

THE RABUN COLONY CLUB AND THE HAMBIDGE CENTER by Bruce Roberts

Although this article is not about Towns County, it discusses a nearby historical site, and the location is probably familiar to many folks...

Rabun County was created from lands ceded by the Cherokee Indians in the Treaty of 1819. Land along Betty's Creek was one of the first areas of white settlement in the county, due to the rich farmland located there. Prior to the early 1900s, residents of this area lived in a small, isolated community and received their livelihood from the land. With the construction of the Tallulah Falls Railroad in 1905, this area became accessible to the outside world and a "resort period" began at Betty's Creek. A few "outsiders" came to the area and built small log resort homes.

A group of businessmen came from Atlanta in 1911 with plans to develop a hunting and fishing club, known as the Rabun Colony Club. The group, headed by Julian Field, an Atlantan who owned a fertilizer business, purchased 450 acres in Betty's Creek for the club. Plans for the club included a lake and rustic lodge. The lake was created in the bottomlands by an earthen dam across Betty's Creek near the confluence of Patterson Creek. The lake only lasted a few years before the dam was washed away in a flood. According to the Industrial Index of February 1914, a three-story lodge, 80 x 50 feet was to be built by the Rabun Colony Club from plans by Edward E. Dougherty, a noted architect from Atlanta. Unfortunately, the combined circumstances of World War I and the breaking of the lake dam forced the Club to abandon their plans. The lodge was never finished, although the start of its construction, a rock foundation, remains in its unfinished state. The Club was dissolved in 1920 when Arthur G. Powell, Receiver of Rabun Colony, sold the land to W. Carroll Latimer, a judge from Atlanta.



Ruins of the Rabun Colony Club

Latimer planned to establish a farming operation at Betty's Creek and purchased additional acreage. He added several structures to the property, including a rock house and spring house, both built by a local artisan, Lex Darnell. This operation ended in the late 1920's with Latimer's death. Latimer's wife died not long after her husband and the property was sold to Mary Hambidge in 1935.



The Spring House

Mary, a native of Brunswick, Georgia, had gone to New York as a model and professional whistler and married Jay Hambidge, an artist and lecturer. His work took the couple to Greece, where Mary learned to weave from the Greek women. After her husband's death in 1924, Mary returned to the United States and through the generosity of friends was able to purchase the Latimer property. Here she began a career of reviving the craft of mountain weaving and created a self-sufficient farming enterprise, as well as raising sheep for her weaving industry.

Mary established the "Hambidge Art Foundation" in 1934 with the goal to preserve and continue the mountain crafts in a more organized manner. She utilized local labor for farming and weaving, built new structures, and repaired existing buildings. She assembled a group of women who became known as the "Weavers of Rabun." The group was commissioned to weave fabrics for nationally-known personalities, won awards at the 1937 Paris Exhibition, and were displayed at the Museum of Modern Art and the Smithsonian Institute. She also added silos and a milking shed in the area for a modest dairying operation. In 1936, Mary built a grist mill along Barker's Creek at the site of a former mill and agreed to operate the mill for the community.



Barker's Creek Mill

After World War II, new industry came into Rabun County, and many of the local weavers were attracted to blue collar jobs. The Hambidge Art Foundation broadened its concepts and began to offer a haven to artists, writers, and musicians. The internationally known folklore magazine, "Foxfire," was conceived at the foundation, with much of the Foxfire work carried on while Eliot Wigginton was in residence during the mid 1960s. Mary Hambidge died in 1973, but the Hambidge Center continues to operate as a haven for artists and programs in arts, crafts, and music.