

Antebellum Settlers in the Mountain Region

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Surrounded by beautiful mountains in the Reems Creek Valley just north of Asheville, the Zebulon B. Vance Birthplace State Historic Site tells the story of the people who settled in western North Carolina during the early antebellum era. Today the buildings on the site where Vance—who would serve three terms as the state’s governor—was born depict typical labor performed on a Mountain farm. These buildings also symbolize gender and racial roles at the time. The Vances were relatively wealthy, and life at their homestead has become part of the story of progress and growth in Buncombe County during the first half of the 1800s.



Many families in western North Carolina lived in log cabins during the early antebellum years. Records show, however, that at one point, the David Vance family lived in one of only two two-story log homes in the large Buncombe County area. Image courtesy of the Zebulon B. Vance Birthplace State Historic Site.

David Vance (1745–1813)—the grandfather of Zebulon Vance—moved his family west from Burke County to the Reems Creek Valley shortly before 1790. Like Vance, many of the first white settlers in Buncombe County received land grants from the federal government for their service in the American Revolution. Land was the main reason for moving to the area. People who owned a large amount of land had an influence on a county’s political development. Buncombe then included what later became several other Tar Heel counties. The area actually was called the “State of Buncombe” because of its large geographic area; the current border of Buncombe County was set in 1851. In 1790 Buncombe had about 1,000 people, not including the Cherokee. (At the time, the census did not count American Indians. They were not considered United States citizens or subject to federal taxes.)

Official documents like wills and land deeds, letters, Zebulon Vance’s autobiography, and other documents left by the family help researchers piece together the story of the Vances, whose ancestors were mainly Scots-Irish. In October 1795, David Vance (a former state legislator, as well as a surveyor and farmer) purchased 328 acres of land from a man named William Dever. Vance’s family at that time included his wife, Pricilla, five daughters, and three sons. He owned three enslaved persons.

The Vances constructed a large log home with features that included a guest room, a sitting room, two children’s rooms upstairs, and a kitchen. This style of house was described as “saddlebag,” because the kitchen was attached to the house rather than being a separate building. At the center of the house was a dual-sided chimney. It provided fire for both the sitting room and the kitchen. Chimneys in the Mountain region were usually made from smooth river rocks, but the Vances’ was built with red bricks made by a brickmason. One-story saddlebag log homes were common in Buncombe County during the antebellum years. The Vances, however, were one of two families with a two-story saddlebag house. During the clearing of land and construction of the house, the family lived in a smaller cabin left behind by the Devers. Though better off than most of their western neighbors, the Vances did not compare to many wealthier families in Piedmont or eastern North Carolina. And, like most Tar Heels, they had plenty of work to do just to survive.



Common features of Mountain homes in the antebellum era included rope beds, homemade chairs with seats of woven hickory bark, and simple handmade quilts. Image courtesy of the Zebulon B. Vance Birthplace State Historic Site.

The yellow pine log house standing on the site today is a reconstruction, built around the original chimney. It contains new and old material, including some wood from the original house. Researchers carefully based the reconstruction on a late-1800s photograph of the house, site surveys, and information from local residents. Today the house displays furniture and other items that represent a typical Mountain lifestyle during the antebellum era; a few of the objects actually belonged to the Vance family. The rope beds and rocking chairs—with woven inner bark from hickory trees for seats—were common. Members of the household would have built much of the furniture themselves, there on the farm. The large kitchen features cooking utensils such as a Dutch oven—a heavy pot with a lid used for baking in an open fire—and cast-iron skillets, which also were popular. The Vance kitchen contains items that were more unique and rare at the time, too, such as a waffle iron and a sausage stuffer.

Several other buildings stand just outside the kitchen's back door, including a corncrib, springhouse, and smokehouse. Some of the structures are old buildings moved from other places, and some were rebuilt based on historic research. These smaller buildings help the site's staff explain gender and racial roles in the early 1800s, as well as daily work on a typical farm in the region. As with most North Carolinians, the people living on the Vance farm did not have specific roles or specialized skills. Each person—family members and enslaved workers—performed all kinds of different tasks.

Things in the toolshed help show the slow process that antebellum men used to build log homes on their farms in western North Carolina. As Americans moved from Virginia and eastern North Carolina, they needed to travel through the Blue Ridge Mountains with as little weight as possible, so most of the tools they brought had no handles. New settlers first would use a tool called a hewing hatchet to make gluts and mauls, which were used to split logs. A glut is a wedge made from dogwood, the same shape as a metal wedge. A maul is an alternative to a metal sledgehammer; it would be used to strike the gluts to split a log. Mauls were made from hardwood like hickory, ash, or dogwood. After splitting a log, settlers would use the pieces of wood to build a shave horse. The shave horse worked as a vise to hold wood in place to be carved with a drawl knife.

Settlers would carve handles from hickory, and each handle was used for a broadax or a foot adze. The broadax would have been used to slice off the sides of a log, so the sides would become flat, while the top and bottom remained round. This process is known as hewing. Settlers hewed logs so they could place panels on the inside walls of the cabin for insulation. One man could roughly hew two 30-foot logs in one day. We do not know how exactly long it took the Vances to build their house, but the skilled and strenuous labor involved easily could have taken two or three years.

Near the toolshed at the historic site stands the loom house. Antebellum Mountain women worked to make yarn from wool with a spinning wheel and to weave cloth with a foot-powered loom. It was uncommon in Buncombe County to have a separate building dedicated to making a family's clothing, blankets, and rugs. This type of work, though, was routine. The spinning wheel and loom—tools that had been used for centuries—were difficult to carry because of their size, shape, and weight. Only settlers who owned wagons, like the Vance family, could bring such items with them. Spinning wheels and looms had value in the region, because settlers were isolated from the few stores around, as well as from other families. The nearest town to the Vance farm was Asheville. The 15-mile journey there would have taken a day of travel by wagon due to the rough terrain and lack of roads. Families made most of what they needed.

Just down the hill from the Vance house, a slave cabin interprets race in Buncombe County during the antebellum era. The small cabin has two rooms and seven-foot-high ceilings. (Ceilings in the Vance home measure 11 feet.) Many white families in Buncombe County at the time also would have lived in this smaller type of house. Slavery was rare in North Carolina's Mountain region. According to the 1800 census, 104 of the 895 white families in Buncombe County owned slaves. Most of those families owned one to three enslaved persons. The proportion of families that owned slaves, and the number of slaves owned by each, remained consistent during the antebellum decades to come. There were no cotton or tobacco plantations

in the county, so slaves largely were considered to be artisans. They performed skilled labor involving carpentry, blacksmithing, brick making, cooking, and quilting. Enslaved laborers worked on the Vance farmland during the summer. The main cash crop—a crop grown to sell or trade instead of for the farmer’s own use—was corn. During the winter, the Vances rented out their slaves to hotels in Asheville, where they would work as cooks or maids and perform other needed services. Enslaved workers contributed to the growing tourism economy in this way.

The construction of roads really boosted economic progress in the area. During the early antebellum period, Buncombe County’s population and economy began to grow. In 1820 the population of the county was 10,501. Boosting growth was the completion of the Buncombe Turnpike along the French Broad River in 1828. This 75-mile dirt road allowed travel from Greenville, Tennessee, through Asheville to Greenville, South Carolina; many considered it to be the finest road in North Carolina at the time. The turnpike brought more settlers, as well as benefits like better mail delivery and more regular stagecoach routes.

The new road also created a booming new drover business. Drovers were men who moved livestock—such as hogs, cattle, and even turkeys—to markets to be sold. They used the turnpike to walk animals to Asheville, where thousands of animals were sold at Pack Square. David Vance Jr. (1792–1844), father of Zebulon, recognized this new opportunity. In 1833 he opened a drover stand along the turnpike, just over 21 miles from Asheville in an area known as Lapland (now the town of Marshall in present-day Madison County). A drover stand provided food and shelter for livestock and the men moving them, for a fee. The Vance family also sold corn at its stand. In 1846, two years after the death of David Jr., his widow sold the farm in Reems Creek and moved to Asheville so their eight children could more easily go to school.



Zebulon B. Vance (1830–1894) moved to Chapel Hill in 1851 to become a student at the University of North Carolina. He became a lawyer, a Confederate colonel and governor during the Civil War, a senator, and an important figure for the entire state. His birthplace, and the story of how his family lived off the land and adapted to change, can still help us understand life in western North Carolina during the antebellum years.

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