

Rutherford County Claims Youngest Historian In North Carolina

Clarence Griffin Well Qualified For Most Important Post

Has Done Excellent Work in Having Markers and Monuments Erected to Commemorate Important Events—Has Made Special and Intimate Study of the Battle of Kings Mountain—Old Bechtler Mint to be Commemorated With Marker on Courthouse Grounds.

(MAUDE MINISH SUTTON, in Charlotte Observer)

Rutherford County has the youngest county historian in North Carolina. Seventy of the 100 counties in the state have historians; and Clarence Griffin, the 24-year-old historian of the romantic old foothill county, is outstanding in this group. He has one of the largest privately owned historical libraries in the state. He has a collection of documents that constitute a reference library of source-material on the early history of western North Carolina, that is of great value. He is a walking encyclopedia of Rutherford county history and he takes his office very seriously. In the year he has served the county in this capacity, he has done some excellent work.

Is Born Student

Mr. Griffin is a born student. He began collecting his library when he was only 14. When he was 19 he prepared a complete history of Rutherford's part in the World War for the state historical commission and some "Daughter of the A. E. F." in the future will doubtless be grateful for this record. He has recently been instrumental in getting some valuable reference material, in the form of old letters, diaries, and records, presented to the files of the state historical commission; and he also aided in getting some curious old relics presented to the state museum.

North Carolinians are awakening to the necessity of preserving records of their state's romantic past. There are no written histories of North Carolina that do not omit many important events, and give space out of all proportion to some

individuals while ignoring others of far greater importance. This fact, admitted by all authorities on state history, has been caused by lack of authentic material. Western North Carolina particularly has suffered because of lack of historical records. The university has charged one of its most scholarly professors, Dr. Hamilton, with the task of collecting historic records and documents. The state historical commission, the Literary and Historical association, all the college libraries, the county historians and many individuals are at work preserving and recording our history.

An Important Office

The office of county historian is of comparatively recent origin. The State Historical Commission has always needed a responsible interested person in each county to help in collecting records, preserving historic documents and relics, and in interesting the citizens in their own history. Clarence Griffin was appointed by the unanimous vote of the Rutherford county commissioners and board of education in July 1927. Since his appointment he has done a great deal of constructive work. The grandson of a Confederate soldier, he secured much of his vast store of information about the War Between the States, at first hand. He has a great many letters which were written home by soldiers in the armies of Lee, Jackson, Stuart and Johnson. He has some diaries kept at the front and old muster rolls. His interest in historic research has so pleased the survivors of "The Lost Cause" that all of them enjoy telling him of their experiences.

In years, Mr. Griffin belongs to the much derided "younger generation." Yet he has sacrificed much that most men of his age would regard as essential to buy his histories and reference books. Every history that chronicles any Rutherford county events he buys. Many rare out of print books are on his shelves and every event that has in any way touched the life of Rutherford in her long, romantic and picturesque existence is chronicled in his library.

Revolutionary Frontier

One reason, probably why Mr. Griffin has done such remarkably good work is he has had such fascinating material with which to work. A frontier in the Revolutionary period, Rutherford has been the scene of many stirring and romantic events. From the first settlement around old Brittain church, through the stormy days of hostile Indians, and the horrors of Ferguson's raid with his Tories, ended by the thrilling Battle of Kings Mountain. Then the War of 1812 and the Mexican War each took their quota from Rutherford homes.

The only mint between Philadelphia and New Orleans coined over \$3,000,000 of gold, much of which was mined on the creeks and rivers of Rutherford, in Rutherfordton between 1830 and 1840. Rutherford had a charming and delightful society in the long period between the Revolution and the War Between the States. Some of the most beautiful and best examples of the stately ante bellum homes that were the pride of the old south adorn this historic county. She did her part in the bloody 60's. She was reconstructed. Her industrial rise since, has been a typically fascinating record of grim sacrifice, daring, and successful achievement. All of the events of these full years are at Mr. Griffin's tongue's end.

A Weekly Column

He is news editor of The Forest City Courier and he combines his

two positions very well. He publishes weekly a well written and interesting column about some local event of historic importance. These stories vary enough to catch the interest of every type of citizen. The field of his research is broad indeed. Political history—last week he gave a list of Rutherford's senators since 1779. Military, a number of fascinating letters from boys who were with Lee, Rutherford's record in the war of 1812, and some Revolutionary war stories have appeared recently. Industrial history, the founding of the cotton mill industry in Rutherford is one of his hobbies. Ecclesiastical, interesting histories of three old churches have conveyed much knowledge of the past to his readers of late; and he has written accurate biographical sketches of many of his county's famous sons.

The preservation of these records is his greatest achievement and the one for which future generations will bless his name. New England's part in the founding of our nation is given disproportionate space in all of our histories. This is because her folk have studied their past, preserved its history, and marked their historic spots. "Not for all the glories of New England, from Plymouth Rock all the way," would any Rutherford county citizen exchange the proud record of her heroic past—if he knew this record—for, no more thrilling or romantic story brightens the pages of North Carolina's history.

About Kings Mountain

Kings Mountain history fascinates Mr. Griffin. He is an authority on all the events leading up to the great battle and the dispersal of the Mountaineers after it. He has made a shrine of the grave of every Kings Mountain hero in the county, and like all lovers of adventure, he reveres Shelby and Sevier. The doughty old fighter, Griffith Rutherford, for whom the county is named, is another of Griffin's heroes, and any event connected with his picturesque career is duly chronicled in the vasty human county history that he is preparing. This history will be modern in spirit. For Mr. Griffin has one characteristic common to his generation. He is no respecter of tradition. He is as iconoclastic as Lytton Strachey and his stories present the heroes of the past as flesh and blood men. Personalities appeal to him more than events.

The preservation of the records is less spectacular and will awaken less interest than the work which Mr. Griffin is sponsoring now. The county Historical Commission, of which he is ex officio chair'n, is going to erect bronze markers on the sites of the historic spots in the county. Old Gilberttown, Brittain Presbyterian church, the Bechtler Mint, and the muster ground of Captain H. D. Lee's "Burnt Chimney's Volunteers." This is a very valuable piece of work, for each of these sites has a wonderful history and every boy and girl in Rutherford county should know about them.

The Bechtler Mint

The Bechtler mint which operated in Rutherfordton from 1830 to 1840 was one of the most unique and interesting enterprises ever carried on in North Carolina. During the period of its existence Rutherfordton

was near the center of the gold producing area in the United States. The nearest mint was at Philadelphia and a long and hazardous journey faced every settler who would take his gold thither, Commerce was barter, and yet every small stream in this section clear down to north Georgia carried enough gold dust to make gold washing pay. The lack of a medium of exchange was keenly felt.

Two German gunsmiths, Augustus and Christopher Bechtler had settled in Rutherfordton. They were skilled craftsmen and scrupulously honest. They opened a mint in 1830 and it did a thriving business until the opening of the government mint in Charlotte in 1840. They coined three denominations: one dollar, two dollars and a half, and five dollars. These coins, very rare now, were the principal money in this section for this period. Carried across the Appalachians by traders they were numerous in Kentucky, Tennessee and on the western frontier. They had a wide circulation and served a great need.

Bechtler coins are very rare now and correspondingly valuable. The name "Bechtler" is on all the coins. They are crude and very yellow. Mr. M. O. Dickerson, a Rutherfordton banker, has a valuable collection of these coins and is an authority on the Bechtler mint. The Bechtler used dies, two of which, with the quaint old homemade press with which the gold was rolled, are now the property of the state historical commission. Mr. Griffin aided in securing the valuable relics. The museum also has four Bechtler coins.

Site of Markers

The marker for the site of this interesting bit of history will be erected by the Rutherford county historical commission. The commission is made up of: Messrs. G. B. Howard, J. C. Cowan, Jr., and K. S. Tanner of the Rutherford County club; J. L. Taylor, H. L. Carpenter and O. C. Erwin of the Rutherfordton Kiwanis club; and G. R. Gillespie, C. C. Erwin and Chas. Z. Flack of the Forest City Kiwanis club. They are much interested in these markers and plans have been perfected for financing two of them.

The second of these markers will be erected by the town of Forest City at the west end of the square. It will mark the spot where the first company of volunteers left Rutherford county in the War Between the States. Co. "B" 16th North Carolina, called "Burnt Chimney's Volunteers," under command of Capt. H. D. Lee, left this spot with 160 men. At the end of the bloody four years, from Bethel to Appomattox, nine of them were paroled. The rest were dead, wounded or in Federal prisons. This distinguished company has one survivor, Mr. Aaron Wall of Carolina. The marker to this heroic body of men, all of whom came from in and around Forest City, will be erected in a prominent position at the end of the beautiful square.

Old Brittain Church

Old Brittain church, the oldest Presbyterian church in western North Carolina, is the third spot to be marked by the commission. It is 159 years old and its cemetery is one

Clarence Griffin, Rutherford county historian, and the youngest man in North Carolina to hold this important post.

of the most interesting in the state. Since its organization in 1768 it has been the religious and cultural center of one of the best communities of the state. The big old graveyard, three acres in extent, contains over a thousand graves in which rest some very distinguished citizens. A sunken grave in the old cemetery holds the bones of a young Virginia hero who lost his life at King's Mountain. Seven other heroes of the Revolution rest here and soldiers of every other war that the nation has engaged in.

This marker, on the new highway from Rutherfordton to Morganton, will also commemorate the Indian massacre of 1776. The Indian fort from which this raid was made is less than a half mile from the church. It was from here that General Rutherford left to go to Hillsboro to beg for troops to go against the Indians; and his brave company marched on an expedition that conquered more territory than William the Conqueror won at Hastings.

Old Gilberttown

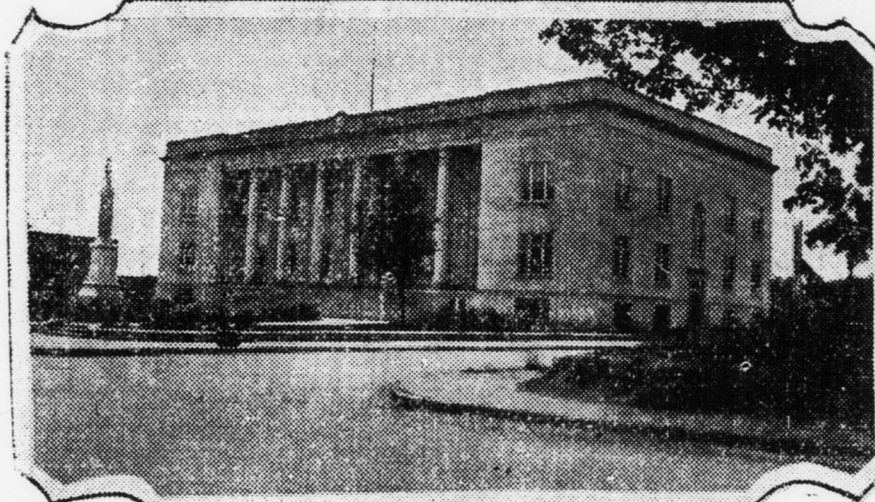
Old Gilberttown is the most historic spot in the borders of Rutherford county. An old field is all that now remains of the home site of William Gilbert, patriot, statesman and gallant frontiersman. The early courts of Rutherford county were held here. From here William Gilbert departed to represent first Tryon, then Rutherford, in the state assembly. This was the site of Ferguson's tory encampment from which he sent the famous challenge that

brought Shelby, Sevier and Campbell down the Blue Ridge to join the Carolinians for the battle of Kings Mountain. It was there that nine Tories were hanged by the victorious patriots. Thirty had been condemned to death, but Isaac Shelby's soul revolted at such wholesale slaughter, and he protested. The other officers agreed with him and 21 lives were saved. One of the Tories executed was Col. Ambrose Mills, the most distinguished loyalist in this section. Senator Toms of Rutherford county had a gavel made of the tree on which tradition says they were hanged, and presented it to the state senate in 1906. At Gilberttown the leaders of early days in western North Carolina visited William Gilbert, Cleveland and Lenoir from Wilkes, Avery and Morgan, McDowell, Rutherford and the other great men of the past. Here the commission will erect the fourth marker.

Clarence Griffin's greatest work is building up in Rutherford county a tradition of reverence for the past. It is a far reaching and important task. No thinking person doubts the value of the pride of ancestry. Pride of home and an honest pride in a heroic past. He puts much time and effort on a position that pays not one cent of salary. He has addressed organizations and school children. He is ready to supply any information or record that any citizen wishes, and he takes the duties of his office as seriously as they should be taken.



West end of square at Forest City, where the marker to "Burnt Chimney's Volunteers" will be placed, and (below) Rutherford county courthouse, on the lawn of which the marker to the Bechtler mint will be placed.



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An acquaintance of ours from Ellenboro was arrested for driving 70 miles an hour, and in answer to the Judge's question as to the reason for such speed exclaimed: "My wife had decided to go back to her folks and I wanted to get her there before she changed her mind." We've not changed our mind one bit about our's being the best place to buy your groceries. Continual commendation from critical housewives convinces us the popularity of our groceries must be deserved.

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