

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 of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Willis, Henry, House
other names/site number Ehle House

2. Location

street & number SR 1164 N/A not for publication
city, town Penland vicinity
state North Carolina code NC county Mitchell code 121 zip code 28765

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>2</u>	<u> </u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u> </u>	<u> </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u> </u>	<u> </u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u> </u>	<u> </u> objects
		<u>2</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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. See continuation sheet.

William S. Fair, Jr. 6-3-88
Signature of certifying official Date
state Historic Preservation Officer
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official Date
State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- 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): _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic: single dwelling

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic: single dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: double-pen log house

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls wood

roof tin

other _____

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The log house occupied by Henry G. Willis and his family before the turn of the century is situated on a sloping, grassy plot once the center of a thriving family farm. The house parallels the tract of an old road and its gable end faces southwest toward Bailey's Peak, the valley of the North Toe River and the roadbed of the Clinchfield Railroad. Two wooden porches and several rooms have been added to the double-pen cabin but do not detract from the integrity of the original mountain house.

About 1880, a descendant of original settler, Benjamin Willis, constructed a single-pen cabin of chestnut logs in the Snow Creek area of Mitchell County, about one mile from the present Penland School. This cabin, approximately fifteen feet square with gable roof, contains two opposing board and batten doors, flanked by six over six windows. The chestnut logs were laid with half-dovetail notching and chinked with mud mortar. An exterior end stone chimney with single paved shoulders stands on the gable end facing the state road (north). Gables of the cabin are weatherboarded. Random length strips of weatherboarding have been applied over the mortar between the logs on the north end. In the loft, which was originally entered only from the outside through a small board and batten door in the gable, are visible timbers fourteen inches square and the unpeeled poplar saplings which support the roof. Although it is almost square in design, the original cabin appears as Glassie's "Pennsylvania-Ulster and Connaught" type, "...distinguished by its ...opposed front and rear doors."¹ Glassie continues, "Frequently the cabin has another added to one of its ends", as was done to the Willis house about 1890. At that time, a second single-pen room was constructed of logs on the southwest gable end of the original cabin, and a one-story porch with shed roof and log pole posts was added across the full facade created by the two rooms. The second room, with half-dovetail notching butted against the original cabin, has a board and batten door and flanking six over six

See continuation sheet

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 1

windows, all opening to the porch. A large rock fireplace and chimney occupy the southwest gable end; rocks are larger and less tightly fitted than those used for the chimney of the first cabin. A roof of standing seam tin, painted red, stretches over both rooms.

Although the fireplace in the second log room has been closed, the original fireplace and vernacular mantel are in use in the original cabin room. Walls in that room are bead board and the ceiling is poplar planks. Floors in both rooms of the structure are turn-of-the-century oak, raised a few inches off the ground on stone piers, and covering the original dirt floor of both cabins.

With the addition of the second log room, the house became a new house type a typical double-pen house. Further enlargement followed a typical pattern also: first, a log ell, one room in size, with a large cooking fireplace, was added to the rear (east) at the juncture of the original pen and added pen after the turn of the century.² The logs of this ell are weatherboarded. The east wall of the log ell is not butted against the double-pen house but stands about 24 inches from the log walls of the original cabin, allowing a space between the two structures which is covered by the tin roof of the ell. This space is today used for access to a recent basement of the double-pen house and to its loft. After 1930, another kitchen room was added to the old kitchen ell and later a bedroom wing was constructed behind the large kitchen fireplace. In the 1980s a covered porch was joined to the double-pen log house on its southeastern gable end. All foundations under the additions are rock, some with mud mortar.

The newer additions in no way detract from the integrity of the structure, which illustrates the typical development of a "frontier" dwelling from basic single-pen cabin to sprawling country farmhouse.

Visible on the property and close to the house are rock foundations of old farm buildings: pig pen, spring house, wood shed and "rag shop" building, which were removed in the 1930s.³ A board and batten privy still stands.
contributing

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2

Henry Willis's wife, Adeline Thomas Willis, and her mother set out boxwoods which have attained considerable size. Also remaining are crabapple and apple trees, black walnuts, southern catalpas and a grove of paw paw trees, all important to the local family farm.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

ca. 1880 - early 20th c.

Significant Dates

Ca. 1880

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

During the comprehensive inventory of historic resources in Mitchell County, conducted by Ted Alexander in 1985, the Henry Willis House was identified as one of the three most recently constructed traditional log homesteads in the county. These three, built from 1870 to 1890, demonstrate the unusual survival of traditional construction methods in isolated county coves in the late nineteenth century. The Willis House began with a half-dovetailed single log pen, built about 1880. About 1890 a second pen was added, creating a double-pen log house, and the full-facade porch built across the facade. In the early twentieth century a log kitchen ell was added. Despite the subsequent enlargement of the house with two additional rear sections after 1930, the double-pen main block retains architectural integrity. Among the traditional construction features are the rock foundations with mud mortar, original dirt floors beneath turn-of-the-century plank flooring, board-and-batten doors, unpeeled sapling roof rafters, and the original exterior gable-end loft access. Although it is not known which member of the Willis family built the original pen, it was probably long-time owner Henry G. Willis and his wife Adeline who added the second pen. Henry and Adeline acquired a seventeen acre tract containing the double-pen house from a relative in 1898, but they had probably been living there since their marriage in 1887. The Henry Willis family occupied the house until selling it to the present owner in 1968.

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1

ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT:

While most of the small towns of Western North Carolina exhibited some, if not all of the architectural styles prevalent over the state during the second half of the 19th century, there were coves in the mountain areas where earlier forms of construction continued and homes were built with techniques introduced into the area by the first settlers. Mitchell County, North Carolina, which was separated from Yancey County in 1861, was an isolated area of the state from its first settling, as lack of adequate roads and the poverty of the region limited migration into the county as well as travel from it. After 1850, there were no large migrations into the Toe River Valley and after the Civil War the poorness of mountain roads was more of a deterrent to travel than before the War.⁴ As settlers pushed further and further into the isolated coves at the heads of creeks, small settlements were created which resisted change until well after the Civil War.⁵

In his survey of historic properties in Mitchell County (1985), Ted Alexander comments on the isolation of parts of Mitchell County. He lists several dwellings constructed of logs before 1840 (George Silver house, c. 1800; Arrowood-Garland house, c. early 1800; and the Cyrus "Son" Bailey Conley house, c. 1840).⁶ In addition, Alexander includes on his list of houses worthy of preservation the Adam Buchanan house on Beans Creek, the Will Moseley house and the Henry Willis house, all built between 1870 and 1890, and all examples of dwellings which, isolated from areas of high-style architecture, were built in the traditional manner of early log construction. Even as late as the end of the 19th century, "old ways are best" was the prevailing philosophy in remote regions of Mitchell County.

The Henry Willis House, Penland vicinity, illustrates a traditional pattern of log construction in the Blue Ridge region of North Carolina, a pattern which can be traced from German and Scotch-Irish techniques brought to the New World by early immigrants. The growth of the house to accommodate a larger and more settled family follows likewise a pattern common to the area

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 2

Having survived for more than a century of continued use, the Willis house is today a basically unaltered example of Blue Ridge mountain dwelling.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Early deeds indicate that Benjamin Willis and his sons settled in what is now Mitchell County as early as 1830.⁸ Land granted and sold to family member was within a mile of the Old Morganton to Jonesboro (TN) road, the scene of migrations from and to North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky before 1850. Turkeys, hogs, cattle and other livestock were driven over this road to markets in the southeast before the Civil War.⁹ During the War, the road was a link in the "underground railroad" for slaves and sympathizers with the Union cause.¹⁰ Trails off the main thoroughfare led to farms and settlements, often gathered around a Baptist church and on the edge of a creek, where the rugged terrain and limited bottomland prevented the development of large farms.

Henry Willis's father, Thomas, and his grandfather, Joseph, son of the original settler, Benjamin, were typical of the settlers of the area. They bought land on the bank of the North Toe River for farming and did not participate in the mining boom which took the region by storm after 1870.¹² Although surrounded by mica mines at Ledger, Bandana and Penland, there is no indication in records or family history that mining had a direct influence on their rural existence.¹³ The ten children of the patriarch, Benjamin, intermarried with Grindstuffs and Willsons and with their various cousins, so that many of the original properties purchased in Snow Creek township of Mitchell County are today owned by descendants of early owners.

Henry Grindstaff Willis ⁽¹⁸⁵⁸⁻¹⁹⁵²⁾ was born in 1858, the son of Thomas Willis (1837-1897) and Cynthia Grindstaff Willis (1830-1921) and named for his mother's father, whose extensive lands adjoined those of his grandfather Willis.¹⁴ Henry's father, Thomas, was a farmer although he owned no lands of his own as the time of his son's birth.¹⁵ According to the Census of 1880, Thomas's family included three daughters in addition to his son Henry, and young Henry was

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 3

employed on his father's farm. The Census notes that Henry was the only member of the family who could read and write and that he "...attended school in the Census year."¹⁶ On January 30, 1887, Henry married Martha Adeline Thomas of Mitchell County and seven children were born.¹⁷ In 1898 Henry Willis purchased seventeen acres of land in Snow Creek township on the North Toe River, adjoining lands of his relatives Stephen Willis, J.M. Willis and C.B. Conley. The deed provided the right of "...nigress and regress" (sic) through Henry's lands for J.M. Willis, the grantor.¹⁸ Henry continued to purchase other tracts in addition to this land.

The tract of land purchased by Henry Willis in 1898 contained a double-pen log house constructed, according to family members, between 1880 and 1890. Family members assume that Henry and Martha Adeline moved into the cabin at their marriage in 1887, but Henry did not become the owner of the property until 1898. After the turn of the century, the log kitchen ell was added to the double-pen cabin and after 1930 the "new" kitchen was constructed.

In 1914 the isolation of the families in Snow Creek township came to an end with the arrival of Dr. Rufus Morgan at Penland, approximately one mile from the Henry Willis home. Rufus Morgan was an Episcopal priest who resolved early in his life to devote himself to helping the people of the mountains. He established the Appalachian School to "...train the heart, the hand, and the head."¹⁹ He encouraged his sister Lucy to teach weaving to the mountain women so that the craft of weaving would be perpetuated and the mountain women could receive some cash.²⁰

In 1929 Miss Lucy Morgan founded the Penland School of Handicrafts and one of her early pupils and close friend was Adeline Thomas Willis, wife of Henry Willis. Miss Morgan pays tribute to the Willis family in her book, "Gift From the Hills":

"When in those early days the world seemed to get so heavy on my shoulders that I felt I could not stagger any longer under its weight, I would steal off down the hill to that warm, friendly, understanding new friend whom I already considered an old friend, Mrs. Henry Willis.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4

She seemed to own the wisdom of the ages. And along with wisdom, she had a native wit and an immeasurable faith. A day with her would always send me home with a feeling that all anyone has to do is live one day at a time, live it well and wisely and happily... I would ... spend a quiet Sunday with her and her husband, discussing whatever might come into our minds as we sat by the fire and cracked walnuts on a flatiron. Everytime I went to the Willises I came away refreshed in body and mind, renewed in spirit. But for that dear lady, I wonder if there would now be a Penland School of Handicrafts."²¹

Henry Willis wrote his will in 1947, and in it he gave each of his children a portion of his land. To his youngest daughter Flossie Willis Copley, he gave the portion of his homeplace which contained the house and outbuildings. Flossie's home tract, described in the will as follows, is the acreage included in this nomination. Although this eighteen acres does not correspond exactly with the seventeen acre tract that Henry bought in 1898, it has historical validity as the hometract as it existed when Henry died in 1952. Henry's original seventeen acres adjoined the North Toe River, but he sold off the river frontage and bought other adjacent land during his long life.

I give to my beloved daughter Flossie Willis Copley...that part of my home place which is, roughly, described as follows:

Beginning on an oak tree above the road west of the house and running an easterly direction with the road to a Balm tree above the road; then northward from said Balm Tree to a Spruce Pine northward to an Oak, which is a corner of Clayton, Fred and Flossie, and from said Oak corner northward with the old line fence to the corner between me and Son Conley; thence eastward with Conley's line to Claude Morgan's line; thence southward with said Morgan's line to Mart Grindstaff's line; then west with Mart Grindstaff's line to where the Pine corner stood; thence northward to the²² beginning Oak tree, and contains 18 acres, more or less.

In 1966 Flossie and her husband sold the home tract to John Ehle, Sr. and his wife, and soon thereafter it passed to his son John Ehle Jr.²³ The Henry Willis farm is presently used as the summer home of John Ehle, Jr., a North Carolina author noted for his narratives about the lives of settlers of the North Carolina mountains. His wife, Rosemary Harris, is the star of the English stage. The Ehles maintain the rambling farmhouse in the manner of the Willis family, with the addition of twentieth century conveniences.

9. Major Bibliographical References

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 # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 18 acres more or less

UTM References

A

1	7
---	---

3	9	8	1	2	0
---	---	---	---	---	---

3	9	7	7	6	0	0
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Zone Easting Northing

C

1	7
---	---

3	9	8	2	4	0
---	---	---	---	---	---

3	9	7	7	3	6	0
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

B

1	7
---	---

3	9	7	9	4	0
---	---	---	---	---	---

3	9	7	7	4	5	0
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Zone Easting Northing

D

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The 18 acres is the tract outlined in red on the accompanying plat showing land conveyed to Flossie Willis Copley (Perisho) by will of Henry G. Willis, dated November 19, 1947, and recorded in the Office of the Clerk of the Superior Court, Bakersville, Mitchell County, North Carolina

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

This 18 acres is the hometract as it had evolved by 1947, when Henry G. Willis subdivided his acreage among his children. It contains the house, privy, and sites of four farm outbuildings.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carolyn A. Humphries date September 1, 1987

organization National Register Consultant telephone (704) 526 9462

street & number Rt. 2, Box 175 state NC zip code 28741

city or town Highlands,

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 5

FOOTNOTES

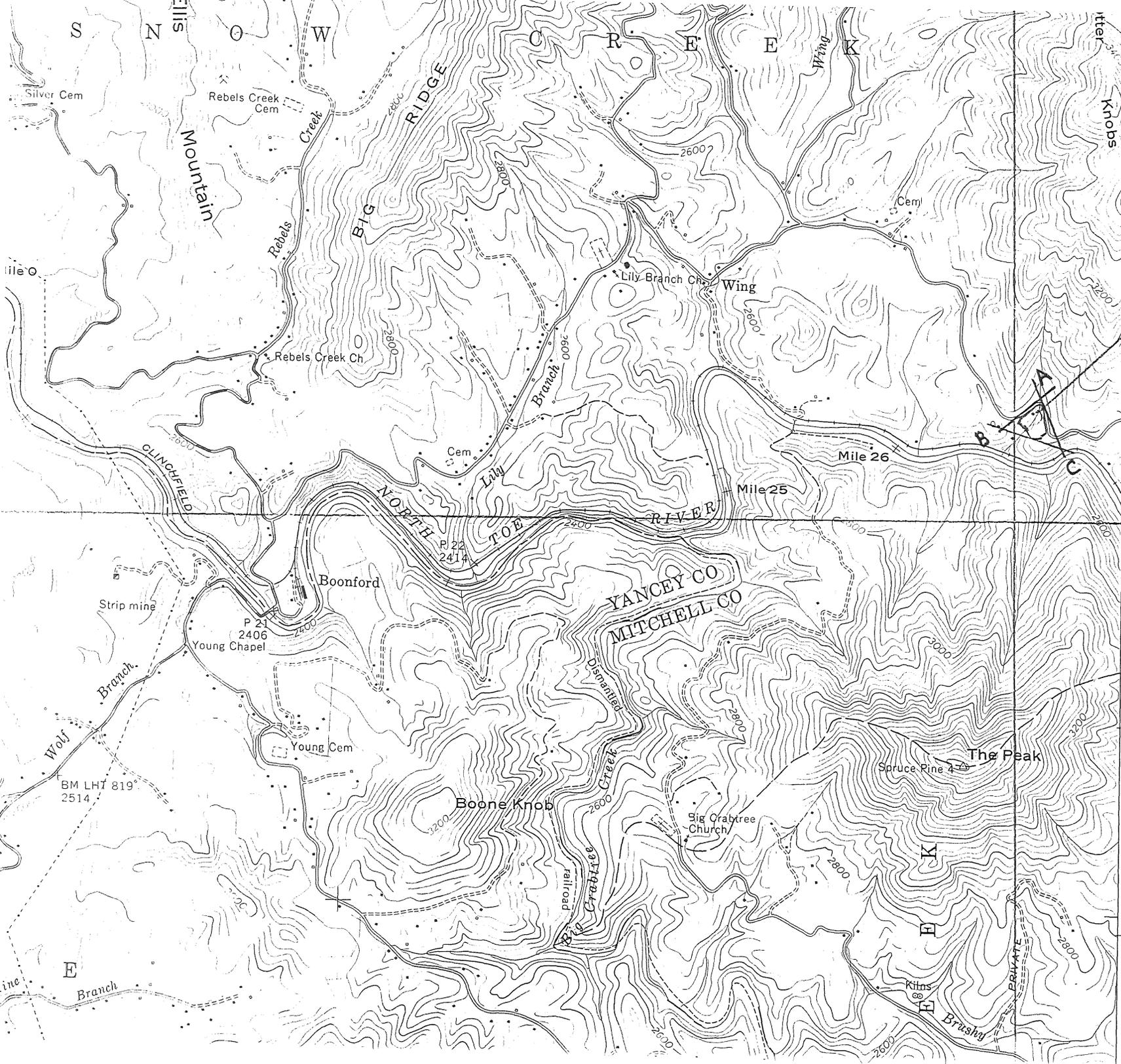
1. Glassie, Henry, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States, Univ. of Pennsylvania, Phila., 1968, page 78.
2. Conversation with Flossie Willis Perisho, June 29, 1987.
3. Conversation with John Ehle, Jr., June 25, 1987.
4. Deyton, Jason B., "The Toe River Valley to 1865", The North Carolina Historical Review, October 1947, page 446, quoted in Alexander, Ted, Mitchell County.
5. Alexander, Ted, Mitchell County, survey of historical properties, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1985.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Burke County Register of Deeds, Book 138, page 249. North Carolina Land Grant # 5520.
9. Robinson, Blackwell P., ed., The North Carolina Guide, Univ. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1955, page 556.
10. Ibid.
11. Alexander, op. cit.
12. Yancey County Register of Deeds, Book 3, page 310; Book 3, page 329; Book 4, page 466; Book 5, page 434.
13. Conversation with Flossie Willis Perisho, June 29, 1987.
14. Correspondence with Margaret Heinek; Gravestones, Lily Branch Baptist Church cemetery.
15. U.S. Census, 1860, Pack Library, Asheville.
16. U.S. Census, 1880, Pack Library, Asheville.
17. Conversation with Flossie Willis Perisho, June 29, 1987.
18. Mitchell County Register of Deeds, Book 36, page 406.
19. Van Noppen, Ina W. and John J., Western North Carolina Since the Civil War, Appalachian Consortium Press, Boone, 1973, page 187.
20. Van Noppen, op. cit., page 188.
21. Morgan, Lucy, with LeGette Blythe, Gift From the Hills, Bobbs-Merrell Co., Inc., New York, pages 27 and 28.
22. Will of Henry G. Willis, November 19, 1947. Plat recorded in Clerk of Superior Court Office, Bakersville, Mitchell Co. Probated 1952. (Copy in SHPO File).
23. Mitchell County Register of Deeds, Book 132, page 28.
24. Mitchell County Deed Book 134, pages 535-537.

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 1

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- Glassie, Henry, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States, Univ. of Pennsylvania, Phila., 1968.
- Heinek, Margaret, correspondence, July and August, 1987.
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- U.S. Census for the State of North Carolina, 1860 and 1880, Pack Library, Asheville.
- Van Noppen, Ina W. and John J., Western North Carolina Since the Civil War, Appalachian Consortium Press, Boone, 1973.
- Yancey County Register of Deeds, Yancey County Courthouse, Burnsville.



Henry Willis-Ehle
House
SR 1164
Penland vic,
Mitchell Co.
Micaville quad
1:24000

A:17/3977600
398120

B:17/3977450
397940

C:17/3977360
398240

3979
3978
3977
3976
55'
3975

(SPRUCE PINE 209-NE)
4555 1 NE

