy rains were a part of the equation. The April 3, 1896 issue of the Bryson City Times noted *"This week's rains has given Coffin & Macdonald one Million feet of logs in their boom"* while the August 7 issue of the same paper reported *"Coffin and Macdonald's mill shut down last Friday night after a 20 day run. Same old story; Out of logs!"*

The Coffin and Macdonald factory also cut logs from locations other than Deep Creek. In the March 29, 1895 issue of the Bryson City Times was a note saying *"Marsh Henry is driving his logs this week from the mouth of Kirkland's Creek into Coffin & Macdonald's boom."* Kirkland Creek empties into the Tuckasegee on the south side about a mile above the mouth of Deep Creek. Under normal conditions, the river in the vicinity immediately above the Bryson Island is quite placid water. Presumably Marsh Henry employed a crew to be sure the logs made their way to the north side of the river so they could enter the channel on the north side of the island, where the saw mill's owners had a watery path right of way. The area along the south side of the island includes some rough water, including a whirlpool like zone known as Devil's Dip. Getting logs through that section and over to the north bank of the river at the lower end of the island would've been a nightmare.

### Coffin and Macdonald ends; Others begin

The operating period for Coffin and Macdonald at the Bryson City mill was probably less than a decade. They were completely finished before 1907 when the properties west of the island were sold. The business likely employed no more than a couple dozen hands.

As they were finishing up with the relatively small scale operation, big timber companies – Norwood, Montvale, Ritter, Kitchens, Crestwood, Whitmer-Parsons Lumber and the biggest of the lot – Champion Fibre were just getting started. The lives of those operations were a bit longer than that of Coffin and Macdonald, and in all cases, they located the saw mills either in or in close proximity to the drainage being logged. They provided cash-paying jobs for both locals and others who came to the area specifically for the work, but their industrial scale operations were largely done within two decades. With the exception of Champion Fibre<sup>8</sup>, the timber companies were altogether businesses headquartered out of state. The disruption in area life associated with their coming and going was arguably as significant as the coming of the Park. Swain County resources which had been centuries in the making were gone within two decades.

There was a solitary exception, however. In 1903, a wood products business was started up about 150 yards to the northwest of the Coffin and Macdonald operation. Bryson City Pump Works

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<sup>8</sup> Champion Fibre was headquartered in Ohio, but the plant at Canton, in adjoining Haywood County, was the operation which was connected to logging operations in Swain County

incorporated in Swain County in 1903 and opened a plant between the original First Baptist Church and the railroad. The company's principal product in its early years was hollowed and turned porch columns made from tulip poplar. The columns were shipped to locations all over the country. Company growth compelled them to move to a new site, a mile down the river. At that point, the company renamed itself Carolina Wood Turning. The business, operated for decades as Carolina Wood Turning, turned into the county's largest employer, and remained in business for three-quarters of a century. Young I.K. Stearns, shown in both photos of Figure 3, became the company President at the retirement of his grandfather and company founder, Jeremiah Shank. During World War II, the plant went on full time war production support, manufacturing ammunition cases and flare bodies – wood turnings into which phosphorus was inserted to provide floating lights for sea and air operations.



**Figure 8. Ralph Woody, foreman at Carolina Wood Turning, holding flare bodies. Photo courtesy of Christine and Rick Colcord, grandson of Ralph's sister Lillie.**

Jeremiah Shank, his wife Helen, three of their daughters: Jessie and Marie Shank and Nell Shank Leatherwood, along with grandson I.K. Stearns and his wife Betty are all buried in the Bryson City Cemetery. A presentation on the [Carolina Wood Turning – Bryson City Cemetery connections](#) is available at the [Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery](#) (FBCC) site.

The Bryson City Cemetery is also now home for the earthly remains and markers to the memory of T.D. and Mary Greenlee Bryson, and three of their four children:

- Thaddeus Dillard Bryson, Jr and both of his wives, Amabel Black and Zulia Ketchie;
- Dr. Daniel Rice Bryson and his wife Anne Dunbar, and
- Harriett, who died in her teens

There are also grandchildren and great-grandchildren with them on yonder hallowed hill. FBCC has additional materials on the Brysons ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) and the [Bryson Place](#).