

Field Notes

BY THE ADVENTURIST

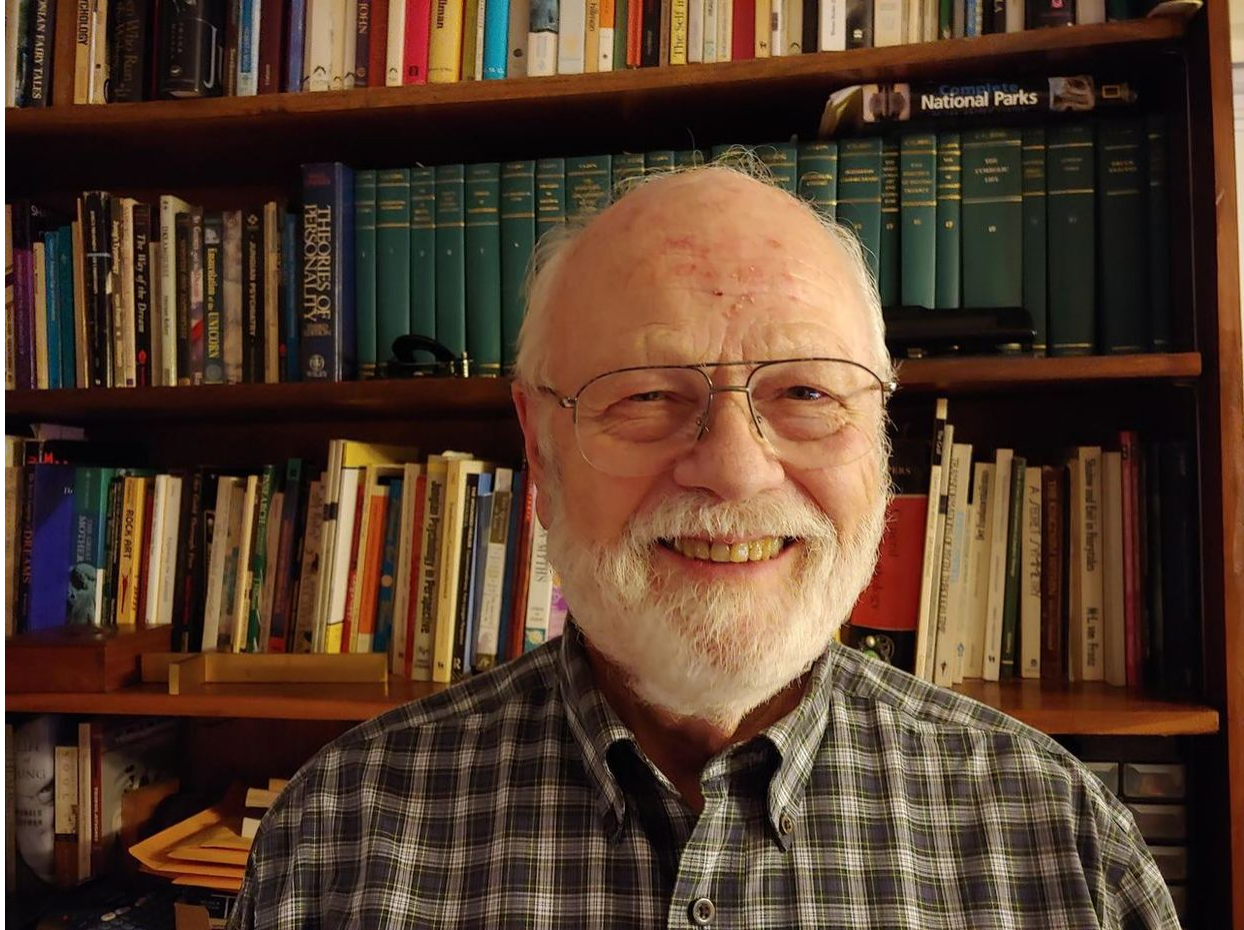
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The Legacy of Indigenous People in Transylvania County

North Carolina has the largest population of Indigenous people east of the Mississippi River and the eighth-largest Indigenous population in the United States. With their rich and diverse cultures, traditions, and histories, Indigenous people have made important contributions to our state and county. As we celebrate North Carolina's "Year of the Trail," we're delighted to share an interview we had with Keith Parker, whose fascinating and varied life experiences have contributed to his knowledge and insights about Indigenous cultures, specifically the Cherokee in Transylvania County.

Keith grew up in Dunn's Rock with Cherokee neighbors, absorbing their stories and mythologies. He graduated from Brevard High School and went on to earn B.A., B.D., Ph.D., and Dipl. Analytical Psychology degrees from multiple institutions, including Berea College, Southern Seminary, and the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich. Keith's educational pursuits were interrupted by a stint as a frogman for the Navy, where he led the primary emergency team for NASA's Mercury program (counting astronaut John Glenn as a friend). Later, he taught counseling and history at a theological seminary in Zurich for more than two decades. In addition to publishing numerous articles on history, church history, and psychology, he has written extensively about Transylvania County and Cherokee history. Most notably, Keith is the author of *Seven Cherokee Myths: Creation, Fire, the Primordial Parents, the Nature of Evil, the Family, Universal Suffering, and Communal Obligation*.



Keith, tell us a little about your connection to the Cherokee.

“The Cherokee were my neighbors and some of the best farmers in the county. I went to school with them. As a result, I grew up with Cherokee stories, and those are the basis for my book. Several of those stories have powerful meaning for the Cherokee and took place in Transylvania County.”

Can you give us a little background on Cherokee history in Transylvania County?

“The Cherokee do not have a written history. A lot of what we do know about them comes from early settlers. There were several small Cherokee villages in Transylvania County including near Dunn’s Rock, where I grew up. The Cherokee would work in one area, hunting and farming, and then move to another area. We know from excavations that, at one time, they had large settlements very near the entrance to Pisgah National Forest at US276 and NC280, where Transylvania Regional Hospital is now.”

Were there other Indigenous tribes in Transylvania County?

“We’ve established that there were Cherokee here as early as 600 AD. Archaeologists have identified ‘Mississippian Mounds’ in Transylvania County, which point to a culture that was 600 to 1000 years before the Cherokee. The Cherokee were scattered about, trading with relatives in SC and GA. They fought the Catawbas, who were located east of Asheville. As the Catawba were killed and died out, many joined the Cherokee nation. The Creeks, in what is now Georgia and Alabama, were arch enemies. An archaeological dig in Parker’s Creek turned up points older than Clovis points.”

(Editor's Note: according to this [source](#), Clovis points date to the Early Paleoindian period, with all known points dating from roughly 13,400 - 12,700 years ago.)

The early established trails created by the Cherokee – what was their main purpose?

“Originally, the trails were for travel between settlements, hunting, and fishing. After the early settlers arrived, the Cherokee began to trade furs, and those trails connected the Cherokee to markets for the furs.”

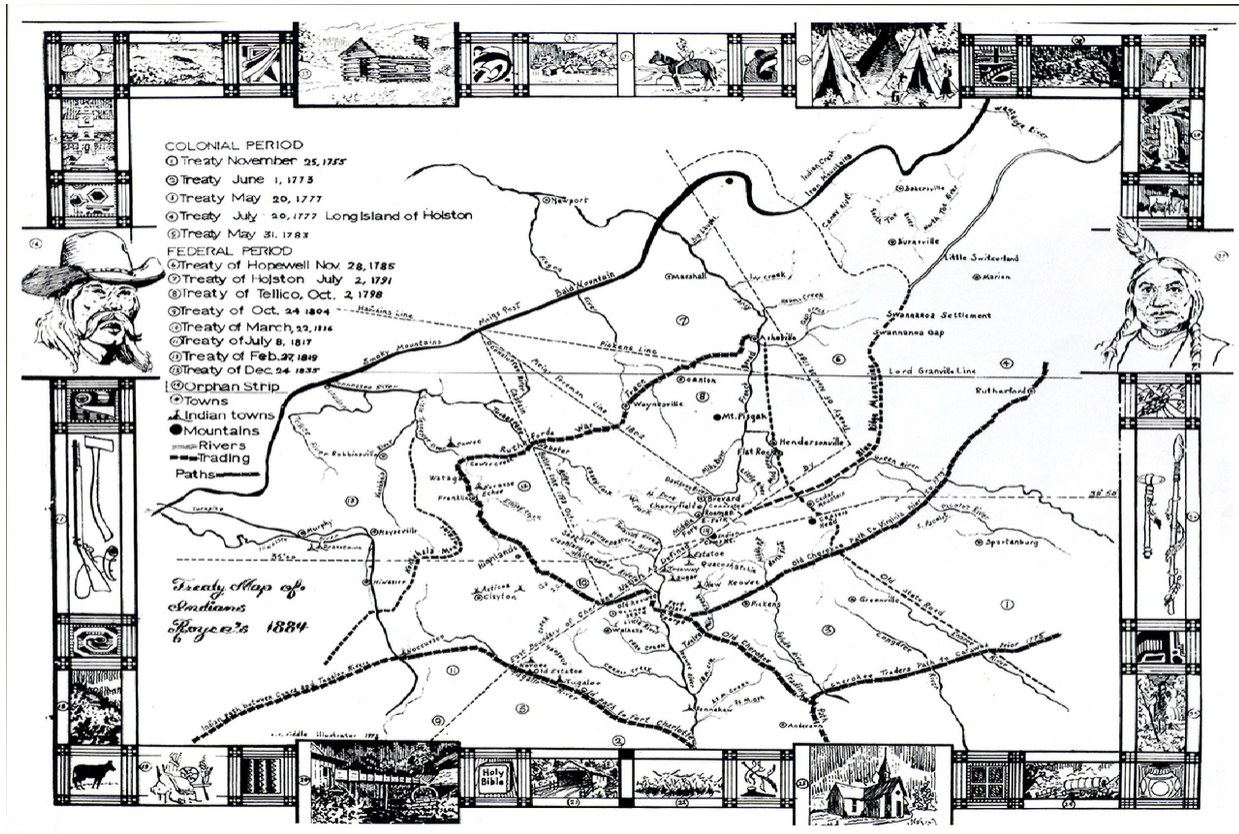


Photo courtesy of Yvonne McCall-Dickson

Are there notable trails in Transylvania County that we can trace to the Cherokee?

“Yes. These trails evolved over time and were adopted and used by white settlers. They were widened and many of the original trails became the roads we are familiar with today. Examples include: Jones Gap Road before it became US 276; what is now Girl Scout Road over the mountain to Cherryfield; East Fork Road, following the East Fork of the French Broad River, connecting to US 178; US 64 between Brevard and Hendersonville, where there are ancient mounds along the French Broad River; Crab Creek Road into Henderson County; and NC 215 crossing Balsam Grove into Haywood and Jackson Counties.

The gap where this road crosses the Blue Ridge Parkway is next to what is now called Devil's Courthouse and is the “home” of Judaculla in Cherokee mythology.”

(Editor's Note: Judaculla, according to Cherokee mythology, was a giant hunting god with slanted eyes and feared by the Cherokee people. He was thought to dwell in a cave at Devil's Courthouse.)

Are there trails in Transylvania County established by the Cherokee that remain, essentially, trails or footpaths?

“Yes. A good example is the Estatoe Trail as it follows the Davidson River in Pisgah National Forest.”

Why is it important to know about the history of Indigenous people in general and specifically as it relates to Transylvania County?

“My family was dependent on what they learned from the Cherokee. Many of the earliest white settlers were saved by the survival techniques taught to them by Indigenous peoples. They understood what types of crops would grow and which wouldn't. I often start history lectures with the statement: ‘We stand on the shoulders of those who have come before. Not just our ancestors but others who brought the understanding of the earth to us.’ We need to honor and respect those that have gone before us.”

You can find Keith Parker's *Seven Cherokee Myths: Creation, Fire, the Primordial Parents, the Nature of Evil, the Family, Universal Suffering, and Communal Obligation* on [Amazon](#) and through his publisher, [McFarland Books](#).

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