

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Miller Homestead

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 324 Miller Drive (NE side SR 1337, .75 mi. N of jct. with SR 1352) N/A not for publication

city or town Lansing vicinity

state North Carolina code NC county Ashe code 009 zip code 28643

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Jeffery Crow SHPO 7/26/01
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is: Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain): _____

Miller Homestead

Ashe County, North Carolina

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property (Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- private, public-local, public-State, public-Federal

- building(s), district, site, structure, object

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling, AGRICULTURE/agricultural outbuilding, AGRICULTURE/agricultural field

DOMESTIC/single dwelling, AGRICULTURE/agricultural outbuilding, AGRICULTURE/agricultural field

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: hall and parlor

foundation WOOD: log, walls WOOD: weatherboard, WOOD: German siding, roof METAL: tin, other BRICK

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Miller Homestead
Name of Property

Ashe County, North Carolina
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Performing Arts

Period of Significance

Ca. 1905-1945

Significant Dates

Ca. 1905; 1928

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Miller, Charles; Miller, Howard

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Miller, Charles, builder

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Miller Homestead

Ashe County, North Carolina

Name of Property

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 12 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 17 449920 4038600

3 17 450240 4038380

2 17 450230 4038600

4 17 450060 4038360

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Sarah A. Woodard, Historic Preservation Specialist

organization David E. Gall, ATA, Architect date April 4, 2001

street & number 938 West Fifth Street telephone (336) 773-1213

city or town Winston-Salem state NC zip code 27101

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Mr. Bruce Miller

street & number P.O. Box 186, 327 Miller Road telephone (336) 384-2332

city or town Lansing state NC zip code 28643

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Miller Homestead, Ashe County, North Carolina

7. Description

Materials

foundation STONE: fieldstone
walls OTHER: rolled asphalt
roof OTHER: asphalt shingles

Narrative Description

Located west of the town of Lansing and north of Comet in Ashe County, Charles Miller's homestead retains a high degree of integrity. The property is accessed from NC Highway 194 via Big Horse Road, Long Branch Road, and Monroe Miller Road. The dirt driveway proceeds uphill through a wooded area before emerging in a clearing surrounding the farm buildings. The clearing includes the maintained yard around the buildings, a vegetable garden, and a small, untended meadow-like field southwest of the complex. Fruit trees, most of which appear to be apple trees, dot the property. Originally, much more of the property was cleared for crop cultivation and pasture, but enough of the farm was wooded to supply the family with lumber. All of the buildings in the complex were constructed of lumber from the property.

Charles Miller's farm consisted of fifty-three acres, which remains intact today, under the ownership of his son, Bruce Miller. Because the site does not derive its significance from its agricultural history and because it retains little evidence of field patterns, only the homestead surrounding the house and outbuildings is being nominated for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. This parcel contains twelve acres.

The driveway forks below the house, and one leg branches off to the north and terminates where it reaches the house. The main farm road continues uphill to the southwest and west of the farm buildings, off the nominated parcel. The road ends on top of the ridge at another field, from which there is a view of Three Top Mountain to the south and Tennessee to the west.

Seven springs were once active on the farm property, but today most are blocked or clogged. Those that are still free flowing create a small brook that begins in the woods behind the house and runs along the northeastern edge of the yard and then down the slope beside the driveway. Most of the springs are located up the hill behind the house and yard, but another begins beside the farm office and crosses the driveway before joining the larger brook.

At least four structures dating from the period of significance have been torn down. These include two barns, a privy, and a spring house.

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Miller Homestead, Ashe County, North Carolina

Inventory List

Charles Miller House, ca. 1905 Contributing

The Charles Miller House is one-story-plus-attic frame dwelling that originally had a hall and parlor plan with the parlor serving as the music room. A gabled addition with a shed room to the rear was made on the southwest end of the house at an unknown date. Across the entire width of the back of the house are shed rooms, which may be additions or porch enclosures. Based on the statements of Bruce Miller, Charles Miller's youngest son, the house probably reached its current form by 1925, and certainly by the late 1920s, when Bruce remembers it in its present configuration. The roof material is five-V crimp metal roofing.

The exterior of the house was originally clad with board-and-batten siding, as described by Bruce Miller. The German siding currently covering the house came from Fort Bragg, where Charles had gone to work as a carpenter in the 1940s. The siding was left over from the construction of barracks at the fort. The house incorporates a variety of single and paired windows, most commonly double-hung, three-over-one and four-over-one.

The house rests on vertical posts or logs on stone bases, although, in almost all cases, the stone is below the surface. The construction gives the appearance that the house sits on posts set directly on the ground. Braces extend diagonally from either side of each pier to the sill of the house. Originally clad with vertical wood siding, the foundation is now covered in many places by new wood or metal roofing material.

An exterior chimney on the northeast gable end replaced the original and was constructed by Bruce Miller in 1995. The original chimney was mostly stone with a brick stack. The current brick chimney is substantial in width and occupies most of the end of the house. An interior chimney, which pierces the rear roof slope, is constructed of concrete block and serves two oil heaters.

A full-width, cat-slide porch extends across the front of the original house. The porch supports, constructed from paired two-by-fours separated by horizontal braces, replaced the original round posts.

The interior of the house retains some original finishes. Interior window trim, door trim, and baseboards are simple wood pieces. Hardwood floors are found in the hall, parlor, and southwest addition. Doors are four-paneled. The shed rooms have sheetrock walls and vinyl flooring. The hall and parlor rooms and additional room on the southwest end of the house have sheetrock ceilings and plaster walls. The mantel and hearth in the music room are modern brick replacements from an unknown date. The original bathroom has been remodeled.

Farm Office and Wash House, ca. 1951 Non-contributing

Located to the south of the main house, the farm office and wash house was constructed in 1951-52 by Charles and Bruce Miller. The small, frame structure with a gable roof and centrally located concrete block chimney is clad with rolled asphalt siding that is original to the building, according to Bruce Miller. The foundation, which is covered on some sides with horizontal wood siding, consists of log piers resting on

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fieldstones. Board-and-batten siding covers the gable ends of the building. The southeast elevation includes a two-panel door and a three-over-one, double-hung sash window. Two, three-over-one, double-hung windows and a door form the northeast elevation. A single five-panel door and a modern fixed sash window are located on the northwest and southwest sides of the building, respectively. One of Charles Miller's sons worked at Parker Tie Company, which manufactured the windows and doors used in the structure.

The interior contains a small rectangular office space and a larger L-shaped washroom. Hardwood floors are found throughout the interior, and the walls are finished partially with corrugated cardboard.

Garage, ca. 1930; ca. 1950 Contributing

Though the Millers typically walked, rode horses, or were driven by friends, the family acquired a Model A Ford around 1930 and constructed a small garage at the point where the driveway turns away from the farm road below the main house. Around 1950, another bay was added to the northeast side of the original garage. Together the bays create a low-pitched, double peaked, gable front building, which retains its original double-leaf garage doors, vertical wood siding, and exposed rafter ends. On the southwest side of the original garage bay, an extension of the metal roof supported by wood poles forms a sheltered storage area.

Woodworking Shop and Chicken House, ca. 1905; ca. 1975

Non-contributing

The woodworking shop and chicken house stand to the north of the main house near the brook that runs through the main yard. Bruce Miller built the woodworking shop ca. 1975 as an addition to the chicken house, which is thought to have been built ca. 1905. Nearly twice as large as the shed-roof chicken house, the woodworking shop effectively hides the earlier building from view. The shop itself is a one-story, gable-roof, frame building with vertical wood siding, exposed rafter ends, six-over-six windows, and a wood post foundation.

Mill House/Woodshed, ca. 1920; ca. 1935 Contributing

Located behind the main house, the Mill House/Woodshed was constructed in two phases beginning ca. 1920 with the woodshed, a one-story, shed-roof frame structure. Supported by braced wood posts, the woodshed features an open center passage, vertical wood siding, exposed rafter tails, modern windows, and a double-leaf wood plank door on the east end.

Built ca. 1935, the one-story, gable roof mill house extends the footprint of the building to the north, away from the main house, and contains a corn crib in the east end of the building. A metal roof covers the structure and exposed roof beams project on the gable ends. Sheathed with vertical wood siding and supported by both wood and stone piers, the mill house is entered through the single wood plank door on the rear (northwest) side and is lit by two four-pane fixed windows.

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Storage Building, ca. 1985 Non-contributing

Located behind the Mill House/Woodshed, up the hill from the main house, the Storage Building is a one-story, gable-front building supported by braced wood posts. One-over-one windows flank the gable-end entrance, a glazed wood door. Covered with vertical wood siding, the building is lit by two one-over-one windows located on the long sides of the structure.

Greenhouse, ca. 1985 Non-contributing

Built ca. 1985, the small, shed-roof greenhouse stands to the southeast of the main house at the edge of the yard. Six one-over-one pane windows grouped together on the long sides of the building define the structure. The greenhouse is entered through an aluminum frame storm door, which is flanked by one-over-one windows on the narrow end of the building.

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8. Statement of Significance

Summary Paragraph

The Miller Homestead is eligible for the National Register under Criterion B in the area of Performing Arts. The property is important for its association with local folk musicians Charles Miller and his son Howard and their role in the regional history of folk music and the development of the country music industry. The eligible parcel is a twelve-acre homestead tract of the fifty-three acre farm Charles Miller established in 1905 in Ashe County, North Carolina. Today, buildings on the site include the house, built in 1905, and various outbuildings. Charles and his son, Howard, were locally well-known traditional Blue Ridge mountain musicians whose home was the site of all-night practice sessions and a well-known gathering spot for area musicians such as influential fiddler, G. B. Grayson, and bluegrass greats, the Stanley Brothers. In the mid-1920s, the Millers, along with two other men, formed the Carolina Night Hawks. The experiences of the Millers, individually and as part of the Night Hawks, are indicative of the experiences of other Appalachian musicians during the early twentieth century. The Millers played locally at various civic, public, and private events in the 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1940s, and with the Night Hawks, they recorded four songs at Columbia Records' Atlanta studio in 1928. The Miller Homestead meets Criterion B because Charles and Howard Miller were significant Appalachian folk musicians who helped to lay the foundation of the country music industry. In addition, the homestead is one of two known homes of North Carolina mountain music personages that retain sufficient historic integrity for National Register listing. The property's period of significance begins in 1905 when Charles Miller established his own farm and built his house. It ends in 1945 when Howard moved off the farm and Charles began playing less frequently.

Historical Background

The story of Charles and Howard Miller is that of hundreds of mountain and folk musicians in the 1920s. The family is especially indicative of musicians in northwest North Carolina, as Charles and Howard represented at least the third and fourth generations of musicians in that branch of the Miller family. The Millers were from Ashe County, which, with Alleghany and Watauga Counties, comprise the "Lost Provinces," a locale so named because the area is a plateau cut off from the rest of North Carolina by the abrupt eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was not until the twentieth century that the mid- and late-nineteenth century roads were improved and made regularly passable.

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Millers have occupied the lands of the Miller farm for at least four generations. Eli Miller had a one-room log cabin, probably built in the mid-nineteenth century, on the site of the current farm house. His son, Monroe Miller, built a two-story log house with two rooms upstairs, two downstairs, and an end chimney. This house was located at the foot of the hill below Eli's house, and was most likely constructed in the late 1800s. It was in this home that Charles Miller was born in 1887. His father, Monroe, taught him to play a repertoire of traditional mountain music on the fiddle, which Monroe had presumably learned from Eli. As a young man, Charles moved up the hill to his own fifty-three acres of land, carved out of the family's original 250 acres. Here, around 1905, prior to his marriage, he built his home on the site of the earlier Miller log cabin. His two older brothers helped him work on the home which was enlarged in various stages over the next fifteen to twenty years.¹

In 1911, Charles married Hattie Barr, and the couple had five children. Howard, the oldest child, was born in 1913. The youngest was Bruce who was born in 1932 and lives on the homestead today.

With the exception of coffee and sugar, the Miller family produced most of what they needed on the farm. They grew corn and vegetables. They also raised some beef cattle, maintained dairy cows, and kept hogs, chickens, and turkeys. Bruce Miller remembers helping with the cattle, filling the corn crib, hauling corn, and grinding meal. The family processed their own meat, and Hattie made butter and dyed her own yarn. The farm's timber (mostly chestnut) was cut for the lumber for all the buildings on the farm, as well as for musical instruments and furniture. The timber was milled on the farm or taken to the nearby town of Lansing. In addition, farm products were sometimes offered for sale, including timber, roots, peeled bark, molasses, nuts, and berries.²

Off the farm, Charles Miller did numerous odd jobs around the area and was a noted carpenter. It was said that when the Department of Transportation was in the area to construct a bridge, Charles would be called upon to help with the engineering and construction. Charles also made guitars, spinning wheels, and furniture. He was known for his ability at "figuring house patterns," meaning that he could look at plans for a home and judge the quantity of material needed for construction. Charles was so good at this that only nine feet of waste lumber was left

¹Bruce Miller, son of Charles Miller, interview by author, 22 June 2000, Lansing, NC, cassette recording.

²Ibid.

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over from one house he figured.³ Charles was not the only musical Miller. His son Howard began playing the fiddle when he was just a toddler. By the time he was a teenager, he surpassed his father's skill level, thus Charles switched to guitar. The other Miller children played music, too, and Hattie played the organ. Howard and one of his brothers were also skilled at making banjos, dulcimers, and guitars.⁴

The Miller farm was widely recognized as a gathering spot for local musicians. Among the musicians to visit the house were popular singers Ola Belle Reed and Lester "Slick" Miller of the North Carolina Ridge Runners; fiddlers Carl Story, Frank Blevins, Alonzo Black, Elmer Elliott, and the legendary blind fiddler G.B. Grayson; the Stanley Brothers; banjoist Fred Miller [no relation]; and many other less well known musicians.⁵ Bruce Miller recalls all-night practice sessions at the house, and he still refers to the small room with the fireplace, in most cases called a parlor, as the music room.⁶

Especially influential on Howard was G.B. Grayson who lived in Tennessee but regularly played with the Millers when he visited relatives.⁷ Grayson and his musical partner Henry Whitter recorded a number of arrangements that became folk and bluegrass standards and were highly successful before Grayson was killed in an auto accident in 1930. The music of Grayson and Whitter was subsequently recorded by musicians such as Doc Watson, Charlie and Bill Monroe, Merle Travis, and even Mick Jagger.⁸

When not playing at their home with other musicians, Charles and Howard performed at local social gatherings such as special suppers and corn shuckings. The pair played on the buses of a family friend who owned a bus line. They also played on trains, usually riding for free in exchange for performing. Charles traveled throughout Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, and

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Miller interview; and Marshall Wyatt, "'Governor Al Smith for President': The Story of the Carolina Night Hawks," *The Old-Time Herald*, Winter 1992-'93, 29.

⁶Miller interview.

⁷Miller interview and Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 29.

⁸Charles Wolfe, *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (Nashville, TN: The Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1997), 63.

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even into Illinois playing music and working. In Illinois, he met and played with Jimmie Rogers. In 1933, Charles and Howard played at a special program at the White Top Folk Festival in White Top, Virginia, for the festival's guest of honor, Eleanor Roosevelt.⁹

The late-night practice sessions and performances recalled by Bruce Miller were also remembered by Miller friend J.H. Brooks:

Lots of times Charles and Howard would be coming in late at night maybe two o'clock, three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning, crossing those ridges, walking, trying to get back home. When they'd get up close to somebody's house, they'd take Howard's fiddle bow and saw on the bass strings of the guitar. It made the most ghostly sound! It sounded really scary there late at night. They'd scare people to death! They'd have people telling boogie tales for a month!¹⁰

As Charles turned more to carpentry and cabinet making in the 1940s and 1950s, he stopped playing music. During the 1940s, the Millers began to let their farming activities become secondary as the children moved away and Charles took more jobs away from home. Charles traveled to Fort Bragg where he did finish work on the barracks. He also worked on various local homes and commercial buildings in surrounding communities. Charles remained on the farm with his wife until his death in 1974. Hattie Miller passed away in 1978.¹¹

Howard moved off the farm in 1945 and eventually settled in West Jefferson. He played well into the 1950s, but put his fiddle aside as he began to make more instruments, becoming known for his finely crafted handmade fiddles, mandolins, and dulcimers. In the 1980s, at the urging of his son Haroldean, Howard began fiddling again, drawing from the tunes and styles as he had fifty years earlier.¹² Howard died in 1990. Today, the Miller Homestead is owned by Charles' youngest son, Bruce Miller.

⁹The White Top Folk Festival was started in 1931 and was a major event for traditional musicians, providing them with an opportunity for public exhibition and giving the general public a chance to enjoy their music. The festival was short-lived, however, operating annually until 1936 and then sporadically until about 1940.

¹⁰Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 29-30.

¹¹Miller interview and Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 30.

¹²Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 30.

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Context Statement Criterion B: Old Time Musicians Charles and Howard Miller and the Evolution of Commercial Old Time Music in Early Twentieth Century North Carolina

Western North Carolina, especially the northwest corner comprised of Ashe, Alleghany, and Watauga counties in the upper New River valley, was home to an important group of traditional musicians who participated in the development of commercial old time and early country music in the 1920s. This music was derived from European and African traditions brought to colonial and early America by colonists and slaves. Throughout the 1800s, as settlers mixed, and moved further from their cultural roots, this music was transformed into the music of mass popular culture across much of the nation. Nevertheless, some rural areas, particularly the southern Appalachian region, retained rich traditions in crafts, folkways, and music.

The earliest forms of southern Appalachian folk music were ballads sung without accompaniment and fiddle tunes played on the European violin, for the most part derived from the traditions of the British Isles. As the dulcimer, banjo, guitar, and mandolin made their way into the mountains in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were incorporated into the music, which evolved into a distinctively rural American sound and style of ensemble playing. The mountain people's interactions with African American music during the late nineteenth century, when black railroad workers constructed rail lines into the mountains, introduced important new elements into Appalachian music. Most notable of these additions was the banjo, an instrument of African origin, and syncopated rhythms and phrasing incorporated into the songs and tunes from the British tradition.¹³

This evolved form of European folk music was, by the early twentieth century, the old time, mountain folk music of southern Appalachia. In the 1920s and 1930s, this music would rapidly transform into a new style of nationally popular country music thanks to the advent of radio and the forays of recording companies into mountain regions.

Commercialization of old time music took place in the 1920s and 1930s. In its infancy, radio was produced and broadcast mainly in cities with "city" music, such as jazz and classical, being the mainstay. As early as 1922, eighty-nine of America's 510 broadcasting stations were

¹³*American Patchwork: Appalachian Journey*, hosted by Alan Lomax, 58 min., PBS Video, 1990, videocassette; and Bill C. Malone, *County Music USA: A Fifty-Year History* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968), 9, 14, and 5; and Alan Lomax, "Folk Song Style" *American Anthropologist* 6 (December 1959): 931-932.

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in the South, and by 1929, every third home in the nation had a radio.¹⁴ Thus, programming expanded, particularly in the South, to include folk and country music, which was often performed live in the studio, giving musicians a new outlet for their talent and a new inlet for influences.

In an effort to expand their markets and compete against the increasingly popular and accessible radio, phonograph companies began recording musical styles beyond those appreciated by the urban white person. Okeh Records was one of the first companies to head South, setting up studios in Asheville, Atlanta, Bristol, Johnson City, St. Louis, and Dallas.¹⁵ Other recording companies followed. Hundreds of groups and individual musicians recorded their music for various studios, laying the foundation for today's country music industry.

There was no definite name for this style of music, so the recording industry applied a variety of names to it. "Hillbilly" was being applied occasionally in the 1920s, but some musicians and some recording companies were uncomfortable with the title and felt that it was derogatory. The most common labels for the style were "old time," "old familiar," or "hill country."¹⁶

It was in the midst of the birth of country music recording that the Carolina Night Hawks, comprised of Charles and Howard Miller, Ted Bare, and Donald "Tommy" Thompson, traveled from Ashe County, North Carolina to Atlanta to record four songs. The experiences of the Millers and the Carolina Night Hawks typify the experiences of Appalachian musicians during the 1920s and early 1930s.

The Millers, the Night Hawks, and a surprising number of musicians hailed from the "Lost Provinces," a region delineated by present-day Ashe, Alleghany, and Watauga Counties. Such an isolated area was dependent on its own population for diversions from strenuous daily labor, and thus, settlers who brought their own musical backgrounds from Germany and the British Isles, played for each other. Marshall Wyatt writes that "few areas could compare with

¹⁴Bill C. Malone, *County Music USA: A Fifty-Year History* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968), 34-35.

¹⁵Ibid., 42.

¹⁶Malone, *Country Music*, 43.

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the Lost Provinces in the abundance of homegrown musical talent.”¹⁷ From this section of North Carolina, and other areas of the Appalachian Mountains, a socially important source of relaxation, celebration, and entertainment gave rise to the nationally popular country music industry.

The Carolina Night Hawks were just one of the groups whose recordings were part of country music’s earliest days. The Night Hawks got started in the mid-1920s when the Millers began playing regularly with a rough, rowdy, and hard-drinking man named Ted Bare.¹⁸ In 1927, Bare recruited Donald Thompson to join the group. Thompson had played violin, but switched to banjo when he joined Bare and the Millers. Thompson recalled that he paid \$60 for a homemade banjo and that Charles Miller played a Gibson guitar and Ted Bare played a Gibson mandolin. The group would practice for a week at Thompson’s house and then for a week at the Miller’s house. The Carolina Night Hawks, as Bare named the group, played all over Ashe and Alleghany Counties, at private homes, school houses, box suppers, square dances, cake walks, and corn shuckings.¹⁹

John Richardson, a local phonograph record dealer, wrote to the Columbia Phonograph Company to suggest an audition for the band.²⁰ A Columbia talent scout made the trip to West Jefferson to hear the Night Hawks and subsequently arranged for the group to travel to Atlanta. They left West Jefferson on 16 April 1928 in a Buick sedan. At the time, Charles Miller was forty-one years old, Howard was fifteen, Bare was twenty-five, and Thompson was twenty-seven. Recalls Donald Thompson:

We went in a Buick and they paid all expenses. . .

We went right to the studio building. A fellow met us and took us to a room and said we could start practicing, so we did. . .

¹⁷Marshall Wyatt, “Music From the Lost Provinces: Old-Time Stringbands from Ashe County, North Carolina and Vicinity, 1927-1931,” notes accompanying the compact disk recording of the same title, (Raleigh, NC: Old Hat Enterprises, 1997), 8.

¹⁸Miller interview; and Wyatt, “Night Hawks,” 27.

¹⁹Wyatt, “Night Hawks,” 27.

²⁰Ibid., 28.

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Ted, Howard, and Mr. Miller got up close to the microphone and they put me about eight feet behind. That banjo was loud you know. Then they said, "Now you watch the light. When the light comes on, you start."

So we watched, and when we came on we just started and went straight on through and never made an error. . .

We didn't have a contract. We never signed a thing, they just sent us down there and we made a record. That's unusual. But after we got back home they sent us checks, they paid us around \$100 apiece and expenses and all that. . . When we finished recording, they played it back to us . . . and it sounded mighty good!²¹

The Carolina Night Hawks recorded four songs at Columbia: "Butcher's Boy," "Nobody to Love," "A Stern Old Bachelor," and "Governor Al Smith for President." The last song was released on 10 June 1928 just in time for the Democratic Convention in Houston, Texas, and was the only Night Hawks' song ever issued. The song's tune was the well known "White House Blues," but the lyrics, singing the praises of New York's Governor, Al Smith, had been penned by the band's loyal Democrat, Donald Thompson. The song highlighted the governor's anti-prohibition stance by pointing out that unregulated moonshine was readily available and that "The sugar-head they make now will make you bounce around / The brandy too will put you flat on the ground / Bad stuff, hard to drink." The song claimed that if prohibition was lifted, "They'll make corn liquor as pure as can be / Free from lye and sugar, too!" Despite the group's best efforts to elect Smith, Herbert Hoover won the election in a landslide, capturing Smith's home state and five of the solidly Democratic southern states, including North Carolina.²²

The Night Hawks were not the only Ashe County band at Columbia's Atlanta studio on April 17, 1928. Frank Blevins and His Tar Heel Rattlers were on their second Atlanta trip and on that particular day, recorded four songs in about an hour. They were followed by the North Carolina Ridge Runners, who recorded two songs. The Night Hawks recorded later in the afternoon. Though the groups traveled separately, and had varying degrees of commercial success, all the musicians involved played together back in Ashe County on a regular basis, and often at the Miller home.

The Night Hawks never achieved national success. After the trip to Atlanta, they continued to play locally, but by 1930, the group broke up. Donald Thompson left for college at

²¹Donald Thompson, interviewed by Marshall Wyatt, quoted in Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 28.

²²Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 28.

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Appalachian State Teachers College and became a teacher. He married, and didn't play again until later in life, but he did write songs throughout his life. Bare spent the Depression rambling across the country, playing mandolin, making moonshine, enlisting in the Army, and opening a photography studio in West Jefferson.²³ Charles and Howard continued to play locally, but over the years, Charles began to take jobs off the farm and eventually put his guitar down altogether. Howard, however, continued to improve and throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, he performed and often won contests at fiddlers conventions and other musical festivals. Howard played into the 1950s before turning more to making finely crafted, handmade musical instruments.²⁴

Both the Millers carried on the age-old tradition of playing mountain tunes in the styles of their predecessors, passing very old songs and arrangements from generation to generation. This process is illustrated by cassette recordings made by Howard's son, Haroldean, in the 1970s and 1980s revealing that Howard was still using the same style to play the songs of his father and G.B. Grayson. Charles and Howard Miller were part of the earliest days of the country music industry, as well as being part of the deep-rooted musical tradition of the Appalachians.

The early recorded music of southern Appalachian bands like the Night Hawks laid the foundation for three different branches of modern American music - country music in the Nashville idiom, modern Bluegrass, and the modern Old Time Music Revival. Although the latter has a very small commercial presence in the music industry, it does have an avid avocational following and is played in scores of festivals across the country.

The Miller Homestead has regional significance under Criterion B as the home of Charles Miller throughout his musical career and as the home of his son Howard throughout much of his musical career. It has particular significance during the 1920s and 1930s when commercial old time music evolved. The Millers' style, repertory, and history are representative of musicians throughout the southern Appalachians, but particularly the Lost Provinces. Their homestead, as the physical setting from which their music came, is important as the home and place of practice and performance for the Millers, as a gathering place for local musicians, and as a well-preserved representative of the typical home where mountain music traditions were passed from generation to generation. The property is important in the area of performing arts for its association with folk music in the Lost Provinces, and for its association with the local influence on the genesis of the national country music industry. While there has not been a specialized survey of historic

²³Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 28-30.

²⁴Wyatt, "Night Hawks," 29-30.

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properties associated with traditional music in western North Carolina, only one other historic property with important associations with traditional music and dance has been identified: the Bascom Lamar Lunsford House in Leicester, Buncombe County. This property was added to the North Carolina Study List in 1996.

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Booklet accompanying the compact disk of the same title.

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10. Geographic Data

Verbal Boundary Description

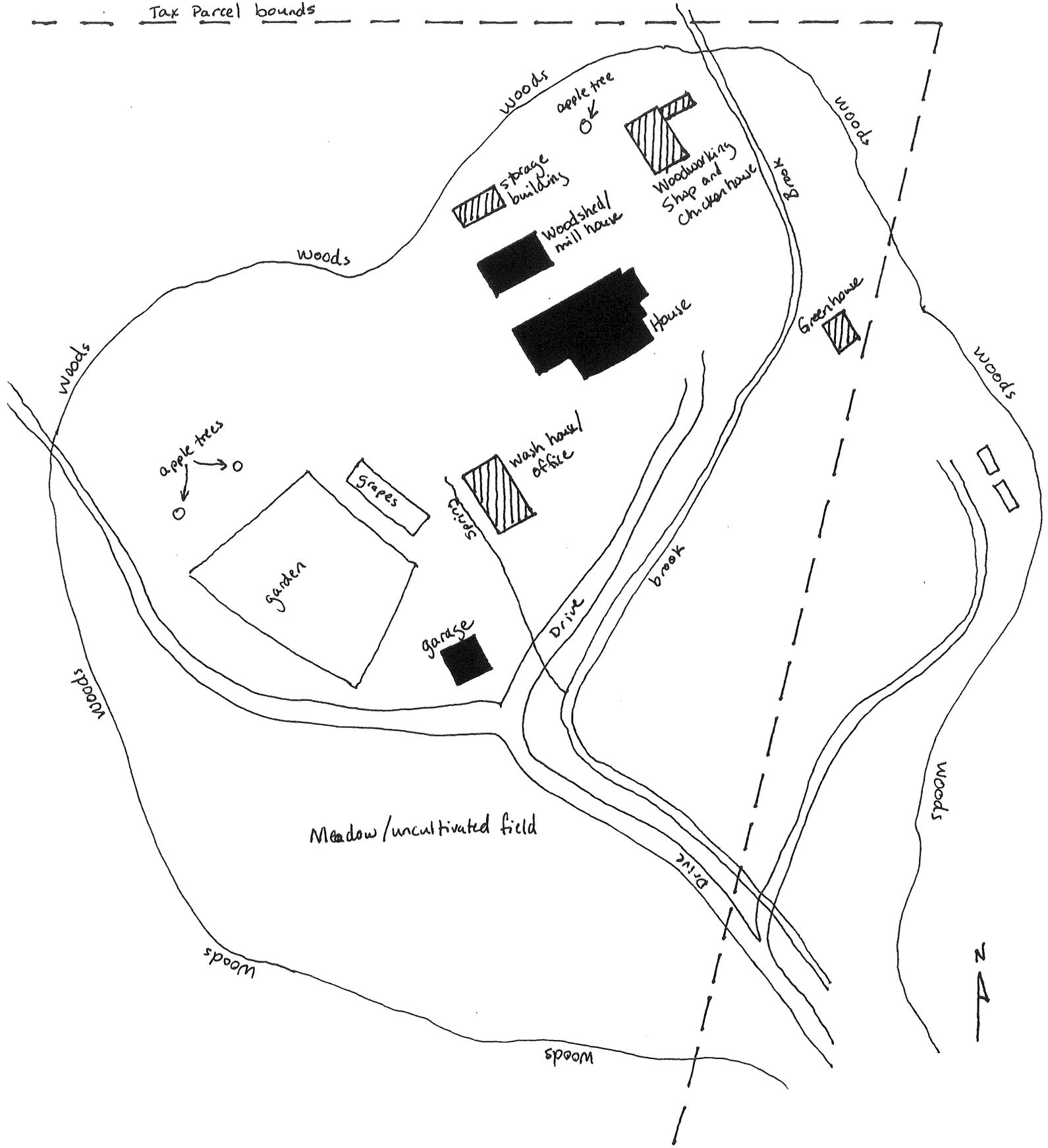
The boundary of the nominated property is defined as Tax Parcel 02143-039, as illustrated on the accompanying Ashe County Tax Map, 2040.00.

Boundary Justification

The boundary of the nominated property is the twelve acres that surround the house and outbuildings. Because the remainder of Charles Miller's original fifty-three acres is no longer in use as a farm and because the homestead is not being nominated for its agricultural significance, only the homestead tract containing the house and outbuildings is included for listing on the National Register.

- Contributing
- ▨ non-contributing

Tax Parcel bounds



Miller Homestead
House
Ashe Co.
NC

