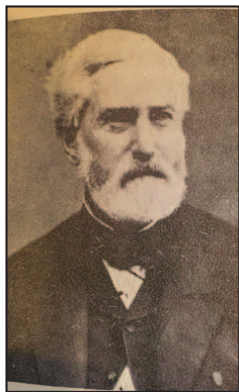


Glen Cannon Farm: McKewn Johnstone and those who built it

Editor's note: This is the second 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. It is the untold story of a community, its people — free and enslaved — and events that ultimately ended the settlement.

A HOME BY THE RIVER

Deep in the forest, a 100-foot waterfall still tumbles over the same rocks it did 175 years ago — the same falls a Charleston rice planter once turned into a marvel of mountain engineering. A year before Johnstone Settlement founder Francis Withers Johnstone set foot in the French Broad Valley, his brother McKewn had already staked his claim there. He called his prop-



A photo of McKewn Johnstone made available by the Johnstone Family.

erty Glen Cannon Farm.

Back in Charleston, McKewn's family had experienced great tragedy. In a one-month period he and his wife, Martha, lost four children to diphtheria. The doctors said their new son "born sickly" required a "higher altitude." To protect

their remaining children McKewn and Martha left coastal South Carolina, and its yearly yellow fever epidemics, for a permanent home in the mountains of western North Carolina.

In 1851 McKewn's brother-in-law, Thomas Webb, bought eight contiguous tracts along the French Broad River and Williamson's Creek — more than a thousand acres in all — and deeded them, free of any mortgage, to his sister Martha. By early 1852, McKewn had raised a five-room cottage on the land, along with cabins for the 23 enslaved men, women and children he had brought west from the family's South Carolina rice fields to his Glen Cannon farm. When the family matriarch, Anna Maria Pinckney, visited that summer she wrote home that her son and his wife seemed "quite accustomed to their quiet situation."

The farm would eventually grow to 1,370 acres — heavy timberland mixed with fertile bottomland. One traveler described a winding approach road leading to a hilltop home with "an almost boundless horizon."

POWER FROM THE FALLS

McKewn had learned the mechanics of water power years earlier while helping to invent and market rice-threshing equipment in the Lowcountry and overseas to China, and he turned that knowledge on a 100-foot waterfall tumbling behind his new home.

By 1851 he had harnessed it to turn a 28-foot overshot wheel generating roughly 150 horsepower, enough to run a sawmill and grind 45 bushels of corn meal in under an hour.

One awed visitor wrote that Johnstone's "genius and enterprise" meant the falls were never "allowed

to run to waste." The mill supplied lumber and meal not only to Glen Cannon but to the growing Johnstone Settlement taking shape around Dunn's Rock.

BUILT ON BONDAGE

None of it happened without the forced labor of nearly two dozen enslaved Africans McKewn brought to the mountains — men who plowed fields, cut timber and ran the mill saws; women who cradled grain and spun wool from the farm's sheep; an enslaved carpenter who helped raise the barns and the Johnstone home itself.

By 1860, seven children had been born into slavery at Glen Cannon, the youngest just 6 months old — a quiet reminder that the picturesque farm so admired by passing travelers was sustained entirely on the backs of people who had no claim on its land.

What became of Glen

Cannon, its families — free and enslaved — and the mill that once roared with the power of the falls is a forgotten story.

"Echoes of Eden" is drawn from unpublished family letters and diaries, court and Civil War records, and forgotten newspaper accounts that bring this lost mountain settlement back to life.

Echoes of Eden is available for preorder now from Highland Books in Brevard (highlandbooksonline.com) and other stores.

For more on Gralley and his work, visit 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 Black organizations in Brevard.

Next article: Life in the Johnstone Settlement