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**CULTURAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY ON THE WESTERN FRONTIER:  
CUMBERLAND GAP TENNESSEE, 1750-1915**

Rebecca Vial  
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Culturally and ethnically diverse, Cumberland Gap, Tennessee, greeted newcomers warmly and accepted change as an inevitable life process. Decidedly not an isolated, fundamentalist Appalachian community, Cumberland Gap stood at the gateway to the western frontier and, unlike Robert Munn's description of Appalachia, it was never a part of any state's backyard.<sup>1</sup> Unwilling to let outside economic interests gain control of the town's most valuable resources, the people resisted the lure of industrialization and its accompanying New South mentality. Race issues, long considered "the central theme of southern history,"<sup>2</sup> did not consume the Gap community. African-Americans, part of the frontier community, remained economically and emotionally committed to the developing village of Cumberland Gap. This acceptance of African-Americans, recorded throughout the community's history, contradicts one of the critical elements generally used to define a southern community. Slow steady growth, not rapid industrialization, assured the continuity and integrity of the Gap.

Unlike earlier settlements, Cumberland Gap, Tennessee, developed after the frontier changed from family subsistence farms to organized commercial community centers. Limited geographically but not isolated, a small village sustained by the "travel that naturally poured through the Gap,"<sup>3</sup> slowly grew in a geologic bowl along the path leading to the Gap. Framed by the mountains, the village had little flat land on which to grow crops. Income from timber cutting, storekeeping, and foundry work allowed the Gap families to purchase food from farmers in Powell's Valley.

By 1840 Cumberland Gap was not only a thriving Tennessee community but also a full participant in the political life of the nation, hosting a crowd of six to eight thousand Whigs who came by foot, horseback, wagon, and buggy to cheer for "Tippecanoe, and Tyler too!"<sup>4</sup> The following year new settlers arrived. Virginian John Newly and his four slaves operated an iron furnace while other members of his militia company settled throughout Powell's Valley. Robert Crockett, Daniel Huff, and James Patterson used twenty to thirty slaves each on their large farms in the Valley. The 1850 census lists approximately thirty-three slave-owners in or near the Gap. Typical of East Tennessee, "blacks continued to live in small groupings much as they had in the early frontier days." A few free blacks began to settle in the countryside, "in drafty shacks on the most hilly and marginal land"<sup>5</sup> and in the "rabbit town" section of Tazewell, the county seat. Free blacks "Uncle" Stephen Graham and "reliable" Godfrey Posey drove the stage between Tazewell and the Gap.<sup>6</sup> Slave owners Huff and Patterson operated their farms, started schools for their children, and opened crossroad stores, tanneries, and other commercial enterprises in the valley. They also formed business partnerships with Newly and another Gap resident, Dr. J.H.S. Morison. A weekly stage between Tazewell and Cumberland Gap carried freight, mail, and passengers.<sup>7</sup> The stage line made it easier to

conduct business throughout the Gap area. The movement of goods and the influx of people, residents and tourists, gave the historic village the look of a much larger community.

During the Civil War the Gap changed hands four times with each side disabling the mill, the furnace, and the pass above the town before they moved out of the area. The residents of Cumberland Gap accepted the opposing armies and emancipation in much the same manner as they accepted travelers along the Wilderness Road. Confederate sympathizer John Newly's daughter married Union surgeon John Washington Divine in April 1865.<sup>8</sup> Many of the local African-Americans, ex-slaves, followed the creek south, settling in the Tiprell area a mile from the iron furnace. Others remained near the destroyed Huff and Patterson farms.

Although the road across the mountain remained "in terrible shape during the war"<sup>9</sup> and was not immediately repaired, a semblance of order returned to Cumberland Gap by 1870. The census lists white doctors, school teachers, and ministers. The African-Americans included blacksmiths, foundry and sawmill operators, and cabinet makers. Many African-Americans, forced to leave the Tiprell area after Confederate Tip Cockrell's return, joined families in the Gap, building their houses around the large spring and working at the iron furnace. The Morisons, Newlys, and other whites returned to their prewar positions of prominence in the community.

Business growth was limited by the lack of good roads and access to the railroads. Area residents had discussed expansion of the local trade for years, but the war interrupted their efforts. In 1886 local businessmen convinced Alexander Arthur, an agent of the Richmond and Danville Railroad, to consider building a tunnel through the mountains. Across the mountains lay the Yellow Creek Valley of Bell County, Kentucky. The Colson family, largest land owners in the valley, showed Arthur virgin forests and coal banks around the periphery of the valley.<sup>10</sup> Arthur envisioned a giant planned development, supported by abundant natural resources and connected by rail to the world marketplace. Arthur secured capital from the Baring Bank of London and became President of the American Association, Ltd. With the "virtual equivalent of a blank check" and the assistance of Colson and Morison, the American Association Ltd., optioned, surveyed, and purchased over 100,000 acres in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia.<sup>11</sup>

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Small orchards and kitchen gardens were cleared for the new business district. Apartments over the grocery stores, shoe shops, printing offices, barber shops, restaurants, and other businesses served as living space for newly-hired store clerks and delivery men. Overnight visitors could choose from three hotels and several boarding houses a few blocks from the railroad depot.<sup>13</sup> Newly's son-in-law, Dr. Divine, now a land agent, and his partners established the first of three local banks. The county newspaper editor made frequent trips to the Gap and encouraged Claiborne Countians to invest in a railroad tunnel through the mountains even though a series of cave-ins hampered the tunnel's completion. Injuries caused by the cave-ins often required Dr. Morison or his son to treat their patients inside the tunnel or on the side of the mountain in primitively-constructed houses and hastily-erected tents. The African-Americans and poor whites working on the tunnel and railroad squatted on the only land in the

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Although the descendants of the black workers who came to town during the Association period and of the families who settled near the mill during frontier days deny any discrimination in Cumberland Gap, African-Americans were nonetheless "limited by local racial custom in their right to mingle casually"<sup>16</sup> with whites. The local hotels did not rent to the workers, so they camped wherever they could.

Cumberland Gap had its share of rowdiness and violence, but the relative peace on the south side of the mountain and the large medicinal springs southwest of town attracted a group of wealthy "dyspeptic invalids"<sup>17</sup> anxious to bathe in the springs and relax in the healthy mountain air. Dr. Allen McLane Hamilton, great-grandson of Alexander Hamilton, decided in 1891 to invest in the most expensive undertaking in the area, a two-hundred-room sanatorium complete with Turkish baths and a high seven-hundred-room hotel. But as the bill for the entire development neared thirty million dollars, the "economic bubble burst."<sup>18</sup>

Residents of the historic village at the foot of Cumberland Gap watched in dismay as the elaborate Four Seasons Hotel was dismantled and outside investors began to leave. But the Gap community leaders had maintained their control over the town. While land auctions in Middlesborough attracted speculators, raising prices beyond belief, the sale in Cumberland Gap proceeded slowly. Land sales to local lawyers, doctors, and merchants buying lots for "town" houses and small businesses outnumbered sales to outsiders.

While Alexander Arthur and the other business investors concentrated on developing the surrounding land resources, Reverend Aaron Arthur Myers and his wife, Ellen, began building a Congregational Church and school in town. Arthur and Ellen Myers exemplified the reformers who discovered Appalachia in the late 1890s. Because they meant well and acted for people's "own good,"<sup>19</sup> the townspeople justified the Myerses' involvement in Cumberland Gap. For them and other late-nineteenth-century reformers, the romanticized possibilities were often more interesting than realasis. For them, the fantasy became the new reality.<sup>20</sup> This is particularly evident in Cumberland Gap. Not only did this community support two churches before the Myerses arrived, but Middlesboro built and maintained seven large churches.

Nor did the Myerses alter the educational system in the Gap community. Before the Civil War, the wealthier citizens had provided teachers for their children. Their children attended the Myerses' school, not the "masses" Ellen expected to influence. Blacks and poor whites started work at an early age; they believed education was irrelevant and unnecessary. When Alexander Arthur's empire began to crumble, the newly-completed Cumberland Gap Hotel closed. Seeing this as an opportunity to expand their school, the Myerses moved their school out of the Congregational Church and into the closed hotel. They called their new school Cumberland Gap College. Shortly after the school opened, the wife of the British Ambassador to the United States visited and suggested the name Harrow School.<sup>21</sup>

By 1900, the culturally and ethnically diverse citizenry of Cumberland Gap had withstood the twin onslaughts of industrial might and evangelical energy. The unprecedented growth of the previous twenty years, 1880-1900, strained the community's ability to sustain itself as a separate viable entity. Nonetheless, Cumberland Gap, Tennessee, "persisted."

The village, incorporated since 1890, was the largest community in Claiborne County. Typical of the new immigrants after 1900, John Estep started peddling produce to the stores in Cumberland Gap. After several years of travelling between his farm and the village, Estep moved his family to town and built a large house on a slight ridge southeast of town.<sup>22</sup> His older children started school; his wife took in boarders, planted a small garden, and sold dairy products in town. John Estep worked in the rock quarry and built company houses in the coal camps. His youngest son began meeting the trains at age seven, earning money carrying drummers' cases and luggage between the depot and the livery stable.<sup>23</sup>

Members of another immigrant family, the Hamblins, moved from Rose Hill, Virginia, to Cumberland Gap, Tennessee, about 1906. Henry Hamblin's father, an African-American farmer with forty-eight acres of marginal land, supported six children of his own and several young nieces, nephews, and stepchildren. Hamblin attended school in 1900 near Rose Hill, but soon left to work as a day laborer on nearby farms and in the coal mines. When Hamblin moved to the Gap, he rented a small house on the hillside near the railroad tunnel.<sup>24</sup> Hamblin worked in the mines, at the mill, and on the city street crew. He also made "the best moonshine" available anywhere in the Gap. His skill as a healer was as well-known as his skill for making good whiskey. Gathering "bark, weeds, and things" from the woods, Hamblin treated the mill workers and other laborers who lived near the railroad tunnel, the old iron furnace, and along parts of the abandoned Wilderness Trail. Hamblin's wife, the daughter of a white miner from Harlan, died after the birth of their tenth child. His oldest son, Mildford, age nine, went to work in the mines to help support the large family. Hamblin's grandchildren, like young Estep, met the trains, earning money by carrying luggage and other items for travellers. For a nickel, they also posed for tourists' pictures near the old furnace.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the large, sturdy homes adjoining the road, houses rented by the workers seldom had more than four rooms, or indoor plumbing, or electricity, or telephones. Besides the visual separation of the two sections, most of the laborers' houses were legally in Virginia, and the Association era homes and businesses were in Tennessee.

A new road, completed in 1908, increased wagon traffic tenfold and the "honk of automobiles [sounded] daily" along the entire sixty-nine mile Middlesboro to Knoxville Pike.<sup>26</sup> Local wagon-maker J.S. Whiteaker opened the first auto business in Cumberland Gap and offered full service for the local "T-Models" and the increasing tourist traffic. In addition to the now frequent automobiles on the road through town, by 1915 seven passenger trains and eight freight trains daily brought people and goods into and out of the area. Salesmen travelled to Cumberland Gap, rented wagons at one of the livery stables in town, and visited general stores located throughout the mountains. Three large hotels and several boarding houses accommodated the salesmen, providing meals, laundry, and other services for the travellers.<sup>27</sup> The money the commercial and recreational visitors spent in town added to the general prosperity of the community.

For more than a hundred years, the traffic that followed the Wilderness Road through the mountains had sustained

the town. Although the road no longer passed the old iron furnace and an electric woolen mill had replaced the water-powered grist mill, the town still provided for and depended on the "travel that naturally poured through the Gap."<sup>28</sup> Along with goods and services, the Wilderness Road brought ideas. These ideas, exchanged and utilized by a diverse group of people, created in the shadow of the mountains a place called Cumberland Gap, Tennessee.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Robert F. Minn, "The Latest Rediscovery of America," in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Bruce Ergood and Bruce E. Kuhre (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt 1983), 8.
- <sup>2</sup>Ulrich B. Phillips, "The Central Theme of Southern History," *American Historical Review* (October 1928): 31.
- <sup>3</sup>*New York Herald* October 1890; The American Association, Ltd. kept a scrapbook of journal and newspaper articles from every state and many foreign countries. Scrapbook, American Association, Ltd. Collection, Cumberland Gap NHP Library, Middlesboro, KY.
- <sup>4</sup>Robert L. Kincaid, "Rally of 'Friends of Liberty'," *Lincoln Herald* (February 1946): 30-38.
- <sup>5</sup>Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 16.
- <sup>6</sup>Alexander Moore McCloud, "Old Time Tazewell," *Claiborne Progress*, (Tazewell, Tennessee), 5 March 1970.
- <sup>7</sup>Claiborne County Stage Book, Microfilm Roll 38, Claiborne County Library, Tazewell, Tennessee.
- <sup>8</sup>Mildred Divine, Interview by Robert L. Kincaid, n.d., Kincaid Papers, Cumberland Gap NHP Library.
- <sup>9</sup>Sterling Kincaid Turner, Interview by Robert L. Kincaid, 10 August 1940, Kincaid Papers, Cumberland Gap NHP Library.
- <sup>10</sup>Prior to Arthur's arrival forty percent of the assessed acreage in and around the Yellow Creek Valley belonged to land owners holding 1,000 acres or more. For an analysis of land investments in Bell County, see Alan J. Banks, "Land and Capital in Eastern Kentucky, 1890-1915," *Appalachian Journal* (Autumn, 1980): 8-17.
- <sup>11</sup>Harry M. Caudill, "Middlesborough: The Magic City," *American History Illustrated* (January 1984): 20-31
- <sup>12</sup>*Cumberland Gap Progress* (Tazewell, Tennessee) 14 Nov. 1888.
- <sup>13</sup>Sanborn-Perris Map Co., Ltd., New York.

<sup>14</sup>[Cumberland Gap Progress](#) 18 April 1888.

<sup>15</sup>William H. Turner, "Between Berea (1904) and Birmingham (1908): The Rock and Hard Place for Blacks in Appalachia," in *Blacks in Appalachia*, by William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

<sup>16</sup>Lamon 15.

<sup>17</sup>[Cumberland Gap Process](#) 29 August 1888.

<sup>18</sup>Caudill, "Middlesborough," 27-30.

<sup>19</sup>Dennis N. Lindberg, "Appalachia: A Colony within a Colony?" in Helen M. Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Don Askins, eds., *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*. (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), 316.

<sup>20</sup>Henry D. Shapiro, "Appalachia and The Idea of America: The Problem of Persisting Frontier," in Ergood and Kuhre 72.

<sup>21</sup>Joseph S. Suppinger, *Phoenix of the Mountains: The Story of Lincoln Memorial University* (Harrogate, Tennessee: LMU Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>22</sup>J.D. Estep, Interview by author, 12 March 1991.

<sup>23</sup>Nola Estep Comer, Interview by author, 11 March 1991.

<sup>24</sup>Mildred Hamblin, Interview by author, 10 April 1991.

<sup>25</sup>Faye Jackson and Crystal Rogers, Interview by author, 13 March 1991.

<sup>26</sup>[Middlesboro Daily News](#) 9 March 1907.

<sup>27</sup>Nola Estep Comer, *As I Remember Cumberland Gap* (Maynardville, Tennessee: Ireland Printing Co., 1976), 3-4.

<sup>28</sup>[New York Herald](#) October 1890, Scrapbook, Cumberland Gap NHP Library.

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- <sup>1</sup>Robert F. Minn, "The Latest Rediscovery of America," in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Bruce Ergood and Bruce E. Kuhre (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt 1983), 8.
- <sup>2</sup>Ulrich B. Phillips, "The Central Theme of Southern History," *American Historical Review* (October 1928): 31.
- <sup>3</sup>*New York Herald* October 1890; The American Association, Ltd. kept a scrapbook of journal and newspaper articles from every state and many foreign countries. Scrapbook, American Association, Ltd. Collection, Cumberland Gap NHP Library, Middlesboro, KY.
- <sup>4</sup>Robert L. Kincaid, "Rally of 'Friends of Liberty'," *Lincoln Herald* (February 1946): 30-38.
- <sup>5</sup>Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 16.
- <sup>6</sup>Alexander Moore McCloud, "Old Time Tazewell," *Claiborne Progress*, (Tazewell, Tennessee), 5 March 1970.
- <sup>7</sup>Claiborne County Stage Book, Microfilm Roll 38, Claiborne County Library, Tazewell, Tennessee.
- <sup>8</sup>Mildred Divine, Interview by Robert L. Kincaid, n.d., Kincaid Papers, Cumberland Gap NHP Library.
- <sup>9</sup>Sterling Kincaid Turner, Interview by Robert L. Kincaid, 10 August 1940, Kincaid Papers, Cumberland Gap NHP Library.
- <sup>10</sup>Prior to Arthur's arrival forty percent of the assessed acreage in and around the Yellow Creek Valley belonged to land owners holding 1,000 acres or more. For an analysis of land investments in Bell County, see Alan J. Banks, "Land and Capital in Eastern Kentucky, 1890-1915," *Appalachian Journal* (Autumn, 1980): 8-17.
- <sup>11</sup>Harry M. Caudill, "Middlesborough: The Magic City," *American History Illustrated* (January 1984): 20-31

[12](#) *Cumberland Gap Progress* (Tazewell, Tennessee) 14 Nov. 1888.

[13](#) Sanborn-Perris Map Co., Ltd., New York.

[14](#) *Cumberland Gap Progress* 18 April 1888.

[15](#) William H. Turner, "Between Berea (1904) and Birmingham (1908): The Rock and Hard Place for Blacks in Appalachia," in *Blacks in Appalachia*, by William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

[16](#) Lamon 15.

[17](#) *Cumberland Gap Process* 29 August 1888.

[18](#) Caudill, "Middlesborough," 27-30.

[19](#) Dennis N. Lindberg, "Appalachia: A Colony within a Colony?" in Helen M. Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Don Askins, eds., *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*. (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), 316.

[20](#) Henry D. Shapiro, "Appalachia and The Idea of America: The Problem of Persisting Frontier," in Ergood and Kuhre 72.

[21](#) Joseph S. Suppinger, *Phoenix of the Mountains: The Story of Lincoln Memorial University* (Harrogate, Tennessee: LMU Press, 1988), 7.

[22](#) J.D. Estep, Interview by author, 12 March 1991.

[23](#) Nola Estep Comer, Interview by author, 11 March 1991.

[24](#) Mildred Hamblin, Interview by author, 10 April 1991.

[25](#) Faye Jackson and Crystal Rogers, Interview by author, 13 March 1991.

[26](#) *Middlesboro Daily News* 9 March 1907.

[27](#) Nola Estep Comer, *As I Remember Cumberland Gap* (Maynardville, Tennessee: Ireland Printing Co., 1976), 3-4.

[28](#) *New York Herald* October 1890, Scrapbook, Cumberland Gap NHP Library.

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