

# Local author unearths story buried for 170 years

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Editor's Note: This introductory article is the first of four installments from Craig Robert Gralley's "Echoes of Eden in Western North Carolina: The Johnstone Settlement, 1852-1864," to be published by McFarland and Company this August. The book tells the little-known story of the Johnstone Settlement, a permanent colony of wealthy Charlestonians and more than 150 enslaved people drawn to the cool mountains surrounding Dunn's Rock. The book follows the full arc of the community — from its creation and daily life to its Civil War destruction by Confederate deserters and the scattering of its settlers.

In the early 1850s — years before Brevard appeared on a map — a small circle of South Carolina planters made a decision that would alter the history of the French Broad River Valley. Francis Withers Johnstone — a Charleston rice planter from one of the Lowcountry's most prominent families — led a group of men and women who left behind the heat, disease and tensions of the coast to build a new community in the shadow of Dunn's Rock. For a brief decade the settlement they built was one of the most ambitious undertakings in western North Carolina. Then, almost as quickly as it appeared, it vanished.

The story of the Johnstone Settlement has been largely forgotten. Except for scattered references, the community slipped

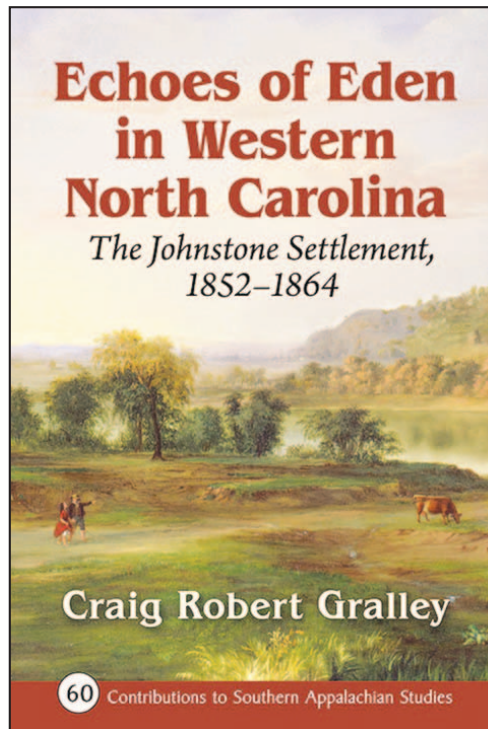
quietly into the margins of history. Yet its rise and fall reveal much about the forces that shaped Brevard, Charleston and Flat Rock — and about the people who sought refuge in these mountains.

## A FLIGHT FROM THE LOWCOUNTRY

By mid-century Charleston was a city under siege — not from armies, but from disease. Yellow fever, malaria and dengue swept through the Lowcountry with grim regularity during the summer months. Families who could afford to flee did so, escaping the "sickly season" for the upcountry or, increasingly, to the mountains of western North Carolina. Flat Rock became the best known of these retreats, earning the nickname "The Little Charleston of the Mountains."

But the families who followed Francis Withers Johnstone were not seeking a summer refuge. They wanted a permanent escape.

Johnstone's circle included some of Charleston's wealthiest and most recognizable names — Hume, Rutledge, Gadsden, Hanckel, Ewbank and Lucas — descendants of Revolutionary War heroes, Supreme Court justices, governors and signers of the Declaration of Independence. Bound by marriage, business and faith many were in their 20s. Half had lost children to disease. They were part of a broader westward migration of South Carolina planters, but their motivations differed. Wealth creation was not their goal. They sought



The book will be available in August.

health. Today, they would be called "environmental refugees."

The mountains offered what Charleston could not: Clean air, cooler temperatures and distance from the epidemics that haunted the coast. The French Broad River Valley, with its fertile bottomland and protective ridges, promised a new beginning.

## BUILDING A COMMUNITY IN THE WILDERNESS

The Johnstone Settlement was a carefully planned community built with the intention of permanence. The settlers purchased thousands of acres along the French Broad River in Dunn's

Rock and brought with them more than 150 enslaved men, women and children whose labor cleared fields, built homes and sustained the settlement. Their presence made the community one of the largest concentrations of enslaved people in what would become Transylvania County.

At the center of the settlement stood St. Paul's Episcopal church. More than a place of worship, it was the institution that bound the community together. It carried with it the theology and social order of the South Carolina Lowcountry, including the belief that slavery was part

of God's natural design.

Life at Dunn's Rock required reinvention. A Charleston lawyer became a hotel keeper. A merchant taught school. A rice farmer experimented with new crops. A customs officer revived an unused medical degree and became the community doctor. Their new lives were experiments and not all succeeded.

## CONTRADICTIONS

The Johnstone Settlement rested on deep contradictions.

The rice wealth generated from the rice fields allowed the settlers to flee from it. Settlers, who lineage defined their positions, erased the histories of the Blacks they subjugated.

The conditions that were killing their children were of their own making: Charleston had been built on the forced labor of enslaved Africans and Caribbean people — labor that also brought tropical diseases into the region. The rice fields they engineered on coastal South Carolina created stagnant pools where disease-carrying mosquitoes thrived and infected their own families.

## A FUTURE CUT SHORT

For a time, the settlement thrived. The planned French Broad Turnpike promised to connect Dunn's Rock to the new railroad depot in Greenville, reducing the long journey to Charleston from two weeks to two days. The settlers imagined a future in which their mountain community would be linked to the wider world.

But the optimism was

short-lived.

The settlers brought a cultural distance that set them apart from their North Carolina neighbors. Their religion, attitudes, and wealth marked them as outsiders. At first, locals tolerated the newcomers. But as national tensions rose in the early 1860s, that tolerance gave way to animosity.

As the Civil War approached, the settlers' isolation became a liability. The hardships of war led Confederate deserters to roam the mountains. The settlement's buildings were ransacked, and its families scattered. By the end of 1864, the Johnstone Settlement had disappeared.

Some families fled to the Caribbean. Others moved north or west. A few returned after the war and helped lay the foundations of what would become Brevard. The formerly enslaved people of Dunn's Rock faced a harsher reality. With few resources and limited opportunities, many became sharecroppers on the same land where they had once been enslaved.

This article provides an overview for subsequent articles. Next: McKewn Johnstone and the establishment of Glen Cannon Farm. Echoes of Eden is available for preorder from Highland Books in Brevard and other stores. For more information about Gralley and his work, visit [craiggralley.com](http://craiggralley.com) which also offers a free Echoes of Eden Discussion Guide for schools, churches and community programs. Gralley's royalties will be shared with African American institutions in Brevard.