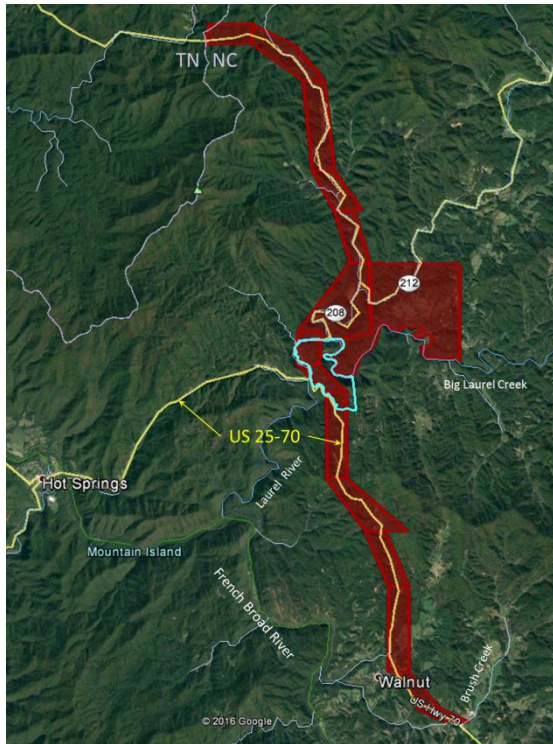


Gahagan, Part 1

The Gahagan heritage in Madison County goes back almost 200 years, and is still a name of prominence in the area. George Robert Washington Gahagan is the family patriarch in Madison County. Born in Edgefield, South Carolina in 1802 (his parents immigrated from Ireland in the late 1700s), the first record of George in Madison County was in the early 1820s when family records indicated he built a cabin near the confluence of the Little Laurel and Shelton Laurel Creeks, just a mile northeast (as the crow flies) of where Bear River Lodge is now located.

The first important land deed of record, showing the acquisition of land in the area by George Gahagan, is from 1828. Because of the archaic descriptions used in this deed, the bounds of the five tracts that George purchased from James Allen (namesake of Allenstand, located on NC 208 about 3 miles north of the intersection with NC 212) cannot be definitively located, but descriptors such as 'two forks of Laurel'¹, 'mouth of Little Laurel' and 'Allen's new road' (which follows present day NC 208), all suggest the newly acquired acreage was in the immediate area. Supplementing this purchase was the 1835 deed cited in the previous chapter, where Gahagan acquired almost 5000 acres from the sons of John Gray Blount (the original owner of the huge land grant). This deed consists of 15 tracts, and though many of the references are difficult to pinpoint (e.g., "tract begins on a pine in a low gap of the ridge in the Bend of Big Laurel on the edge of the Allen road"), there are a number of references that could be located on modern maps, and by piecing together all of the tract descriptions, it was possible to outline the approximate bounds of this deed.



The figure to the left is a Google Earth image that shows the extent of this purchase, forming a contiguous strip of land, extending approximately 13 miles, generally following the route of modern US Highway 25-70 from Brush Creek (Madison Middle School and Brush Creek Store), northward to where 25-70 turns left to Hot Springs, and then following modern NC 208 past Bear River Lodge (outlined in light blue) all the way to the Tennessee state line.

Given the configuration of the multiple tracts in this deed, and the fact that many of the tracts follow the 'old Allen Road', it would appear that improving this road may have been an objective of Gahagan. There is a reference in the Gahagan family history that George Gahagan made a deal with the State to construct a road from Jewel Hill (present day Walnut) all the way to the Tennessee line in exchange for land one half mile on either side of the road. The tracts, as shown in the map, average about 1/3 mile across, so it's unknown if this deal was ever consummated. Also, in 1838 Gahagan

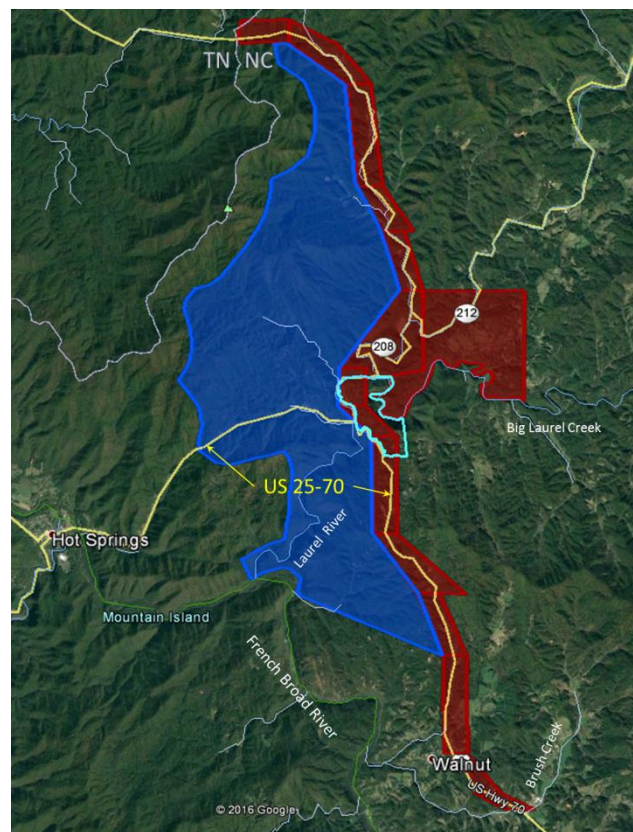
was apparently named by the state general assembly as one of three commissioners in charge of building a public road from Burnsville, NC to Tennessee, by way of "Walnut Mountain, and down Laurel

¹ Though not explicitly described in this deed or other similar deeds of the era, 'Two Forks of Laurel' is believed to refer to the area around and between the confluence of the Big Laurel and the Shelton Laurel (at the bridge outside the BRL gate) and the confluence of the Little Laurel and the Shelton Laurel, located near the intersection of NC 208 and NC 212, near the old community of Belva.

Creek”. The details of these State agreements are sketchy at best, and it is not known if these obligations were fulfilled.

With almost 5000 acres in this deed, which included mostly virgin forest, Gahagan built the first known saw mill in the Laurel region, somewhere near the confluence of the Big Laurel and Shelton Laurel Creeks. It was about this time, in the late 1830s, that Gahagan started construction on his house, using wood he cut and milled. The accompanying barn, constructed of hand-hewn logs, is believed to have pre-dated the house, since once the mill was completed, it would have been faster and easier to construct with milled lumber. The original house and barn still stand, located just a half mile north of Bear River Lodge on NC 208. As you drive to the north, high on the right you’ll notice the house, with the old barn located just to the east. This is believed to be one of the oldest barns in the county and is of keen interest to the Appalachian Barn Alliance, a local non-profit group dedicated to the documentation and preservation of historic barns in the area. The property is still in the Gahagan family, belonging to Rueben and Monnie Lisenbee, Monnie being the great-great granddaughter of George R.W. Gahagan.

Following the 1835 land purchase, the next major acquisition was in 1841, though there appears to be some confusion on the actual date. The original deed is available in the Buncombe County records (Madison County incorporated in 1851), and the date, written in longhand, is not clear, reading “One thousand Eight hundred and thirty xxxx” (the word after ‘thirty’ being illegible). However, when the deed was rewritten in the Madison County deed records, again in longhand (though legible) the date was written as ‘one thousand eight hundred and 41’. Regardless, it’s clear this deed came after the 1835 purchase, since this deed refers to Gahagan’s ‘road tract’ near the Tennessee border, following it south to “where the Allens road leaves the old Warm Springs road”. This same reference is used in the 1835 deed and is located near modern US 25-70, just north of Walnut. Many of the references in this deed are dated and almost impossible to interpret, but a ‘best-guess’ outline of this tract is shown in the figure to the right, in blue, covering a huge swath of the area. Originally listed in the deed as 4000 acres ‘more or less’, the outline shown encompasses over 7000 acres when plotted on a modern map. This magnitude of discrepancy, though large, was not uncommon when comparing 19th century surveying practices with modern maps and techniques.



Note that on Figure 2 there are still portions of Bear River Lodge not included in either of these deeds, though later evidence does indicate that all of Bear River Lodge was once owned by the Gahagan family. Given the unknown bounds of the 1828 deed, the surveying errors from 1835, the ambiguous nature of the road deal with the State or the fact that additional deeds probably exist, this fact is not in dispute. In fact, the Gahagans owned much additional acreage in the county, mostly to the south towards Marshall, but because these deeds were not pertinent to BRL’s history, they were not pursued.

But there were many more Gahagans beyond George that helped perpetuate the Gahagan legacy. In 1841 George married Mary West and over the next 24 years proceeded to have eleven children, not uncommon for families of that era. Of most interest to the Bear River Lodge history, was their son William Wade Gahagan, born in 1860 in the 'Laurel' of Madison County. Wade Gahagan's story is an interesting one, leading to many of the landmarks familiar with many owners at Bear River Lodge. That story in the next installment of our local history...