



Fort Defiance *Chronicle*



Summer

August 2026

Fort Defiance
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Lenoir, NC 28645

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historicfortdefiancenc.org

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All Friends of Fort Defiance are invited to join us September 26th at 12:30PM for our annual Membership Meeting. The Event will include light refreshments and catering from JD's BBQ. Sandra Watts and Cassandra Douglas will share the site's process over the last year, including updates, grant funding, and visitation. Historian and professor Dr. Jewel Parker from Appalachian State University will be this year's guest speaker. The title of her topic is "Calvin J. Cowles and Overharvesting Medicinal Roots in the Long Nineteenth Century." Dr. Parker's presentation will cover the medicinal traditions in Appalachia that developed through Indigenous American and African practices, and the overharvesting of these ingredients around the time of the Civil War and in the years that followed.

This event was organized to thank all Friends of Fort Defiance for their loyalty and support of the site. The event will begin at 12:30 under the picnic shelter, and tours of the house will be available following the conclusion of the event. Lenoir family textiles will also be on display in the house. **Please RSVP** by September 23rd via phone (828-758-1671) or email (Fortdefiancenc@gmail.com). Members will receive invitation.

Shelby Rae Moore Band



**OCTOBER
17TH**

The Shelby Rae Moore Band will be performing at Fort Defiance on October 17th from 4 pm to 7 pm

Tickets are \$20/person

For more details, follow our Facebook, Instagram, or website:
historicfortdefiancenc.org

Visitors to Fort Defiance

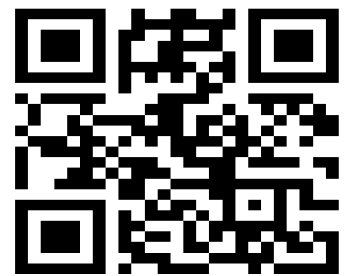


On May 1st, Fort Defiance was visited by 20 students of King's Creek Elementary School (left photo). Fort Defiance was one stop on a multi-part excursion of their tour of local history. The students learned about the history of the Battle of King's Mountain and the Overmountain Victory Trail, and gave a great "Huzzah!" at the Patriots' victory that was no doubt heard throughout the Happy Valley. The young scholars enjoyed lunch after the tour before traveling to their next destination.

On May 2nd, 25 members of the Carolina Crossroads Vintage Car Club (center) joined staff at Fort Defiance for a full guided tour. The colorful assortment of cars ranged from the 1930s to 1970s and created a stark contrast between 20th century history and the 18th and 19th century history present on site. The club frequently travels across the state to various historic sites, but was excited for their first visit at Fort Defiance!

On June 23rd, 36 people from Just People Now (right), a group that works to improve the lives of economically challenged families and children in Caldwell County toured the house and had lunch under the picnic shelter.

**TIME TO RENEW
YOUR
MEMBERSHIP**



By becoming a member, or renewing an existing membership, you help keep the story of General William Lenoir and Fort Defiance alive. Memberships allow the site to provide visitors and school groups with a unique experience. The site can also continue its goal to preserve, research and enhance the land, buildings and artifacts of Fort Defiance. **Memberships are for a one-year period from January 1 through December 31.** For more information on becoming a member, **see page 7** of this newsletter, then take a moment to fill out the portion at the bottom and send a check payable to **Fort Defiance** to Fort Defiance Inc, P.O. Box 686, Lenoir, NC 28645, or pay by using the QR Code or visiting the website at www.historicfortdefiancenc.org to show your support. Continued patronage is essential to the success of Fort Defiance!

Thank You
**FOR YOUR
SUPPORT**

William Lenoir's Chestnut Trees: A Manifestation of an Astounding Legacy

By Kelly Coffey

We know from William Lenoir's records that he maintained a nut orchard that included chestnut trees. The story of the American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) is an almost unbelievable saga of an almost perfect tree that met a tragic end. The narrative has a Garden-of-Eden-like quality where the archetypal tree was growing in paradise for the benefit of mankind, but a defect entered and the tree was struck down and destroyed, depriving mankind of its manifold usefulness. The world has been mourning ever since. If the story had been written by a fiction writer, it would have been derided as too implausible- a tree couldn't have had so many uses, it couldn't have benefited so much wildlife, and a tree so abundant and strong couldn't have died out completely. The story is a true myth, told and retold so many times that few, if any, have never heard it. It's a part of our Appalachian heritage and identity, it characterizes our region like the giant Sequoia does California or the way the saguaro cactus brings to mind the desert southwest. The difference, of course, is that those giants still live while our defining tree lives only in legend.

The annual chestnut bloom created an awesome sight and smell. As the blooms matured, they turned from yellow to white, covering mountainsides in what looked like snow, which is the origin of geographic names like Whitetop Mountain or Yellow Mountain. Chestnut trees produced more nuts than all other species (like oak and hickory) combined; about 320 lbs per acre. Very large mature trees yielded as much as nine bushels. It was not unusual for trees to reach seven feet or more in diameter. The range of the chestnut diminished after Europeans arrived, but about the year 1500, the range formed an oval that reached east to Raleigh, west to the Mississippi River, south almost to the gulf, and north to Maine. Note that the core of its range was the Appalachian Mountains, where grew the largest trees and densest groves. Chestnut leaves had more nutrients than other trees, which resulted in a richer soil from leaf litter. Aquatic insects that fed on fallen chestnut leaves were larger and produced more offspring, which in turn benefited fish that fed on them. Chestnuts trees and limbs that fell into streams lasted for decades, creating pools which reduced flooding and soil erosion. The benefit of chestnuts to land-based wildlife was legendary. Wildlife were fatter and raised more offspring. Squirrel, turkey, deer, and bear lived off chestnuts, which in turn sustained people who ate wild game. There is evidence that the decline of some predators, such as rap-



American chestnut growing on Grandfather Mountain; photo taken in 2022. Chestnut trees still sprout from stumps and grow for a few years before the blight kills them again.

tors, panthers, and bobcats was due in part to the loss of chestnut. Predators didn't eat chestnuts, but they preyed on animals that did. The number one export in the first half of the 1700s was furs and skins. Chestnuts were a major food source for wildlife at the time, and as such, "supplied the natural capital upon which the frontier economy was based." Deer, for example, ate nuts as well as young trees.

Historical uses

In the late 1700s, chestnut was used by pioneers for buildings, but it was mostly turned into fencing. Worm fences were common at the time, and 4,500 rails were needed to enclose a 10-acre field. Such an enclosure required 40 large chestnut trees. Chestnut fences were popular because they would last up to 70 years.



Kelly Coffey, author of the article.

Historical uses

Chestnuts were being cut in large numbers, but the tree has the ability to regrow vigorously after being harvested. There is a story of a man who cut down a chestnut tree to shingle a barn, and 30 years later he cut the tree that regrew from the stump to completely replace the original shingles.

In houses, chestnut was used for flooring, paneling, and furniture. Household items like broom handles, picture frames, cradles, and pianos were made from chestnut. It was favored for Windsor chairs, a style common around the Revolution. There were several medicinal remedies in use made from various parts of the chestnut tree. Even though the uses of chestnut expanded, it was still valued for its nuts. By the end of the Revolution, "most families in the original 13 colonies consumed a bushel or more of nuts annually."

In the 1800s, like William Lenoir, people began growing chestnuts in their own orchards, hoping that by selecting seeds from the best trees, they could get higher yields and larger and more flavorful nuts. Others didn't plant trees, but rather didn't cut down the best natural-growing ones near their home, thus creating a sort of natural orchard.

In the 19th century, roasted chestnuts became very popular in cities, and most of these chestnuts came from the southern Appalachians. "By the mid-1880s, Appalachian communities were known as major suppliers of chestnuts, with some shipping entire carloads to wholesale distribution centers in Wheeling, Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City." Chestnut sales were extremely profitable, especially for wholesalers. Chestnuts were so valuable that they were used as money. Families would buy groceries with them at country stores. People would gather chestnuts to have cash to pay their taxes. The chestnut trade blossomed in the late 1800s and peaked in the 1920s. It wasn't just street vendors selling snacks that drove the trade, "chestnuts were by the early 1880s key ingredients in main courses, soups, side dishes, and desserts. Cookbooks of the period devote considerable space to their preparation."

Local markets

Lenoir was a significant market for chestnuts. The October 22, 1884 edition of The Lenoir Topic had this to say:

"Although there has for several weeks been a considerable trade in mountain produce, the boom began last week. A great many of our Watauga friends came down



One of the chestnut trees planted by William Lenoir at Fort Defiance. This variety is not an American Chestnut, but would have been tended to for domestic use.

with apples, cabbage, chestnuts, and other produce and, almost without exception, they sold out in Lenoir where the prices rule high on account of the order system. One feature about Lenoir which makes it almost without rival as a market for country produce is the fact that, with the exception of Statesville, it is the only Western North Carolina town that is a market for roots and herbs."

A later article dated October 7, 1913 hints at the broader market for the nuts, "Chestnuts are fast finding their way into the local markets and some are being shipped to different points. The chestnut crop this year seems to be plentiful and they are now opening, and hunting them will be the diversion for a while."

After 1920, road building had improved to where it was more feasible and profitable to transport chestnuts out of the mountains. One of the largest markets was Hickory, "where no fewer than 25,000 pounds of chestnuts were sold to Charlotte buyers the first week of harvest." These nuts came from Avery, Watauga, Ashe, and Alleghany Counties. But Lenoir remained a viable market too. My great grandfather, Grant Hodges, and his wife and children, who lived in Watauga County, would gather chestnuts every fall and transport them to Lenoir by wagon where they would be sold. This occurred in the 1910s and 1920s.

Chestnuts was a cash crop for mountain people for over a hundred years. The loss of chestnuts severely hindered their ability to obtain store-bought goods. Chestnuts were food for livestock who had free range in the woods. It cost nothing to fatten hogs on chestnuts, and thus the nut was an important indirect source of sustenance for mountain families. In the late 1800s, ten million chestnut trees were sacrificed for telephone and telegraph poles. But even that didn't compare to the number used to build railroads. Railroad building removed more trees from American forests than any other use. In addition to railroads and telephone and telegraph poles, 50,000 acres of chestnut was annually cut for other uses. In North Carolina, the furniture industry was a big consumer of chestnut. Manufacturers of burial caskets also used an extraordinary amount. After 1890, an extract was produced from chestnut to tan leather. "By 1925, the leather industry had relocated almost entirely to the southern Appalachians, making it the geographic center for the production and consumption of chestnut extract." Another use was paper. Champion Paper Company in Canton "maintained an insatiable appetite for chestnut" using 275 cords per day.

The construction of narrow gauge railroads into the mountains hastened the cutting of chestnuts. In 1907, for the first time, more chestnut timber was harvested from southern Appalachia than any other region.

The End is Near

In 1904, American chestnuts at the Bronx Zoo were found to be infected with a fatal disease. The fungus, later named *Cryphonectria parasitica*, was discovered to have originated with imported Japanese chestnuts. Commonly called chestnut blight, it began spreading farther and farther, efficiently killing all chestnuts in its path. However, it took some time before the blight reached our part of the country. "In many parts of the southern Appalachians, large, healthy stands of chestnut survived well into the 1940s." Nevertheless, the mountains were not spared and eventually all died. Given the many uses of chestnut and its economic and subsistent importance to mountain families, the loss of the tree took a psychological toll on individuals. The emotion was best summarized by a man named Joe Tribble, "Man, I had the awfulest feeling about that as a child, to look back yonder and see those trees dying. I thought the whole world was going to die." Efforts are underway to overcome the blight and bring back the American chestnut. The American Chestnut Foundation is working to cross American chestnut with Chinese chestnut to achieve blight resistance. The trees are 94% American. Another approach is to breed the very few surviving American chestnut trees that exhibit blight resistance. A controversial effort is to genetically engineer American chestnuts with a wheat gene that renders them blight resistant.

The main source of information for this article comes from *The American Chestnut: An Environmental History*, by Donald Edward Davis. All quotes are taken from this book, except where otherwise noted. A longer version of this article will be posted on my website www.blueridgelore.org in the future. The website contains other articles on the natural world, local history, and folklore.

Board Highlights

The board of directors met on July 9, 2026, at 5:30. Members attending were Ike Forester, Tina Triplett, Doug Davis, Monty Minton, Bob Kogut, Steve Rauchfuss, Sandra Watts, Nell Fisher, Bill Karr and site director Cassandra Douglas.

- Sandra Watts reviewed the grants that had been requested and the grants received.
- Tina Triplett gave an update on the sale of tickets for the America 250 quilt raffle and an update on the completion of the cleaning by ASU of the Lenoir family books.
- Bob Kogut discussed the music festival scheduled for October 17 with Shelby Rae Moore.
- Monty Minton has secured an electrician to begin work on the wiring and lighting in the main house.

FRIENDS OF FORT DEFIANCE

Your support is vitally important to the operation of Fort Defiance. **THANK YOU!** The following members have joined for **2026**:

Please Renew now for 2026

Patriot/Individual

Mark Coltrain
Orrin Robbins
Karen Barlow
Wanda Prince
Richmond Bernhardt
Katherine Bravo
Fran Hagaman
Jeanne Dairaghi
Nell Fisher

Militia/Family

Lissa Holsclaw
Kelly Coffey
Steve & Jean Branch
Sharon Underwood
Jill Privott
Pam Helton
Caldwell County Historical Society
Sonny Church
Nathan Hunt Gwyn III

Lieutenant

Britton King
Lucy F. McCarl
William H. LeNoir, Jr.

Captain/Patron

Jennie G. Deal
Al & Adrienne Johnston
Dr. Myra A. Dickson
Monty & Brenda Combs
Cindy Day
Jerry Brooks
Thomas Allen & Virginia Foxx
Douglas Pegram
Tina Triplett
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Charles Forester
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Specified Donations—Thank You

Broyhill Family Foundation
Bernhardt Furniture Foundation
Hogan Family Foundation
Lenoir Service League

Please become a "Friend of Fort Defiance". Memberships are available for individuals, families, and corporations who are looking to support local history and tourism. Each level of membership comes with perks when visiting Fort Defiance. For example, free admission when visiting on regular days of operation, discounts for special event admission, discounts in the gift shop and discounts on ground rentals. Each member will receive a membership card and a copy of the bi-monthly newsletter via mail or email.

Fort Defiance, Inc. is a 501c3 non-profit organization. Anyone wanting to become a member of the "Friends of Fort Defiance" should send a check made payable to Fort Defiance, Inc. and mail it along with the membership form to Fort Defiance, Inc., P. O. Box 686, Lenoir, NC 28645. Payments can also be made by credit card on the Site's website, www.historicfortdefiancenc.org.

_____ Patriot/Individual \$20-39

_____ Militia/Family \$40-74

Family is defined as two parents and their dependent children.

_____ Lieutenant/Supporter \$75-99

_____ Captain/Patron \$100-499

_____ Colonel/Sponsor \$500-999

_____ General/Benefactor \$1000-up

Contact Fort Defiance at fortdefiancenc@gmail.com or call 828-758-1671.

Name: _____ Telephone: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Please Come Visit Soon!

Fort Defiance is located 1.8 miles East of the former Patterson School on Hwy 268.

Hours of Operation

April-October Thursday - Saturday 10 AM-4 PM Sunday 1 PM - 4 PM

November-March Saturday & Sunday 10 AM - 4 PM

Admission

\$7 per Adult

\$5 for children (Ages 6 -15)

Children 5 and under free

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To schedule a group of 10 or more, please call for an appointment.



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