

MOUNTAINS



Thru-hiking the entire Appalachian Trail in 2017 was the first hiking experience for Daniel White, whose trail name is The Blackalachian. PROVIDED/NPS

Project uncovers stories of Black life in the park



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Guest columnist

Who were they? How did they get here? What were their lives like?

These are questions that constantly resonate with me when I gaze upon clouds and mountains and dare to consider the 9,000 years of human history that lie untold within this region that we call home.

Often left out of the popular modern narratives about the Smokies that captivate visitors and locals alike are tales of African Americans who have made their homes here since the 1500s. To learn more, Great Smoky Mountains National Park is using ground-penetrating radar in the park's five known cemeteries that contain Black burials — Meigs Mountain, Ravensford, Higdon, Kerr and the Enloe Enslaved Cemetery. Their data reveal definitively that Black people have lived in this region for a long time and that slavery was indeed present in the Smokies.

The African American Experiences in the Smokies Project is an ongoing effort to uncover and share previously untold stories of Black life in the park and its surrounding lands. Leading the charge to document and educate the public about local Black history is Antoine Fletcher, also the park's science communicator, who says last year marked several milestones for the AAESP.

"The park was able to reach over 500 visitors in-person and virtually last year, telling and asking for African American stories," he said. "We conducted programs for local universities, for regional NAACP branches, and for internal staff. We look to add to these numbers next year."

In 2022, Fletcher and the team updated the AAESP web page on nps.gov with new stories and added historic photos as well as several oral histories to the park archives. They also created and conducted a census records education program to help students understand African American history and worked with the University of Tennessee Knoxville to hire two African American artists to create illustrations that support stories tied to the project.

"I love the research," Fletcher said. "It is very similar to being a detective in that you have to put pieces together to create a story. As a park, it is our duty to tell these stories, and as a team, we do it very well."

With the help of last year's AAESP intern, Atalaya Dorfield, the team was able to secure \$97,700 in funding to help create a five-minute movie, update exhibits, and offer cultural demonstrations

during 2023. They also worked with stakeholders in the community to create wayside panels interpreting themes at relevant locations throughout the park. A panel on Job Conservation Corps history will be placed at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, and Mingus Mill will feature two new panels sharing information about the Black Mingus family and the nearby Enloe Enslaved Cemetery. A panel on Daniel White, "The Blackalachian" thru-hiker, is slated for the Newfound Gap area, while Elkmont will soon be home to a new panel sharing the story of the Davis family.

"We will be hiring an intern in March to help with the research," Fletcher said. "They will focus their efforts on Elkmont's history but also will be in the park daily to conduct informal pop-up programming."

Fletcher says there are plans to host an African American bluegrass and country music concert at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center this spring or summer and possibly a spoken-word and music concert at Elkmont in 2024.

Also in 2023, plans are under way to transcribe more oral histories and create an engaging story map for the website that will host videos and new information as it is being discovered.

"The hardest part of telling these stories is that you are dealing with a group of people that was overlooked for a long time, which creates these vast voids when it comes to their history in the region," he said. "You can research a story for a long time, only to come to a dead end after months of hard work — but that only drives the park to continue this hard work because we know that that void will be filled one day."

If anyone has oral histories of African Americans or pertaining to the African American story in the Smokies, Fletcher wants to hear from them.

"People can get involved by volunteering their time to help us discover new information," he said. "Some people become involved by simply supplying information to us or conducting oral histories with us. Soon we will be working on Forgotten Voices, an oral history project that will be accessible through our website. If regional African Americans would like to share their voices with our oral history project, that would be great."

Antoine Fletcher may be reached at Antoine_Fletcher@nps.gov. Read more at nps.gov/.

Frances Figart (*rhymes with Tiger*) is the editor of *Smokies Life* and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

Court disposes of local gun crime by anti-BLM protester

Joel Burgess
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - An anti-Black Lives Matter protester who pleaded guilty to bringing an assault-style rifle to a downtown demonstration has had his case disposed after attending a racial equity course and paying court costs.

William Jay Turknett, 39, of Henderson County, was charged with bringing the gun to a 2020 protest that followed the death of Black Minneapolis resident George Floyd by white police officer Derek Chauvin, who has since been convicted of murder. Bringing a weapon to a parade or protest is a misdemeanor violation of North Carolina General Statute 14-277.2.

Turknett, appearing Feb. 16 in Buncombe County District Court did not speak, but his attorney, Jack Stewart, said he had attended a three-day racial equity course in Greensboro as part of a deal with prosecutors. Stewart asked Chief District Court Judge Calvin Hill to enter a prayer for judgment continued, meaning the case was disposed but no judgment would be entered, though that could be revisited depending on Turknett's future actions.

Turknett has court dates scheduled for charges of obtaining property by false pretense, on Feb. 23 in Buncombe and March 22 in Polk County. He is also facing multiple misdemeanors, including for alleged traffic violations and for being paid for work he then did not do.

At the Feb. 16 hearing, Assistant District Attorney Austin Braxton did not object to the prayer for judgment.

"He completed what we asked him to do, the racial equity training that was recommended due to the nature of the protest," Braxton said.

Turknett was among a group of counterprotesters who went to a June 21, 2020, BLM rally. According to some present at the rally interviewed by the Citizen Times and pictures of the event, some of the counterprotesters had pistols, while Turknett and another counterprotester, Joshua Jody Case, carried semiautomatic rifles. Both Turknett and Case, a self-admitted former member of the Ku Klux Klan from Candler, were charged after the fact with the violation of state law.

No shots were fired at the protest, though there was gunfire on two other nights of demonstrations. No one was



At a June 21, 2020, demonstration in downtown Asheville, several men carried firearms, including this man, identified by some people as William Jay Turknett of Hendersonville. PROVIDED/JARRET PORTER

reported injured by firearms, though some businesses were riddled with bullet holes.

On Nov. 21, Case had his charge disposed in a similar fashion. Having also attended racial equity training as part of a deal with prosecutors, he paid court costs.

Police Chief David Zack defended his department amid concerns that the agency did not arrest the men on site, when officers saw them with long guns. Police did approach a BLM protester with a holstered pistol who put the gun in his car at officers' request. He was charged with the same misdemeanor, though District Attorney Todd Williams' office dismissed it.

"We have to understand the volatile times we are in," Zack said June 26, 2020, to the Citizen Times. "Police are there, thinking, 'Shooting in crowds? Oh, my God.' They were just thinking, 'We just want these people to go home.'"

Joel Burgess has lived in WNC for more than 20 years, covering politics, government and other news. He's written award-winning stories on topics ranging from gerrymandering to police use of force. Got a tip? Contact Burgess at jburgess@citizentimes.com, 828-713-1095 or on Twitter @AVLreporter. Please help support this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

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