

# Fort Defiance

## Chronicle

Winter Issue

February 2021

**Fort Defiance**

**P.O. Box 686**

**Lenoir, NC  
28645**

**828-758-1671**

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## **Black History Month**

Since February is "Black History Month," it would be a good time to pay tribute to the African Americans who lived and worked at Fort Defiance. Thanks to William Lenoir's meticulous record keeping, we know quite a bit about his slaves and what their life was like. He documented in detail, names, dates of birth, children's names, and, in some cases, their place of origin. Even after his death in 1839, other family members continued the practice of keeping detailed notes about what was happening at Fort Defiance as well as within other locations where family members resided. Elsewhere in this newsletter you will find an article about Mammy Judah who was the children's nurse. Much of the information in the article is taken from Lenoir's records.

The slave's duties were varied. Some cared for the children and assisted Mrs. Lenoir with the household chores. In 1835, Lydia was responsible for the washing and ironing, while Polly had household duties. In 1839, reference is made to a slave named Jenny who had died. It was stated that "she was the best servant we had," and her skills as a seamstress were noted. She may have also been a weaver, since some slaves were taught that skill.

Others worked on the grounds and in the fields and took care of the livestock. Some, such as the blacksmith could work for other people, and the pay he received, he could keep for himself. Some slaves had their own gardens and harvested their own crops. Sometimes the family bought the excessive vegetables and crops which they paid for with silver. Some also were hired to neighboring landowners and they, too, could keep their pay.

Although it was illegal for slaves to read and write, there are letters written by slaves to Lenoir family members. Since William Lenoir was an educator in his early years, perhaps he felt that it was good that his slaves be educated. That idea, along with allowing them to earn money, was certainly radical in its time.

An example of the detailed record keeping is recorded in 1854: "Romeo fell out of the upper door of the Mill House with four bushels of wheat on him very near making him a cripple for life." It was later recorded that Romeo was the driver for the family, which may have come about because of his accident. It was probably the driver's responsibility to care for the carriage horses and the vehicles.

In a letter from the Gwyn family to Thomas Lenoir, Fort Defiance dated March 26, 1856;

Dear Sir,

Our good old servant Mason died on Saturday morning last; rather suddenly and unexpectedly. He was taken on Friday after dinner with severe pains in his bowels, which continued to the moment of his death. We gave him many things to releave (sic) him all to no purpose. I don't think I ever regretted to part from a friend or relation more than I did to part from him. He was so good, honest, truthful, and so careful and attentive to the stock and to everything about the plantation, and so very kind to the children; everybody loved Uncle Mason and they had good reason to do so. He was about 68 and if he would have taken care of himself might have lived 8 or 10 years; but I could never get him to do that. He would be out about something and often when he ought to have been in the house. He has not equal of his color in this part of the country.

*J. Gwyn*

The slaves were treated with kindness. There are very few mentions of times when punishment for a slave was needed. It certainly did not seem to be a common occurrence.

While the detailed information about the building of the house has made it possible to restore the edifice as it was originally, and the information about the Lenoir family has given genealogists insight into what the people were like, it is also good to have information about the slaves. It helps to understand that they, too, were real people, not just shadowy figures of the past.

Ike Forester, a descendent of William Lenoir, has abstracted information about the slaves from the General's papers. A copy of the information can be seen in the visitor's center.



## Notes hint at Lenoir slave's life

Somewhere around the year 1731 in Guinea on the western African coast, a baby girl was born. We do not know the names of her parents, the month and day of her birth, the name she was given, nor do we know whether she had siblings. In fact, the only reason we know the little bit we do about her origin is because of a Jan. 15, 1773, agreement between Henry Collier and William Lenoir for the sale of "one negro woman named Judah about forty-two years old, Guinea born."

Even that factual statement raises some questions. Was she newly arrived from Guinea or had she been in the new world for a while? Did she leave somewhere behind a husband and children? We know nothing about her family status. Later records found among the Lenoir papers that list the slaves and their children, she is not shown as having children.

The Lenoirs came to Surry (now Wilkes) County about 1775. They moved to what is now Caldwell about 1783. It is obvious that the purchase took place before the move to this area.

The late Allan Poe gave me information from his vast storehouse of knowledge that Judah was the Lenoir children's nurse. After the children were adults and some had moved away from the Yadkin Valley, they would often include in their letters, "Give our love to Mammy Judah." William and Ann (Ballard) Lenoir had their first child about 1772 and their last child about 1796, so Mammy Judah spent many years caring for children.

The next record is dated November 1792 and is found in the Yadkin Baptist Church minutes: "Application was made to the church for letters of dismissal (sic) for Leanah Welch and Sister Judah Ethiopia. The church ordered the clerk to prepare the same." There is nothing in the records as to when Judah became a member of the church, but it was probably during the 1780's when many of the records are missing. Since slaves did not have surnames, the church leaders, knowing of her African origin, probably assigned the name Ethiopia at random.

At first I had a hard time understanding why she would have moved her membership until I remembered that in 1791, the Beaver Creek Church and the Yadkin Church agreed that the boundary between their respective church fields would be the mouth of Buffalo Creek. All the members of Yadkin who lived west of the mouth of Buffalo Creek were dismissed to Beaver Creek Church. Fort Defiance, where Judah lived, would be in the bounds of Beaver Creek area, so perhaps in the initial transfer Judah and Leanah were overlooked.

The next item found in the Lenoir papers states that on Jan 4, 1797, several slaves, including Judah, were given either a butcher knife or a jack knife. Since the day almost coincides with "Old Christmas," their items might have been Christmas gifts. It says to me, given that a butcher knife is a potential weapon, these people were trustworthy.

In 1809 a list of 15 taxable slaves has Judah's name first. I am wondering if her place on the list might be determined by her age, her stature among the slaves, or both.

A most interesting but somewhat puzzling item is dated June 27, 1817: "Measured a Colvant (or Cribbage) in Jude's garden 4 feet 6 inches across just as it grew without moving the leaves." It is interesting that, as an 86-year-old woman, she was still able to work

in the garden. It is puzzling because I don't have a clue what she grew, but whatever it was, it was unusual in size and deserved to be noted.

On the third Saturday of August 1828, the Yadkin Baptist Church minutes state: "We announce that our ancient black Sister, Judah, died since the last meeting." If we are anywhere near correct with her birth year, she would have been about 97 years of age when she died. What a remarkable number years for someone of that time period!

There is much that we do not know about Judah—we do not know what she looked like, we don't know her personality, and we don't know her philosophy of life. But given the era she lived in and her station in life, we do know quite a bit.

**NOTE: Apparently Judah had transferred her membership back to the Yadkin Church since she was member at her death. Nothing more is found in the church records, which are incomplete.**

***I wonder if "Cribbage" is supposed to be cabbage. The description sounds like it might be.***

John O. Hawkins

Originally published in *The News Topic* February 7, 2014

"2nd June 1783. Agreed to give Mr. Jordan 10 lbs specie and 55 in horses to build me a Grist Mill and Saw Mill in a good and workman like manner, and set them both to work at the falls of Buffalow. The saw mill forty feet long, and build a grist mill house 12 ft by 15. The cistern to be 52 ft long and the dam 7 ft high."

*William Lenoir*



## Volunteer Opportunities

Fort Defiance is seeking volunteers who are interested in history and who like to dress in period costume to serve as docents and tour guides during the busy summer season. Training and costumes will be provided. Volunteers may work as much or as little as they wish, and they can set their own schedule.

Docent training and costume fitting days are scheduled for Friday, March 12, Sunday March 14, Thursday, March 18, and Saturday, March 20. Volunteers may choose the day that is the most convenient for them. Training will include a tour of the historic house and grounds by the site director, practical experience in leading the other volunteers on a tour, and a costume fitting. Lunch will be provided.

Plans for April include a discount day for residents of Caldwell County to tour the house led by the newly-trained docents. Other special events are planned and will be announced as soon as possible.

There are opportunities for those who do not want to guide tours or dress in period costumes as well. People with clerical abilities, handy man skills, and grounds workers are just a few others who are needed on a regular or an occasional bases.

For more information or to sign up as a volunteer, contact Kristin Robbins, Site Director, at [fortdefiance@gmail.com](mailto:fortdefiance@gmail.com) or by calling 828-758-1671.

Fort Defiance is open each Saturday and Sunday during November-March from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. During April-October, the site is open Thursday-Sunday from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. Docents may also help with events that are scheduled on days when the site is not open to the public or for special events. Social distancing and masks are required as long as Covid-19 restrictions remain in place.

## Historical Highlights

- ◆ May 8, 1751—William Lenoir is born in Brunswick County, Va., the youngest of ten children
- ◆ July 23, 1773—Certified as being taught the art of surveying. This skill would bring him into the wilderness of the Upper Yadkin River where surveying skills were badly needed.
- ◆ February, 1776—Receives his first orders to march 50 miles to suppress a force of Scottish loyalists. Tory leader Colonel Gideon Wright is captured and Lenoir and his men escort him to Richmond as a prisoner.
- ◆ August, 1780—William Lenoir helped raise about 200 men for the march southward to engage Major Patrick Ferguson. Lenoir served as a captain but relinquished his command to Joseph Herndon from Wilkes so that he could move more quickly toward Kings Mountain on horseback. Most of Lenoir's men were without horses. At the battle Lenoir charged the southeast side of the mountain fighting under Colonel Winston. This proved to be heavy fighting and the position where Ferguson took his final stand. While charging up the hill Lenoir saw Col. Chronicle's men retreating down the hill to his right after the Captain had been killed. He immediately moved to his right, rallying the troops and lead them up the mountain.



## Boy Scout Troop 377 of Mooresville

General William Lenoir never envisioned having a picnic shelter in back of his house when he began construction of his home along the Yadkin river in 1788. He named the home Fort Defiance after the stockade built years before in a nearby location to protect local residents from Indian attacks. Today his home is a State Historical Site and this picnic shelter is rented out to local groups for weddings, family reunions, business meetings, etc. and serves as a major source of income for the organization which maintains the site. The only problem was that after decades of service the roof of this picnic shelter had deteriorated beyond repair making the structure unusable and a safety hazard.

This is where the Boy Scouts of Troop 377, sponsored by Rocky Mount United Methodist Church in Mooresville, came to the rescue. After a happenstance visit to the fort on a Sunday afternoon back in August, Scoutmaster Mike Bernhardt, and Fort Defiance governing board chairwoman Sandra Watts, came up with a plan where the Scouts could be of service to the fort by replacing the roof. Since the roof measured 55 feet by 28 feet it was no small undertaking. Mike departed to convince his Scouts BSA Troop Committee to undertake the project while Sandra met with her board to allocate funds to pay for the materials.

During the first weekend in October the Scouts camped at the fort for a series of historical presentations about colonial life while the adults on the troop committee demolished the old picnic shelter roof. The Scouts helped to clear the site by picking up the debris from the deconstruction. Then on the weekend of December 18-20 while most other people were out do-

ing their last minute Christmas shopping, nine adult Scouters and five Scouts spent over 300 man-hours adding a new roof to the picnic shelter (see bottom pictures). The main problems encountered were weather related--it was 24 degrees when the crew began work on Friday and Saturday and it rained overnight on Saturday--but the job was completed by dusk on Sunday.

Kirk Setzer  
Director of Field Service/COO  
Boy Scout of America Piedmont Council





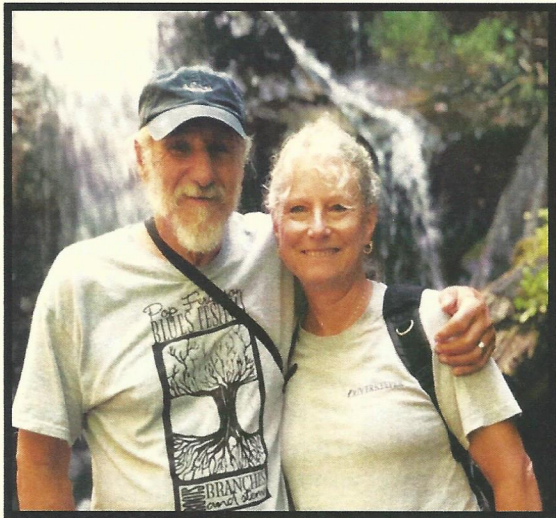
## Board of Directors



Bob Kogut

My wife, Roberta, and I have lived in Caldwell County for 20 years. We have one daughter Emilia. I worked as a licensed physical therapist for 45 years. Upon retirement, I began a second career as a luthier, making musical instruments. I am proud to say that I have built over 245 violins to date, and many are in other countries around the world played by professional musicians.

I first got involved with Fort Defiance by volunteering, with giving tours, and special event days. Roberta would sew period costumes for herself and for our daughter for these events. In the early days of the Fiddler's convention, Becky Phillips was a big part on a planning committee, and we offered tours to Fort Defiance by shuttle from the Fiddlers Convention. I feel Fort Defiance is very important in preserving our communities' rich history.



Helen Nell Fisher and Bill Karr

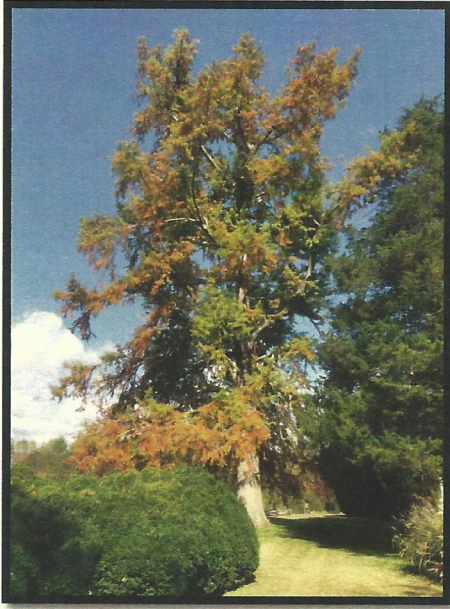
When Bill and I first moved to this beautiful area in 2010, we wanted to immerse ourselves as volunteers for causes close to our hearts. We have always enjoyed working with others to promote and preserve environmental and historical projects wherever we have lived. The Board at the Caldwell Arts Council was one, and then we stopped in to see Becky Phillips here at Fort Defiance. We were immediately caught up in her enthusiasm and the Fort's history. Being retired teachers, our involvement in educational and fundraising efforts were right up our alley. Then joining the Board here, we have had the honor of working with more wonderful people as well.

During our involvement with Fort Defiance, we were also impressed by the Overmountain Victory Trail, (which passes through Fort Defiance property). The efforts of the Revolutionary War Overmountain Men, their families, and the historic places and achievements of the past need to be preserved for the benefit of future generations to learn from, cherish, and enjoy. As life is now, especially, the more real education children can experience, the better we all become.

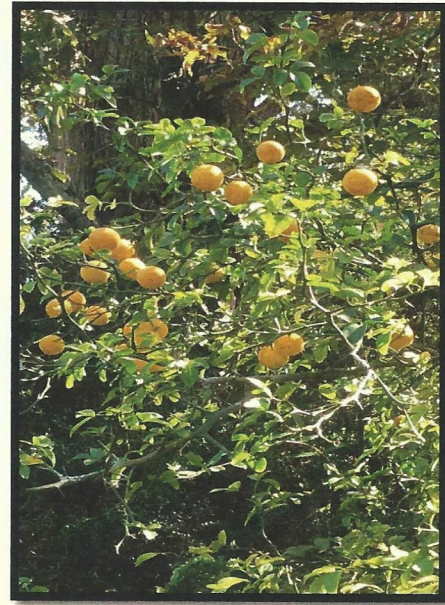
We are so incredibly grateful for the work Sandra, Kristen, the volunteers, and the other Board members do to promote Fort Defiance and preserve the valuable history here. We always look forward to working with others who have a passion for making the Fort and this area shine even brighter. Thank you for your interest and any involvement you can offer.



## Walking the Grounds



The **Cypress** tree is not native to this part of NC and is found more in the eastern part of the state. It is believed that William Lenoir brought this back with him after a trip to Fayetteville.



**Trifoliate Orange or Hardy Orange**

The fruit, though fragrant and citrusy, contains little pulp but instead are chock full of seeds. What pulp is produced is exceedingly sour.



The family cemetery can be found next to the Visitor Center at the edge of the tree line. It is surrounded by very old boxwoods that seem to stand guard over the area.

The earliest grave belongs to Elizabeth Lenoir, daughter of William and Ann Lenoir. She was born February 15, 1783, and died on March 22, 1785, and is the only child who did not grow to adulthood. It is possible she died while playing around the walls of the old fort. If you go on a tour of the house, you will be told the story of Loula and Bessie, the daughters of Rufus and Sarah Lenoir. You can find them in the cemetery and if you look closely at the stone, you will see both their names on the one stone. That is because they are buried in the same grave hand in hand. They died from diphtheria a day apart and because they were so close to each other, Sarah never wanted them to be apart even in death. The stone reads "Laid down to sleep together Sept. 6, 1877. Lovely and pleasant in their lives, in their deaths they are not divided." On the west side of the stone, "Our Bessie's voice is hushed in prayer and changed to songs where angels are." On the east side of the tombstone, "Loula said—Put these words on my tombstone—We love him because he first loved us." The latest grave belongs to Shirley Lenoir, wife of Charles Lenoir one of the last family members to have lived in the house. Shirley died January 5, 2021. Family members can still be buried there if they choose.

The cemetery has about 50 graves.



# FRIENDS OF FORT DEFIANCE

The following members have joined since the last newsletter:

## **Patriot/Individual**

Wanda Prince

## **Lieutenant/Supporter**

Stephen Rauchfuss

## **Militia/Family**

### **Mr. John Hawkins**

Nell Fisher & Bill Karr

## **Colonel/Sponsor**

## **Captain/Patron**

Mary Kincaid

Dr. John W. & Hanna Thuss

Joe & Frances Delk

Lucy F. McCarl

Chuk Forester In Honor of Ike Forester

Samuel & Sandra Ramsey

Jerry & Millie Brooks

## **General/ Benefactor**

Interested in becoming a Friend of Fort Defiance? Memberships are available for individuals, families, and corporations who are looking to support local history. 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.

Anyone wanting to become a member should send dues in payment to Fort Defiance, P. O. Box 686, Lenoir, NC 28645.

Contact Kristen Robbins at [fortdefiance@gmail.co](mailto:fortdefiance@gmail.co) or 828-758-1671.

-----Detach here-----

\_\_\_\_\_ **Patriot/Individual**      **\$20-39**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Militia/Family**      **\$40-74**

Family is defined as two parents and their dependent children.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Lieutenant/Supporter**      **\$75-99**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Captain/Patriot**      **\$100-499**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Colonel/Sponsor**      **\$500-999**

\_\_\_\_\_ **General/Benefactor**      **\$1000-up**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Please Come Visit Soon!**

Fort Defiance is located past the former Patterson School on Hwy 268.

### **Hours of Operation**

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

November-March Saturday & Sunday 10 AM - 4 PM

### **Admission**

\$7 per Adult

\$5 for children (Ages 6 -15)

**Like us on Facebook and Follow us on Instagram.**

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



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