

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 any 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 R. T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 7181 Railroad Grade Road [Northeast corner of Todd Railroad Grade Road (SR 1100/1106) at Cranberry Springs Road (SR 1100)] not for publication n/a

city or town Todd vicinity xx

state North Carolina code NC county Ashe code 009 zip code 28626

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets _____ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant _____ nationally _____ statewide X locally. (____ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Jeffrey J. Crow SHPO 2/05/03
Signature of certifying official Date
North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
State or 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 or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this 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): _____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

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

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

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

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u>	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)

 COMMERCE/TRADE: warehouse

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

 VACANT

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

 No Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brick

walls Metal

roof Metal

other Wood

Narrative Description

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

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 a 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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce

Period of Significance

c. 1918 – 1945

Significant Dates

c. 1918; 1933; 1945

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Architect/Builder

unknown

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 # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

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

Name of repository:

NC Archives & History Western Office

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	<u>17</u>	<u>450250</u>	<u>4014790</u>	3	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	4	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing

 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 Sherry Joines Wyatt, Historic Preservation Specialist
organization David E. Gall, AIA, Architect date May 10, 2002
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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name Mr. I. S. Cooper
street & number 3124 Cranberry Springs Road telephone (336) 877-4817
city or town Fleetwood state NC zip code 28626

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 the 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,

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R.T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse, Ashe County, North Carolina

7. Narrative Description

Situated at the intersection of Railroad Grade Road (SR 1100/1106) and Cranberry Springs Road (SR 1100), the ca. 1918 R. T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse stands on an open lot in the bottomlands along the South Fork of the New River. The former Brownwood Depot is located across Todd Railroad Grade Road to the northwest and provides another faint reminder of prosperity once associated with the Virginia Creeper line of the Norfolk & Virginia Railroad (originally the Virginia-Carolina Railroad). Around 1933, when the tracks were removed, Railroad Grade Road was laid over the railroad bed from here four miles northwest to Todd, the terminus of the railroad. A ranch house stands on the west side of Todd Railroad Grade Road, directly opposite the herb warehouse, and a two-story concrete chicken house occupies the lot behind the warehouse. The extensive lands of the A. S. Cooper Farm (NR, 2001) are located to the east across the New River. Cultivated fields surround the warehouse between Todd Railroad Grade Road and the river.

The R. T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse is a two-story, timber framed commercial building. Sheathed in corrugated metal sheet siding, the building is rectangular in plan with a shed roof addition running the full length of the southern elevation.¹ A brick pier foundation supports the structure. The flat roof slopes from front to rear behind a low parapet. The symmetrical façade (west) is punctuated by a single-leaf, central entrance door flanked by two-over-two double-hung wood sash windows. Two-over-two windows are located on the second floor above those on the first level. A full-width shed roof porch extends across the façade of the original building and is supported on simple square posts. The one-story side addition, which was added in the 1940s, stretches the full length of the south elevation and is sheathed with diagonal wood siding. A wood plank door in the west end of the addition originally served as a loading bay and is approached neither by the porch or separate steps on the exterior. A small four-over-four window pierces the center of the addition's long side and rafter ends are exposed below the eaves. Two four-over-four double-hung wood sash windows are located in the upper level of the south wall and illuminate the second story interior. The rear (east) elevation of the building is penetrated by a central doorway on the first level. The north elevation contains two four-over-four double hung windows on either side of a sliding freight door. Two more four-over-four windows are located on the second story, and this elevation shows the original fenestration pattern of the south elevation prior to the addition.

¹The metal siding is probably a pre-1945 addition. Buck Cooper believes the building always had metal

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The interior of the warehouse contains a large open space broken only by a single row of support posts with curved impost blocks running from front to rear in the center of the building. Upon entering the building, a small enclosed office is located immediately to the left (northwest corner); it is accessed and illuminated through an interior door and window. The interior framing of the building remains exposed and diagonal wood siding is visible behind the stud walls. A wide, open stair rises to the second story along the south wall beyond the freight door. The well-worn wood flooring survives throughout the building.

On the second floor, which is an open space, there is a square hole in the floor where the herbs were thrown down into the baling apparatus which was located near the sliding cargo door on the north side of the building. The baled herbs were then loaded onto the train for shipment.

The interior of the R. T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse is plain and unadorned befitting its function as a storage facility. The undefined interior space and wide stairs and doors provided efficient circulation throughout the building and easy organization of the collected and stored herbs. The warehouse retains a high level of integrity, particularly on the interior. Although modified by a one-story addition and the application of metal siding during the period of significance, sometime before 1945, the simple character of the building is still readily apparent.

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R.T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse, Ashe County, North Carolina

8. Statement of Significance

Summary

Constructed around 1918, the R. T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse is a rare example of a herb warehouse in western North Carolina. The building is located in the Brownwood community at the southern tip of Ashe County near the Watauga County line. R. T. Greer and Company was a major figure in the root and herb industry, becoming the largest dealer of crude botanicals in the United States by 1928.¹ The headquarters of Greer's company was in Marion, Virginia and was connected to the Brownwood branch warehouse via the Virginia-Carolina (later Norfolk and Western) Railroad.

The root and herb industry peaked in the early and mid nineteenth century at a time when natural resources in the Blue Ridge Mountains were at their most abundant. By the early twentieth century, the industry, much like the timber industry, had moved into previously untapped areas with the expansion of railroads like the Virginia-Carolina. The root and herb industry settled into a pattern of small-scale gatherers who sold primarily to local general stores, but in certain areas sold directly to root and herb warehouses. These gatherers were local farm families who traded eggs, butter, poultry and other items, along with dried roots and herbs to earn much-needed cash during a period when the agriculture of the region lacked a major cash crop.

The R. T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse is significant under Criterion A for commerce as one of the few surviving buildings associated with the regionally significant herb industry, as well as its ties to the nationally renowned Greer Company. Its period of significance extends to 1945, when the company closed this branch warehouse.

Commerce Context: the Root and Herb Industry in the Blue Ridge Region

Among the verdant hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina, grows an amazing variety of medicinal plants. The use of roots and herbs is a practice as old as medicine itself. Documentation of the botanical wealth in the Appalachian region came with the earliest explorers. During the mid-eighteenth century, H. Timberlake lived among the Cherokee, and in his *Memoirs* he brought to light the potential commercial value of ginseng "a root," he wrote, "which never fails curing the most inveterate venereal disease."² The art of ginseng gathering for commercial sale was taught to settlers by Andre Michaux, a French naturalist living in Charleston, South Carolina. Michaux was among the early naturalists to visit the Blue Ridge

¹ John Kern, et. al., "R. T. Greer and Company Building National Register Nomination, 1997," Virginia State Historic Preservation Office, Roanoke

² Leonard Bloom, "The Acculturation of the Eastern Cherokee," *North Carolina Historical Review* Vol. XIX (October 1942): 340-341.

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region. He climbed Grandfather Mountain in 1794 and sent the plant material he collected to France for use in the Royal Gardens.³

By the early-nineteenth century, commercial herb and root dealers were established in the western mountains of North Carolina. In the Caney River section of Yancey County in 1837, local dealers Smith and McElroy barreled and shipped 86,000 lbs of ginseng (25,000 lbs dried) to Lucius and Heylin of Philadelphia. From there, the roots were shipped to China.⁴

The ginseng boom was relatively short-lived with supplies declining by the mid-nineteenth century. Like timber and other woodland resources, the wholesale harvesting stymied efforts to allow the commodity to reseed and renew. Yet, as late as 1850, the total value of ginseng collected in the Toe River Valley of Yancey County still reached \$5,500. The root and herb industry no longer depended solely upon ginseng, but came to include a steady market for other herbs, such as bloodroot, raspberry leaves, liverwort, and spearmint.⁵

Trade with local merchants was a common feature of nineteenth-century life in the Blue Ridge region. Eggs, milk, butter, and animal hides were all sources of supplemental income when sold at the local general store. Added to these items were a variety of roots and herbs, with ginseng holding the highest value.⁶ Accounting records for Waugh and Harper general store in Lenoir, Caldwell County indicate that the owners paid out nearly \$250 for herbs between September and November 1876. The firm processed the materials and offered for wholesale "crude medicinal herbs, roots, barks, seeds, flowers, etc. Goods neatly and compactly pressed in bales of two hundred to five hundred pounds each, and forwarded in prime order."⁷ The natural materials the store purchased included burdock, mint, hellebore, flax seed, butterfly, beeswax, butter, beth root or purple trillium, blood root, lob seal, Indian turnip, catnip, may apple, skull

³John P. Arthur, *Western North Carolina, A History* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Publishing, 1914), 513, and 523.

⁴Arthur, 228 and Jason Basil Deyton, "The Toe River Valley to 1865, *North Carolina Historical Review*. Vol. XXIV (October 1947): 454.

⁵Deyton, 454 and Muriel Sheppard, *Cabins in the Laurel* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1991), 43.

⁶Ina W. and John J. Van Noppen, *Western North Carolina Since the Civil War* (Boone: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1973), 348-350 and "#2908, Harper Family Account Books, Summary," Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Harper_Family.html.

⁷Van Noppen, 348-350.

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cap, lion's tongue, feathers, dried fruit, eggs, bitter root, boneset, seneca, star root, angelica, ginseng, sassafras bark, and lady's slippers.⁸

In Wilkes County, Calvin J. Cowles (1821-1907) developed a thriving root and herb business by the 1860s, traveling annually to Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington and trading regularly with England. In 1869, Cowles sold his business to his son, Arthur, who moved the business to Gap Creek in Ashe County. Arthur D. Cowles' business stationary read: "Office of Arthur D. Cowles, Dealer in Dry Goods, Groceries, Hardware, Medicines, etc. and Collector and Dealer in all kinds of Indigenous Botanic Crude Roots, Herbs, Barks, Seeds, Flower, etc. and Country produce generally."⁹ Cowles' business was well remembered even after it closed at the time of his death in the late 1890s. In 1914, John P. Arthur's *Western North Carolina, A History* remembered that Arthur Cole [sic] "did an immense business in herbs, and the large warehouses still standing there were used to store the herbs which he baled and shipped north."¹⁰

The Cowles family was not alone in concentrating their business on roots and herbs. While a large part of the roots and herbs collected in the Blue Ridge region would have been sold at a local general store, dealers like the Cowles were not uncommon. By the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, Wallace and Wallace of Statesville contracted with three hundred part-time agents to gather botanicals for them, principally in the mountains. The yearly business of the Wallace firm was reported to reach two million pounds in leaves, bark, and roots in 1893.

Combined with the small-scale general stores, the root and herb dealers played a notable economic role in North Carolina. J.D. Cameron's *Handbook for North Carolina* claimed in 1893 that North Carolina had the largest supply and greatest variety of herbs for botanic medicines in the United States. Cameron went on to announce that "on the Atlantic slope of the Blue Ridge there are said to grow no less than 2,500 varieties of plants used in the Meteria Medica." Ginseng was still the most desirable product selling for one to three dollars per pound during the 1890s.¹¹

Despite this apparent success, the root and herb industry during the late nineteenth century produced far less than during the boom period of the early nineteenth century. Arthur Cowles' 1878 letter reveals that his business "...had failed within the past year owing to roots and

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.; C. J. Cowles papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh; Arthur D. Cowles, Gap Creek, Ashe County, to C. J. Cowles, 28 September 1878, original document, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh; and "#3808, Calvin Josiah Cowles Papers, Summary," Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/c/Cowles_Calvin_Josiah.html.

¹⁰Arthur, *Western North Carolina*, 289-291.

¹¹Van Noppen, 349 and Arthur D. Cowles.

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herbs becoming almost exterminated and the decline in price and monopoly of the trade by Wallace Brothers so that it no longer pays me to keep the extra force of clerks, wagons, teams, and drivers..." Thus, the industry settled into a pattern of modest profit that attracted a few dealers and many small-scale gatherers.¹²

The extent of this industry was wide, spreading from the southern to the northern counties of western North Carolina. Reverend C. D. Smith (1813 - 1894) reported in his late-nineteenth century autobiography that ginseng was "manufactured" (probably referring to the baling process) by 1891 at a factory in Buncombe County. Smith also defines the region most involved in the root and herb industry - Madison, Yancey, part of Buncombe, Mitchell, Watauga, Ashe, and Alleghany counties.¹³ In 1896, Branson's *North Carolina Business Directory* reported that the staple crops in Watauga County were "wheat, corn, rye, oats, Irish potatoes, fruits in great abundance, and medicinal herbs."¹⁴ Further, a 1915 history of Watauga County noted that there had once been a "sang" (ginseng) factory on Brushy Fork.¹⁵

Wilkes County can be added to the list of herb-producing counties defined by Smith. The role of Wilkes had less to do with the actual gathering of herbs, however. In 1922, the North Carolina Geological and Economic Survey, "Water Power Survey of Surry and Wilkes Counties," reported that North Wilkesboro was the "shipping center" for Wilkes County as well as for Ashe, Alleghany, and Watauga counties. The town was the "chief shipping point for the entire State for the export of poultry, hardwoods, roots, herbs, medicinal bark, canned goods, commills, and produce."¹⁶

In Wilkes County in the early twentieth century, ginseng and witch hazel were shipped to Germany and ginseng could also be shipped to China. Some of the dealers in Wilkes were: A. F. Phillips and Company, Carl A. Lowe and Sons, S. V. Tomlinson, E. E. Eller and Son, F. D. Forestoer, and Scroggs and Company. A. F. Phillips became one of the largest independent crude drug dealers in the nation during the early twentieth century. By the mid-1920s, Phillips was purchasing over one-hundred and thirty different roots and herbs. A 1927 Phillips Company price

¹²Ibid.

¹³Arthur, *Western North Carolina*, 289-291.

¹⁴Levi Branson, *North Carolina Business Directory* (Raleigh: Levi Branson Company, 1896).

¹⁵John Preston Arthur, *A History of Watauga County, North Carolina* (Richmond: Everett Waddy Co., 1915), 221-222.

¹⁶J. Jay Anderson, *North Wilkesboro: The First One Hundred Years, 1890 - 1990* (North Wilkesboro: North Wilkesboro Centennial Committee, 1990), 102.

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list illustrates the modest to significant amounts that were paid for a variety of roots and herbs. Sassafras root was purchased for 10 cents per pound, witch hazel leaves were worth only 3 cents per pound, but lobelia paid 12 cents per pound. Still holding its place was the most desirable of the roots and herbs, ginseng was worth 12 dollars per pound.¹⁷ The prices for roots and herbs had changed little since December 1, 1910 when Virginia general store owner Charles T. Forrester published a list of "Market Produce Prices" in the *Troutdale News*. The list included eggs at twenty-two cents, butter at seventeen cents, turkeys at twelve cents, dry hides at twelve and a half cents, and balm bud (balm of Gilead buds) at ten cents per pound.¹⁸

This list also reflects the varied trade at general stores throughout the Blue Ridge. The stores operated on a cash basis, but relied heavily upon trade. For example, the Cook Brothers Mercantile at Todd, Ashe County, like Forrester's store, purchased chickens, eggs, butter, and dried roots and herbs from their customers.¹⁹ Similarly, Hamilton Greer's Mercantile in Woodford, north of Todd, traded "butter, eggs, chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks, guineas, cured hams, cured side meat, wool and chestnuts." Greer (no known relation to R. T. Greer) was also "a dealer in roots and herbs."²⁰ In Boomer, Wilkes County, Nell Carlton recalled the root and herb trade at her father's general store. "Each year the store in North Wilkesboro would send a list to my father, telling the price per pound and the name of each root and herb they would buy." Carlton's father always checked each bag of produce to ensure it was dry, so that it would not mold, and to make sure there were no stones or other weights hidden among the herbs.²¹

While much of the local root and herb industry was conducted at general stores such as these by the 1910s, there were several root and herb warehouses throughout western North Carolina. A root and herb warehouse was located on 10th Street in North Wilkesboro in 1904 and a different warehouse appeared on B Street by 1910. In 1920, this warehouse was described as "dilapidated" and was to be demolished. A larger warehouse had been constructed near it on Foundry Lane, however. This warehouse was still in operation in 1926.²² In Asheville, S. B.

¹⁷Mrs. W. O. Absher, ed., *The Heritage of Wilkes County, 1982* (Winston-Salem: Hunter Publishing Co., 1982), 68.

¹⁸Zetta Barker Hamby, *Memoirs of Grassy Creek* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Publishers, 1998), 220.

¹⁹Sherry Joines Wyatt, "Todd Historic District National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1999" North Carolina Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh.

²⁰*Ashe County Heritage* Vol. I (Winston-Salem: Hunter Publishing), 90 and 97.

²¹Nell Carlton, "Old Times in the Hills of Wilkes," in Wilkes Genealogical Society Inc., *The Heritage of Wilkes County* (Winston-Salem: Hunter Publishing Company, 1982), 1.

²²Sanborn Maps for North Wilkesboro, 1904, 1910, 1920, 1926.

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Penick and Company constructed a root and herb warehouse on Broadway at Catawba Avenue between 1917 and 1925; it was still open in 1943.²³

There is little documentary evidence in the historical record indicating the amount of roots and herbs processed by warehouses or general stores during the early twentieth century. Figures indicating the impact of the industry on the economy of western North Carolina are also unavailable. What is clearly documented, however, is the impact the industry had upon the individual economies of farm families throughout the region. During the late summer, when the wild flora were at their peak, many families gathered medicinal herbs and roots including ginseng, yellow-root, witch hazel, sassafras, galax, golden-seal, and bloodroot. During the late nineteenth century, ginseng ranged from two to five dollars a pound – approximately the price of a pair of boots or a suit of clothes.²⁴

Zetta Barker Hamby, of Grassy Creek, Ashe County, recalled that when someone found a patch of ginseng where it grew on northern slopes in the dense woodland, it was kept strictly secret. “Those who did not have animal or poultry products to sell,” she remembered, “depended heavily on gathering herbs and roots and working for people.”²⁵ In the thirty interviews conducted for the *Pond Mountain Chronicles*, the gathering of herbs or roots for sale was mentioned by eight participants in their descriptions of life in that section of Ashe County. Herbs noted by these interviewees included wild cherry bark, poke root, galax leaves, sassafras roots, sumac or shoemake, boneset, beadwood leaves, bammagillibud (Balm of Gilead bud), pennyroyal, milkweed, and dock root. While folklorists have conducted extensive research on the use of medicinal herbs in the North Carolina mountains, the collection and distribution of crude botanicals appears to have been sparsely researched by scholars. Lockie Richardson, who was born in Ashe County in 1898 stated “I never did know what they did with poke root. We’d dig it and then we’d take a little hatchet and we’d cut it in slices...put it up and dry it, take it to the store.”²⁶

Some of the flora were gathered for use in the floral arrangement industry. Arthur reports in his 1914 *Western North Carolina: a History* that “ferns, galax leaves, and other evergreens are gathered by women in the fall and winter.”²⁷ Documentation of this facet of the industry comes

²³Sanborn Maps for Asheville, 1917, 1925, 1943.

²⁴Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1982), 21-22.

²⁵Hamby, 207.

²⁶Leland and Mary Lee Cooper, *Pond Mountain Chronicles* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Publishers, 1998), 13, 22, 73 and 169.

²⁷Arthur, *Western North Carolina*, 289.

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in the form of a German-printed postcard from the early twentieth century entitled "Marketing Galax at Blowing Rock, N. C." The illustration shows an older woman with large hat and dress and an ox pulling a small sled filled with burlap bags. Interestingly, galax leaves became one of the most enduring products of the root and herb industry. Well into the late twentieth century, galax leaves were still noted as an excellent side business.

In fact, the root and herb industry continued to play a role in the economy of the region through the late twentieth century. In 1963, Fletcher noted, "The medicinal root and herb business is still a flourishing business in Ashe. Many rural mercantile establishments still have root and herb warehouses in connection with their stores."²⁸ During the early 1970s, Wilcox Drug in Boone was the largest crude botanical drug company in the South. The company cleaned, processed, and shipped about one million pounds of cherry bark, ginseng, passion flower, witch hazel bark and leaves, and deer tongue each year. During 1970, two thousand people derived income from the sale of these products.²⁹ As late as 1982, Arthur Lowe of Lowe Fur and Herb, Inc. in Wilkes County purchased about fifty varieties of roots and herbs.³⁰

The R. T. Greer Herb Warehouse in Brownwood

The Virginia - Carolina Railway constructed its line into Ashe County from Abingdon, Virginia, southward through Damascus, Virginia, during the 1910s. The railroad passed through the Ashe County communities of Lansing, West Jefferson, Bowie (now Fleetwood), Brownwood, and terminated in Todd in 1915. The extension of the railroad into Ashe County was driven by the availability of timber products in the area at a time when other resources, primarily to the south of Ashe County, were beginning to be depleted.³¹

Small agricultural communities along the line grew into new towns and villages to serve area farmers as well as timber and railroad workers. The coming of the railroad spawned a boom in southern Ashe County well in advance of the first train. At Todd, the construction of the railroad spawned growth as early as 1910.³² Fed by the rash of speculation and anticipation, local landowner J. S. Brown ordered the plat of a new village, four miles southeast of Todd, in July 1915. Brown's plat was prepared shortly after the first Virginia-Carolina Railroad passenger

²⁸ Arthur L. Fletcher, *Ashe County, A History* (Jefferson: Ashe County Research Association, 1963), 200.

²⁹ Van Noppen, 350.

³⁰ Absher, 68.

³¹ Wyatt, "Todd Historic District."

³² Ibid.

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train arrived in Todd in May of 1915.³³ The village was originally known as Riverside or West Riverside and the post office was established here in April of 1916. The village's name was changed to Brownwood in September of 1919. The area surrounding the fledgling community was agricultural with several nineteenth century farms, notably the large farm of A. S. Cooper, located nearby.³⁴

The plat of the new village commissioned by J. S. Brown was ambitious. The lots were laid out in a dense pattern along either side of the railroad which turned sharply to the northwest at this point. Alleys were incorporated into the scheme, which used standard street names like Main Street, Locust Street, and Pine Street as well as hopeful terms such as College Street. The only building indicated on the plat at this point, however, was the Virginia-Carolina Railroad station.³⁵

Like the villages and towns scattered along all of the Virginia-Carolina Railroad's Ashe County line, Brownwood thrived during the late 1910s and early 1920s. The Virginia-Carolina Railroad created a burgeoning economy in the area causing the *Watauga Democrat* to report in 1915 that there was an "...air of business heretofore unknown in that section."³⁶ By 1925, Brownwood, like most of the railroad villages was at its peak. The village consisted of the railroad depot, a post office, three or four general stores, a grist mill, the root and herb warehouse, and a lumber yard (the dominant economic force).³⁷

While many general stores in the Blue Ridge region dealt in medicinal herbs and roots, warehouses devoted solely to this industry were more rare. These warehouses tended to be located in larger towns that were already established as trading centers. Thus, the location of the R. T. Greer Root and Herb Warehouse in Brownwood was relatively unusual. Its location can be explained by two factors. First, the warehouse was a branch of a larger root and herb company based in Marion, Virginia, a sizable town and an important trading center along the Virginia-Carolina (later Norfolk and Western) line in southwestern Virginia. Secondly, the root and herb industry, like the more widely known timber industry, relied upon a steady natural resource supply. The railroad had extended into Ashe County because other timber resources had become depleted by the 1910s, as was also the case with roots and herbs.

³³Wyatt, "Todd Historic District."

³⁴Sherry Joines Wyatt, "A. S. Cooper Farm, 2001" North Carolina Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh.

³⁵C. W. Ray, "Plat of Riverside, Ashe County, North Carolina, 1915," Ashe County Deed Book A-1, page 59.

³⁶*Watauga Democrat*, quoted in Wyatt, "Todd Historic District."

³⁷Wyatt, "A.S. Cooper Farm."

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The root and herb warehouse in Brownwood was built about 1918 for Riley T. (R. T.) Greer of Marion, Virginia. Greer had purchased the lots the building occupied (lots 9-14 of Block B) from J. S. Brown on October 25, 1918. Brown had purchased these lots from the Virginia-Carolina Railroad Company around 1915.³⁸

R. T. Greer arrived in Marion, Virginia in 1904 with George W. Greer and F. P. McGuire. The partners had come to Marion from Watauga County, North Carolina, which may have influenced their decision to open a warehouse in Brownwood. R. T. Greer and Company built its primary warehouse on Main Street in downtown Marion, Virginia in 1916 and grew to become the nation's largest dealer of crude botanicals by 1928. Marion was an attractive location for this business because of its location near many natural herb sources with the advantage of a railroad depot suitable for shipping the processed herbs all over the world. Greer's company thrived, selling crude botanicals to "top-name" pharmaceutical companies such as Eli Lilly, Parke-Davis, Wilcox, McKesson, Robbins, and Rexall. Sassafras was sold to the manufacturer of other products such as Hires root beer. Ginseng was shipped to China by the firm and other herbs were marketed to Germany.³⁹

The root and herb trade was very active in Brownwood. During the mid and late 1920s, Buck Cooper recalls the wagons would line up half a mile down the road in the summer waiting to unload their goods at the warehouse. While general stores that purchased herbs were relatively common, there were no other herb warehouses in the area. The warehouse operated year-round with two, full-time employees. Peak seasons, such as late summer, would see the staff increase to five and the warehouse remain open twenty-four hours a day. All of the botanicals collected and baled at the warehouse, were shipped by train to the company's main warehouse in Marion, Virginia. When the rail line from West Jefferson to Todd closed in 1933, the warehouse shifted to truck transportation.⁴⁰

Purchased from local general stores or from individual farm families, the herbs at the warehouse were separated and stored until there was a sufficient quantity to bale. There is a square hole in the floor of the second level of the warehouse where the herbs were thrown down into the baling apparatus which was located near the sliding cargo door on the north side of the building. The baled herbs were then loaded onto the train for shipment.

³⁸ Ashe County Deed Book Z-1, page 31.

³⁹ Kern, et. al. and Lee Ann Prescott, "Two More for the Virginia Landmarks Register," *Smyth County News and Record*, 5 April 1997, <http://www.smythnews.com/970405/I-Articles/fp-2.htm>

⁴⁰ Wyatt, "Todd Historic District" and I. S. (Buck) Cooper, Fleetwood, NC, letter to Sherry Joines Wyatt, January 23, 2002.

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The deed record of the warehouse illustrates the history of the Greer company. In 1922, R. T. Greer transferred the parcel to his firm, R. T. Greer and Company and in 1933, the warehouse was sold to George Greer of Pikesville, Kentucky as R. T. Greer liquidated his interest in the firm. George Greer was a partner in R. T. Greer and Company along with R. T. Greer and C. C. Stafford. The firm continued with George Greer owning two-thirds of the business. In January of 1943, a new partnership agreement was drawn and the property was transferred back to R. T. Greer and Company.⁴¹

R. T. Greer and Company's Day Books from 1934 through 1944 illustrate the firm's wide market. Crude botanicals were procured from more than twenty states and the distribution included Canada, China, Australia and five European countries. Cecil R. Greer, son of George Greer and manager of the firm, stated in 1938 that the company's business "usually grossed between a quarter to half a million dollars per year."⁴² The herb industry had increased steadily through the Depression, but declined significantly after 1945. The introduction of penicillin and synthetic drugs during World War II prompted the decline of the herb market and likely precipitated the closure of the Ashe County branch warehouse. The main warehouse in Marion continued to operate until 1968.⁴³

In 1945, the Brownwood warehouse closed and was sold for five hundred dollars to William B. Todd. The building was sold again in 1951 to Bruce Greene and finally to I. S. (Buck) Cooper on January 30, 1956.⁴⁴ Cooper ran a feed and farm supply store in the building until the early 1970s. Both Greene and Cooper were long-time residents of Brownwood.

When the railroad closed in the early 1930s, the commercial activity in Brownwood slowed significantly. A. S. Cooper, Jr. closed his general store in 1933 although some businesses, such as the root and herb warehouse, continued by using truck transportation rather than the train. A major regional flood destroyed many of Brownwood's commercial buildings in 1940 leaving only the herb warehouse and the depot. The Brownwood Post Office closed in 1953.

⁴¹ Ashe County Deed Book M-1, page 82; book Z-1, page 31; book Q-2, page 445; book Q-2, page 446.

⁴² Kern, et al.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ashe County Deed Book D-3, page 427; W-3, page 210.

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R.T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse, Ashe County, North Carolina

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R. T. Greer and Company Root and Herb Warehouse, Ashe County, North Carolina

Verbal Boundary Description

Tract delineated by heavy solid line on 1 inch = 150 feet scale Ashe County tax map labeled as Exhibit A.

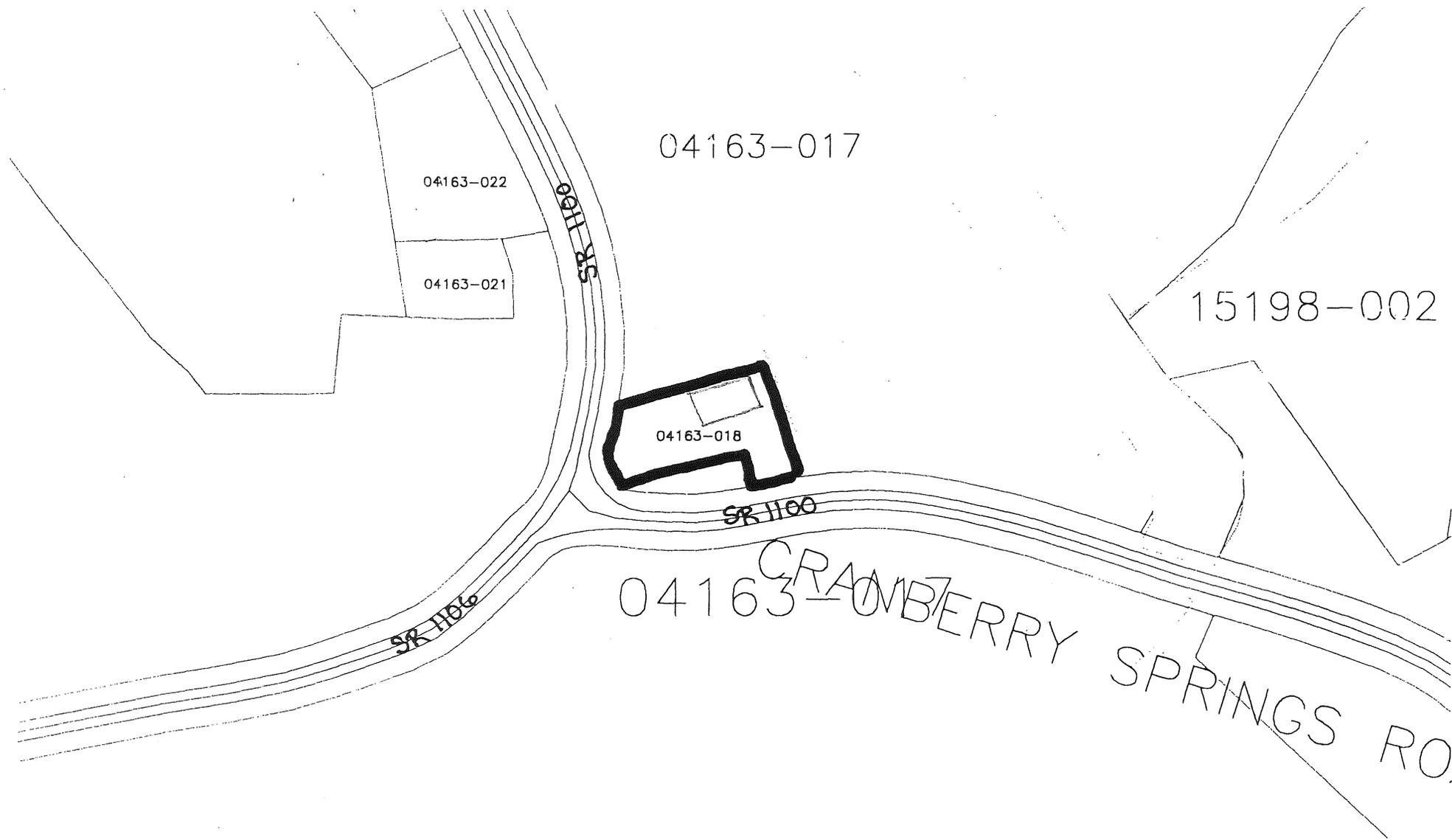
Boundary Justification

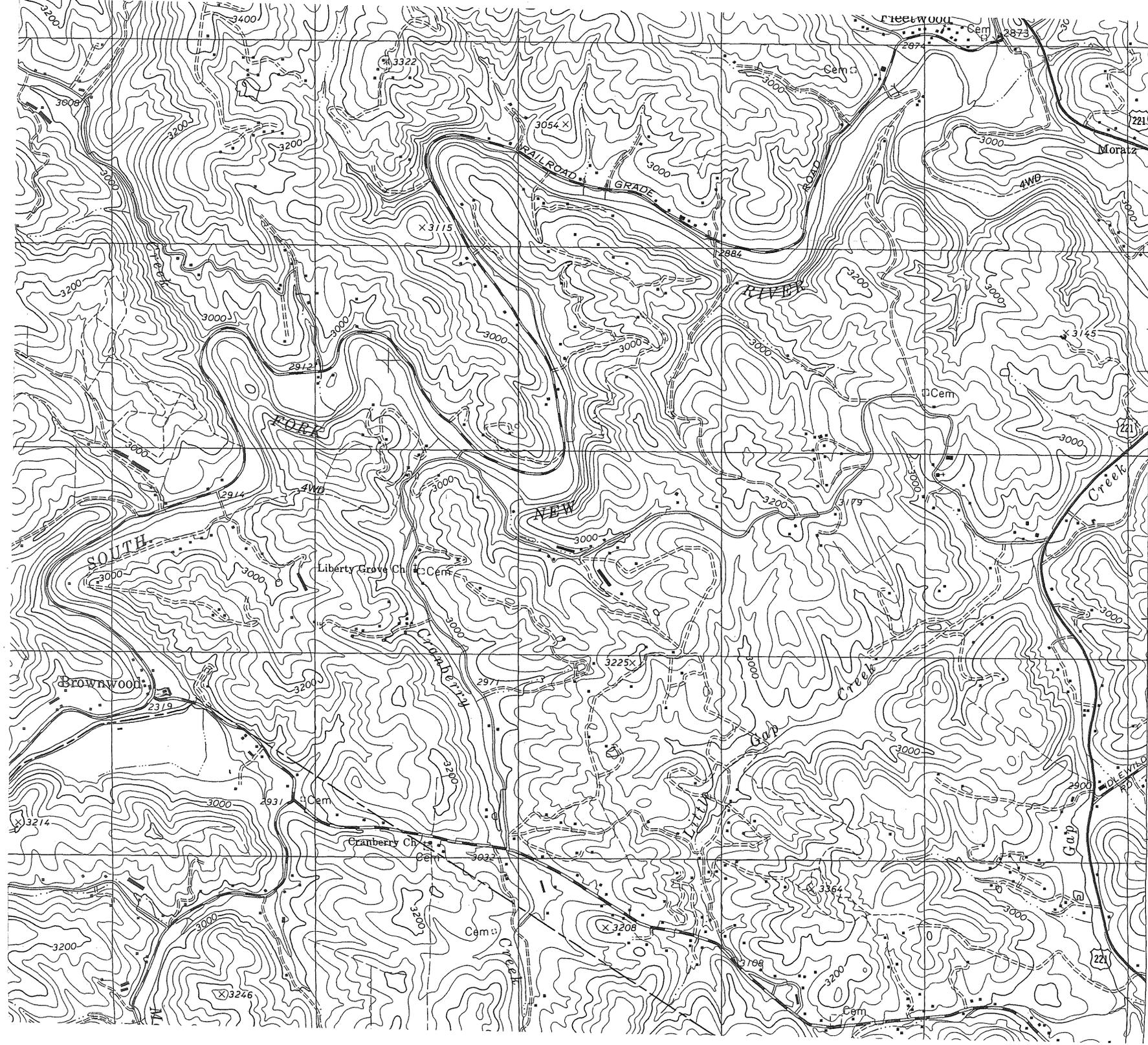
The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the property.



R. T. GREER & COMPANY ROOT AND HERB WAREHOUSE
BROWNWOOD COMMUNITY, TODD VICINITY, NORTH CAROLINA

Ashe County Tax Map
Scale: 1" = approx. 150'





18
17
17'30"
16
15
14

R. T. Greer
and Company
Root and Hair
Warehouse
Todd vicinity
Ashe Co, NC
Zone 17
E 450250
N 4014790

Todd Q

