

**North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources
State Historic Preservation Office**

Ramona M. Bartos, Administrator

Governor Roy Cooper
Secretary D. Reid Wilson

Office of Archives and History
Deputy Secretary, Darin J. Waters, Ph.D.

June 7, 2023

Clay Griffith
Acme Preservation Services
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Asheville, NC 28804

cgriffith.acme@gmail.com

Re: Evaluation Report, Stabilize Andrews Geyser, Old Fort, McDowell County, ER 19-2737

Dear Mr. Griffith:

Thank you for your letter of April 5, 2023, transmitting the revised Historic Structure Survey Report (HSSR), "Andrews Geyser, Old Fort, McDowell County," prepared by Acme.

We do not recommend additional changes and accept this version of the report as final. We have also determined that the proposed water supply line repair, which includes the replacement by horizontal directional drilling of 701ft at Mill Creek and point repairs of an additional 200ft along the line, will have no adverse effect on the historic property. With this letter we consider our consultation for this undertaking complete unless the scope of work has changed since the March 31, 2022, State Clearinghouse submission.

The above comments are made pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's Regulations for Compliance with Section 106 codified at 36 CFR Part 800.

Thank you for your cooperation and consideration. If you have questions concerning the above comment, contact Renee Gledhill-Earley, environmental review coordinator, at 919-814-6579 or environmental.review@ncdcr.gov. In all future communication concerning this project, please cite the above referenced tracking number.

Sincerely,

for Ramona Bartos, Deputy
State Historic Preservation Officer

cc Nicolas Perdomo, WithersRavenel
Rick Hensley, Old Fort, Mayor

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Historic Structures Survey Report – Andrews Geyser

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Acme Preservation Services, LLC (APS) has completed a Historic Structures Survey Report for Andrews Geyser (MC0088) in Old Fort, North Carolina, a property approved for the Study List for the National Register of Historic Places in 2006. APS conducted the survey and evaluation on behalf of the Town of Old Fort, which plans to repair the water supply line to Andrews Geyser, and WithersRavenel, consulting engineers for the Town. The Town seeks financial assistance from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Rural Utilities Service to fund planning and construction of the project. The purpose of the survey and report is to identify and evaluate historic resources present within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended.

Originally conceived in the nineteenth century as an attraction for rail passengers and guests of the Round Knob Hotel, the rebuilt Andrews Geyser remains a unique landmark historically associated with the construction of the railroad and tourism industry in western North Carolina. Situated on the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge escarpment, Andrews Geyser currently serves as the focal point of a public park owned by the Town of Old Fort. The park containing the geyser basin covers approximately 10 acres, while the offsite reservoir and water supply line for the man-made geyser are located on private property, railroad right-of-way, and national forest land. The APE for the project is defined as the park property surrounding the geyser basin, as well as the unmaintained corridor containing the water line.

Architectural historian Clay Griffith of APS completed a survey of the APE in September 2022, photographing and mapping the resources associated with the town park and three areas of exposed water line, and authored the report. APS conducted the survey and prepared this report in accordance with the provisions of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological and Historic Preservation (48 FR 44716); 36 CFR Part 60; 36 CFR Part 800; and the HPO's *Report Standards for Historic Structure Survey Reports/Determinations of Eligibility/Section 106/110 Compliance reports*, effective January 25, 2022. As a result of the assessment documented in this report, APS recommends that Andrews Geyser is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment/Recreation. The eligible boundary for Andrews Geyser encompasses the 10-acre tract containing the geyser basin, memorials, and additional monuments, as well as the water supply line, dam, and reservoir located off-site that complete the system.

SSN	Property Name	Eligibility Determination	Criteria
MC0088	Andrews Geyser	Eligible	A

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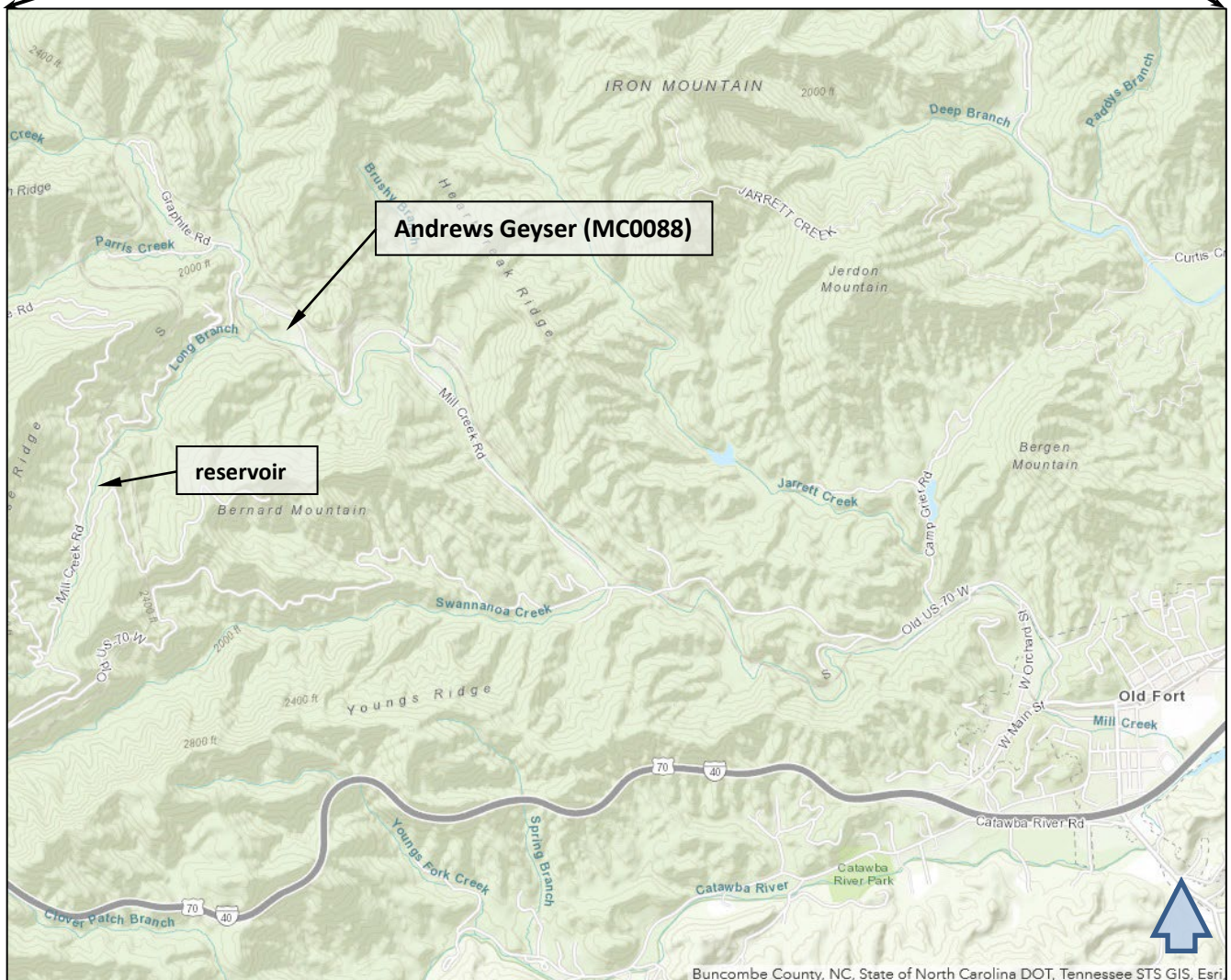
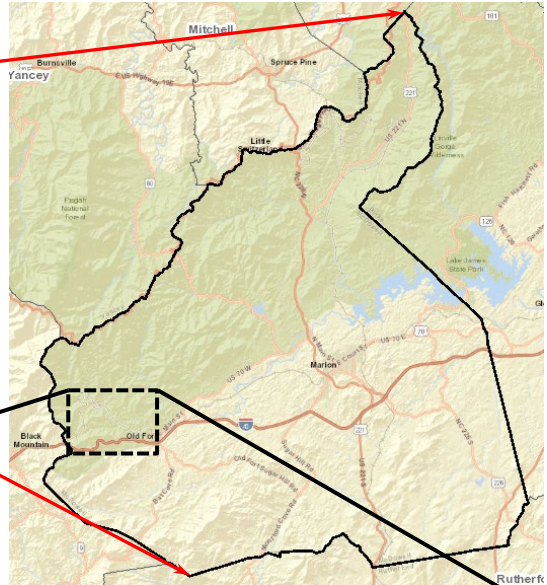
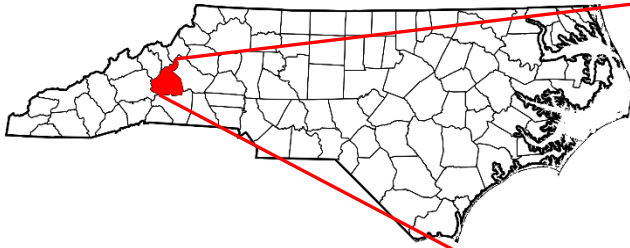
I. Project Description

The Town of Old Fort is seeking to repair the water line supplying Andrews Geyser (MC0088), a man-made tourist attraction originally constructed by the Western North Carolina Railroad (WNCRR) in the nineteenth century and rebuilt by the Southern Railway in 1911. The geyser basin sits at the center of a two-acre grass clearing that is located in the northern portion of a 10-acre municipal park off Mill Creek Road (SR 1407) approximately five miles northwest of the town. The National Register Advisory Committee (NRAC) in North Carolina approved Andrews Geyser along with the dam, reservoir, and water supply line for the Study List in 2006.

The water line supplying Andrews Geyser begins at a small reservoir located on private property more than a mile southwest of the geyser basin, which forms the centerpiece of a park owned by the Town. A concrete dam impounds the less than one-acre reservoir, and a valve set within a concrete shaft controls the flow of water through the dam. The water supply line generally descends along Long Branch before crossing Mill Creek and connecting to the geyser basin; it follows a deeded right-of-way across private property, railroad right-of-way, and national forest lands. The water line, which is exposed in several areas, was damaged during Tropical Storm Alberto in 2018. The Town proposes to replace approximately 70 feet of existing 6-inch pipe where the line crosses Mill Creek.

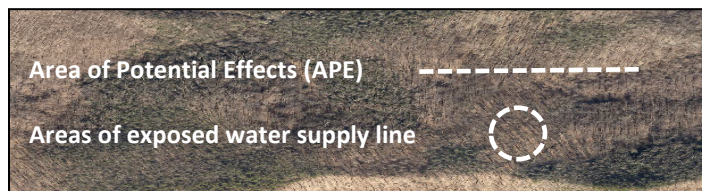
The Area of Potential Effects (APE) for the project is defined as the park property surrounding the geyser basin, as well as the deeded corridor containing the water line. All proposed work is to be completed within the right-of-way owned by the Town. The water line replacement will not require the acquisition of any additional land.

Project Location Map



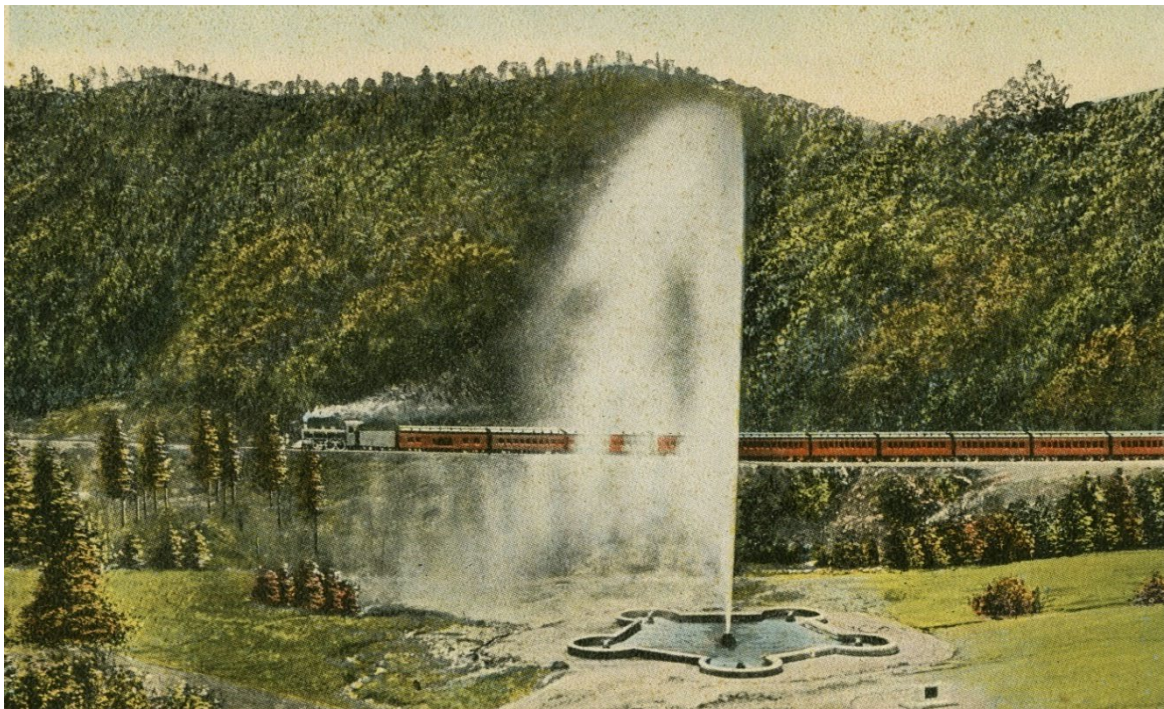


Area of Potential Effects (APE) map (Source: McDowell County GIS)



II. Purpose of Survey and Report

The purpose of this survey and report is to evaluate the potential National Register of Historic Places eligibility of Andrews Geyser (MC0088) in order to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended. The Town of Old Fort seeks financial assistance from USDA Rural Development Rural Utilities Service to finance planning and proposed repairs to portions of the water line supplying the man-made geyser. The property, which was approved for the Study List in 2006, is the only resource located within the APE for the subject project. APS conducted the survey and prepared this report in accordance with the provisions of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archaeological and Historic Preservation (48 FR 44716); 36 CFR Part 60; 36 CFR Part 800; and the HPO's *Reports Standards for Historic Structure Survey Reports/Determinations of Eligibility/Section 106/110 Compliance Reports in North Carolina*, effective January 25, 2022.



"Geyser Fountain, Erected at Round Knob, to the Memory of Col. A. B. Andrews" in Durwood Barbour Collection of North Carolina Postcards (P077), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill

III. Methodology

APS conducted a search of the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (HPO) survey files to acknowledge that Andrews Geyser (MC0088) was previously recorded and approved for the National Register Study List in 2006. A further search of HPO survey files revealed that the dam and reservoir serving the geyser are recorded in a second survey file (MC0090), although the files largely contain similar material. The resources were first documented by Ted Alexander as part of a multi-county reconnaissance survey to identify historic properties in 1985.

Architectural historian Clay Griffith of APS completed a survey of the APE in September 2022, photographing and mapping the geyser basin and associated resources, and authored the report. In addition to research conducted through McDowell County GIS, additional information and documentation was available at McDowell County Register of Deeds Office, the Old Fort branch of the McDowell County Public Library, Pack Memorial Library in Asheville, and D. H. Ramsey Library Special Collections at University of North Carolina Asheville. A substantial amount of material was available in the HPO survey file including an extensive report on the history of Andrews Geyser prepared by Steve Little, local historian and mayor of the Town of Marion. Recent research into the history of previously overlooked aspects of the construction of the railroad across the mountains in the 1870s and 1880s has resulted in a project to acknowledge and memorialize the laborers who built the Western North Carolina Railroad (WNCRR). The RAIL Project—the Railroad and Incarcerated Laborer Memorial Project—placed a monument in the park near Andrews Geyser and compiled a website (<https://therailproject.org/>) to document the project and its research.

IV. Property Evaluation – Andrews Geyser

Resource Name	Andrews Geyser
HPO Survey Site Number	MC0088
Location	SW side of Mill Creek Road (SR 1407), 2.1 mi NW of jct. w/Old US 70W (SR 1400)
PIN(s)	0730-77-0565
Date(s) of Construction	1911, 1975
Eligibility Recommendation	Eligible (A) –Entertainment/Recreation



Andrews Geyser (MC0088), Mill Creek Road, Old Fort, NC (May 2022)

Description

Situated in a grass clearing on the north side of Mill Creek in western McDowell County, Andrews Geyser is a man-made fountain built as an attraction for railroad tourists along the Southern Railway and its predecessor, the Western North Carolina Railroad (WNCRR). The present five-sided concrete basin of the fountain replaced the original circular basin in 1911. The site of Andrews Geyser serves as a public park for the Town of Old Fort and consists of a grass lawn, a picnic shelter, picnic tables, and other monuments to the nineteenth-century construction of the railroad over the Blue Ridge Mountains. The park lies on the southwest side of Mill Creek Road (SR 1407), approximately 2.1 miles northwest of its junction with Old US 70W (SR 1400) and approximately five miles northwest of Old Fort. A gravel parking area

borders the road, while a concrete sidewalk and wooden railing define the boundary of the parking area. A concrete block base supports the sidewalk, and block steps and a concrete ramp transition into the park's grass lawn at intervals along the sidewalk. A row of wooden bollards extends both north and south of the parking area to keep vehicles from entering the park.

Built in the form of a pentagon with circular lobes at each of the five corners, the concrete geyser basin resembles a star when viewed from overhead and measures approximately 70 feet across. The basin has low outer walls that rise from approximately one to three feet above the surrounding grade and are capped by a heavy concrete coping; the interior depth is approximately four feet. The basin has a flat bottom and an overflow drain on the east side with a makeshift metal grate covering the opening. An irregular mound of river rock located at the center of the basin houses the vertical pipe forming the spout of the geyser. Similar, yet smaller rock mounds were originally located in each of the five lobes but were removed in the late 1970s as part of the geyser restoration.

The majority of monuments and fixtures within the park are located near the parking area and have been added in recent years. An information plaque installed by North Carolina Civil War Trails provides a history of the Swannanoa Gap Engagement, which occurred as part of Stoneman's Raid through western North Carolina in the spring of 1865. A concrete block trash repository with irregularly coursed stone masonry at the corners serves as a container for two trash bins. The trash repository stands near the handicap-accessible concrete ramp entering the park. A tall, rectangular monument constructed of river rock frames a polished granite tablet acknowledging the construction of Andrews Geyser and its restoration and dedication as a public park in 1976. A second rectangular stone monument was erected in 2021 as a memorial to the incarcerated railroad workers who built the railroad through the mountains in the 1870s. A tablet on the north side of the monument briefly recounts the role of incarcerated workers in the construction of the railroad and a second tablet on the south side of the monument lists the names of known incarcerated workers as recorded in United States Census records.

A gravel path located between the two rectangular monuments leads up a slight incline to a smaller stone marker with a polished tablet top set at an incline. Resting on a concrete slab, the monument is covered by a veneer of uncoursed stone masonry. The tablet honors the memory of McDowell County soldiers who served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. A small bronze medallion on the rear of the marker identifies the Sons of Confederate Veterans as the sponsors of the monument.

At the top of small rise beyond the Confederate soldiers' memorial is a substantial granite monument consisting of a carved stone bench resting on a wide plinth. Erected in 1911, at the time the geyser basin was rebuilt, the rough-hewn granite seat is roughly 5 feet by 10 feet in size and stands on a rough-hewn granite slab measuring approximately 7 feet by 12 feet. A bronze tablet originally mounted on the rear of the bench seat has been removed. The text on the tablet read:

This Geyser has been restored and perpetuated as a tribute to Colonel Alexander Boyd Andrews of Raleigh, N.C., and in appreciation of the great public service he

has rendered in the development and upbuilding of Western North Carolina by his friend George Fisher Baker of New York. A.D. 1911.¹

The stone bench, paid for by Baker, was once encircled by a hedge that no longer exists.

A wooden picnic shelter stands approximately 70 feet southwest of the bench monument. Supported by three wooden posts on either side, the gable-roof shelter measures approximately 15 feet by 20 feet and covers a gravel pad and two wooden picnic tables. The open roof structure consists of wooden rafters, plywood decking, and asphalt shingles. Six concrete picnic tables are located within the park, installed in the late 1970s after the Town took over the property. Two tables stand along the edge of the woods at the north end of the site, while the other four tables are located within the woods near the road to the south of the parking area.



Andrews Geyser site plan – basin, monuments, and park (HPOWEB 2.0)

¹ Tablet inscription quoted in Stephen R. Little, *Andrews Geyser: Star of the Mountain Railroad* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012), 3.



Andrews Geyser, view south from parking area



Andrews Geyser, view northeast to parking area and Mill Creek Road



Andrews Geyser, view west to picnic shelter and stone bench monument



Andrews Geyser, view northwest, railroad grade in background



Andrews Geyser basin, spout detail, view to east



Andrews Geyser basin, wall detail, view to east



Andrews Geyser basin, wall detail, view to northwest



Andrews Geyser basin, wall detail, view to northwest



Parking area and park monuments, view to northwest



Trash repository and handicap-accessible park entrance, view to north



Andrews Geyser memorial, 1976, view to southwest



Incarcerated railroad workers memorial, 2021, view to south



McDowell County Confederate soldiers memorial (foreground), view to southwest



Stone bench monument, 1911, view to west



Picnic shelter, view to north



Picnic tables in southern portion of the park, view to southeast



Andrews Geyser Reservoir and Dam (MC0090) site plan (HPOWEB 2.0)

A small reservoir located on the privately-owned Inn on Mill Creek property, approximately one mile southwest, supplies water to the geyser basin. A reinforced-concrete gravity dam, built in 1916, replaced the original earthen dam, which washed away in the floods of July 1916. The impoundment, once known as Allison Lake, currently covers less than one acre due to perennial silting. At the northwest end of the dam, a square shaft descends into the ground and provides access for the water line's control valve. The shaft is currently concealed beneath a wooden deck and accessed through a wooden hatch. Metal bars sunk into the concrete in one corner of the shaft form a ladder. The exact route of the water supply line is not fully known, but it generally follows the course of Long Branch to its confluence with Mill Creek. The water line is exposed and visible in at least three locations along its route, which crosses private property, national forest land, and railroad right-of-way.

The most accessible section of the water line is located at the edge of the Andrews Geyser site where an unnamed tributary of Mill Creek forms the western boundary of the park property. A section of the water supply line, approximately 10-12 feet in length, is exposed where it crosses the branch, but the line remains buried through the park property to the geyser basin. The exposed pipe is heavy 6-inch iron pipe with a Mueller gate valve.

The largest section of exposed water line lies approximately 450 feet upstream on Mill Creek. Roughly 70 feet of exposed pipe spans the creek. The supply line emerges from the steep slope below the railroad grade on south bank of the creek, and the unsupported pipe

descends into the creek bed, where it is submerged for approximately 15-20 feet. A straight section of iron pipe emerges from the creek bed and rises unsupported to the north bank where an exposed elbow connector redirects the water line to the northeast. Beyond the elbow, a portion of the line remains exposed before returning underground. Several pieces of the water line in this section have been obviously replaced with PVC pipe.

The third area of exposed water line is located approximately 1,500 feet to the southwest adjacent to US Forest Service property. Running parallel to Long Branch, the exposed line consists of a central piece of replacement PVC pipe spliced into partially buried sections of iron pipe. The heavily wooded site is accessible via an overgrown trail that connects to Mill Creek Ridge Road at the end of a bridge over Long Branch.



Property of Inn on Mill Creek, 3895 Mill Creek Road, encompassing the Andrews Geyser reservoir and dam, view to north



Andrews Geyser reservoir and dam, view to northeast



Andrews Geyser reservoir and dam, view to southeast



Hatch covering the shaft to water supply line control valve, view to north



Shaft to water supply line control valve at northwest end of dam, view to south



Water supply line and gate valve over branch on western edge of park, view to west



Water supply line crossing Mill Creek, view to west



Water supply line, north bank of Mill Creek, view to southeast



Water supply line on Long Branch at edge of US Forest Service land, view to southeast



"Round Knob, The Approach to Asheville, NC," in Durwood Barbour Collection of North Carolina Postcards (P077), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill

Historic Background and Context

Originally built around 1883 as a tourist attraction on the Western North Carolina Railroad (WNCRR), Andrews Geyser is the second incarnation of a man-made fountain that once sent a flume of water more than 260 feet into the air to the delight of rail passengers and guests of the Round Knob Hotel, which stood adjacent to the tracks on the south side of Mill Creek. After the hotel burned in 1903 and the fountain fell into disrepair, George Fisher Baker arranged to rebuild the fountain in 1911 and renamed it in honor of Col. Alexander B. Andrews, who was instrumental in completing the WNCRR west of Asheville. Southern Railway, successor to the WNCRR, rebuilt the fountain at Baker's behest on a new location across Mill Creek from the original hotel and fountain site. Located at Round Knob, a modest promontory in western McDowell County, the geyser site lies near the beginning of a series of loops and switchbacks in the tracks that was necessary to overcome the elevation change as the rail line ascended the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The railroad negotiates more than 1,000 feet of grade change in just over three miles by virtue of a meandering nine-mile route with seven tunnels.

The completion of the WNCRR from Salisbury to Asheville in 1880 served as a major catalyst in the growth of the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Construction on the line began in the 1850s but stalled at Morganton during the Civil War. Although the WNCRR was completed to Old Fort by 1873, financial and engineering difficulties further

slowed progress of the rail line over the Blue Ridge into Buncombe County. Construction across the mountains between Old Fort and Ridgecrest proved to be a monumental challenge requiring another five years and countless hours of manual labor to complete. The opening of the 1,832-foot-long Swannanoa Tunnel in 1879 and completion of the rail line to Asheville helped usher in nearly 50 years of steady population growth and economic development. The railroad connection, by way of Old Fort, to Asheville bolstered the city's position as a thriving health resort and tourist destination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and established Asheville as the social and economic hub of western North Carolina.²

Railroad Building in North Carolina

The first serious proposals for a railroad in North Carolina came in the late 1820s with the publication of several articles by Joseph Caldwell, president of the state university, who called for a rail line that would begin at the coast, proceed through Raleigh and Lexington, and continue toward the Tennessee border.³ As political consensus for rail improvements to link major commercial centers spread, the first two major railroads in North Carolina were chartered in the 1830s and completed in 1840. The citizens of Wilmington sold subscriptions totaling \$400,000 to charter the Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad as a means to boost the port city's economy. The capital city showed little interest in the plan, so company officers changed the terminus to Weldon, located on the Roanoke River near Virginia. Construction of the line began in 1834 and was completed in March 1840. The Wilmington & Weldon Railroad—extending over 161 miles—was the world's longest railroad at the time.⁴ The citizens of Raleigh, however, supported a second railroad to connect the capital city with Petersburg, Virginia. The state legislature chartered the Raleigh & Gaston (R&G) in December 1835. Gaston, a town on the north side of the Roanoke River near Weldon, became the terminus for the North Carolina section of the new interstate railroad. The first R&G locomotive rolled into the capital city in 1840 to great celebration.⁵

The two railroads created complementary trading corridors for transporting crops such as cotton, corn, and tobacco to market and for moving supplies, especially fertilizer, to farmers. In 1842, Governor John Motley Morehead argued that the success of the two lines could carry over to other parts of the state and urged the legislature to help fund an extension of the R&G to Charlotte. The common refrain among railroad promoters of the period, including Morehead, was that the lack of extensive railroads contributed to the

² Douglas Swaim, *Cabins & Castles: The History and Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina* (Asheville, NC: Historic Resources Commission of Asheville and Buncombe County, 1981), 28, 38-40; Nan K. Chase, *Asheville: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007), 29-30.

³ Allen W. Trelease, *The North Carolina Railroad, 1849-1871, and the Modernization of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 12.

⁴ William S. Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 285-287; Charles Clinton Weaver, *Internal Improvements in North Carolina Previous to 1860* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1903; reprint, Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1971), 82-83.

⁵ Powell, *North Carolina*, 287; John Gilbert and Grady Jeffreys, *Crossties Through Carolina: The Story of North Carolina's Early Day Railroads* (Raleigh, NC: The Helios Press, 1969), 4.

trade of North Carolina products outside of the state.⁶ This was especially true in western North Carolina where farmers tended to trade at markets in Danville, Virginia; eastern Tennessee; and upstate South Carolina where railroads had already been built.

In 1849, the General Assembly approved the charter of the North Carolina Railroad (NCRR), creating a rail line that would run from Goldsboro to Charlotte by way of Raleigh, Greensboro, and Salisbury. Boosters claimed that connecting rail lines would eventually be built as extensions of the NCRR to unite the eastern and western parts of the state. Ultimately, the NCRR's connections with established railroads in Virginia and South Carolina advanced the creation of a rail network along the eastern seaboard. Construction of the 223-mile-long NCRR through the Piedmont began in 1851 and was completed by January 1856.⁷

The Western North Carolina Railroad (WNCRR) was organized on August 30, 1855, as a major branch of the NCRR. The original charter designated Salisbury as the eastern terminus and "some point on the French Broad River beyond the Blue Ridge" as the western end.⁸ The eight men selected as directors appointed James C. Turner as chief engineer and charged him with surveying and locating the line from Salisbury to Morganton by way of Statesville and Newton.⁹

The WNCRR underwent significant change after the Civil War, which rendered the line almost completely destroyed and the company short of money and laborers. Having already subscribed \$4,000,000 to the WNCRR, the state issued additional bonds for more than \$2,500,000 in 1868. George W. Swepson of North Carolina and Milton S. Littlefield of New York secured control of the company and proceeded to manipulate state officials and stockholders into the creation of two divisions. The legislature approved the move to designate the section from Salisbury to Asheville as the first division and the portion west of Asheville to Ducktown and Paint Rock, Tennessee as the second division. Stocks were issued leaving control of the company in the hands of Swepson and Littlefield, who pocketed several million dollars in proceeds and made only a pretense of actually constructing the railroad. The state ordered an investigation into the misappropriation of funds leading to both Swepson and Littlefield fleeing North Carolina.¹⁰

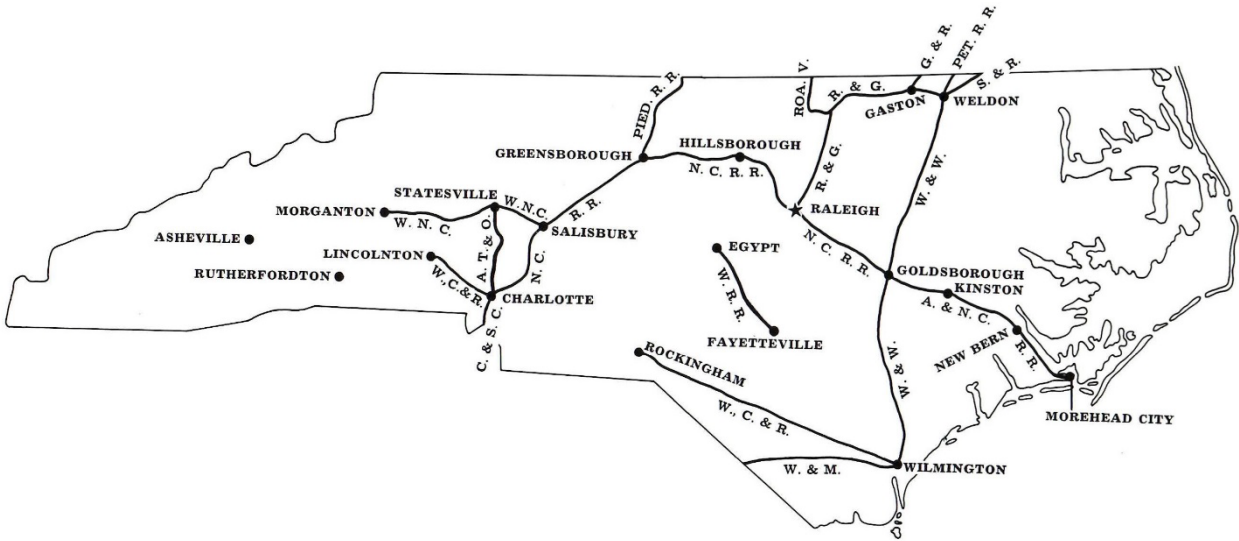
⁶ Powell, *North Carolina*, 288.

⁷ Trelease, *The North Carolina Railroad*, 17-18; Powell, *North Carolina*, 289.

⁸ James C. Turner, "Engineer's Report," August 27, 1856 in *Second Annual Report of the President and Directors to the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road Company* (Salisbury, NC: The Watchman, 1856), 14.

⁹ R. C. Pearson, "Report of the President," August 28, 1856, in *Second Annual Report of the President and Directors to the Stockholders of the Western North Carolina Rail Road Company* (Salisbury, NC: The Watchman, 1856), 7-8.

¹⁰ William Hutson Abrams Jr., "The Western North Carolina Railroad, 1855-1894," (Master's thesis, Western Carolina University, 1976), 22-25; Burke Davis, *The Southern Railway: Road of the Innovators* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 196.



"Rail lines of North Carolina at the time of the Civil War" (*Crossties Through Carolina*, 8)

Owing to the stock scandal, progress on the WNCRR came to a near standstill. The line, which had been completed to Marion in 1870, was completed to Old Fort by 1873. Henry Station, three miles west of Old Fort, became the official terminus from 1875 until 1879, where westbound rail passengers transferred to stagecoach and continued their journey across the mountains. Located near the present junction of Old US 70 (SR 1400) and Mill Creek Road (SR 1407), Henry Station bustled with activity. The company erected a depot, railroad office, and supervisor's headquarters. Capt. W. T. Sprague and J. H. Pearson built and operated a small hotel, the St. Bernard, where passengers could have a meal or spend the night. In 1877, the state legislature approved reorganization of the WNCRR, and the company board elected Maj. James W. Wilson as president. The act not only created the Mountain Division, which extended from Henry Station to the western portal of the Swannanoa Tunnel, but also authorized the company to receive as many as 500 convicts from the state penitentiary to work on the construction of the line.¹¹

Before the stock scandal ensued, James W. Wilson (1832-1910), who had served as a Confederate major, took over as chief engineer for the road. Wilson and Thomas H. Bomar, also a civil engineer with the WNCRR, conducted a survey of Old Fort Mountain in order to determine the best route for the railroad's climb up the daunting slopes. The men concluded that the grade had to be kept at a minimum and came up with the idea of building serpentine loops up the mountain. When completed, the route of the Mountain Division—a distance of 3.4 miles and a climb of over 1,000 feet—required nearly nine miles of circuitous track with a curvature of 2,776.4 degrees. Workers constructed six tunnels into order to maintain the grade of 2.1 percent insisted upon by Maj. Wilson. A seventh tunnel collapsed due to the

¹¹ Lou Harshaw, *Trains, Trestles and Tunnels* (Asheville, NC: Hexagon Company, 1977), 12; Mildred B. Fossett, *History of McDowell County* (Marion, NC: McDowell County American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, Heritage Committee, 1976), 96-97; Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 5-6.

condition of the soil and was remade as an open cut—Mud Cut—that plagued the engineers for years.¹²



“Western N.C. Railroad – Mountain Division” (1881), North Carolina Maps, State Archives of North Carolina

Wilson got his start with the railroads as a rodman on a survey crew and was later appointed president of the WNCRR in 1864. Governor William W. Holden removed Wilson from the position but following reorganization, Gov. Zebulon B. Vance installed Wilson as president, superintendent, and chief engineer during the critical period of construction in the late 1870s. After leaving North Carolina to be chief engineer of a railroad in Tennessee and Kentucky, Wilson returned to the state in 1891 to become chairman of the Board of Railroad Commissioners, a position he held for eight years.¹³

Based in Morganton, Maj. Wilson had extensive land holdings across western North Carolina including a large tract at Round Knob in McDowell County. One account claimed that

¹² Cary Franklin Poole, *A History of Railroading in Western North Carolina* (Johnson City, TN: The Overmountain Press, 1995), 3-6; Abrams, “The Western North Carolina Railroad,” 36; Harshaw, *Trains*, 12.

¹³ Gilbert and Jeffreys, *Crossties Through Carolina*, 25-26.

“he owned all of the land between Round Knob and Ridgecrest across which the tracks ran.”¹⁴ At Round Knob, Wilson kept a small residence for himself, erected a sawmill, and established a camp for incarcerated workers. The provision for laborers from the state penitentiary in 1878 proved critical to the completion of the line.¹⁵

The convict force supplied the sheer manpower necessary to conduct the grueling, labor-intensive work of not only railroad building, but also erecting, staffing, and maintaining their work camps. Incarcerated laborers built the stockades where they lived, five in total housing approximately 125 at each site. In addition to the Round Knob stockade, the others were built at the top of the ridge near the east end of the Swannanoa Tunnel, Lick Log, Jarrett’s, and Mud Cut. The incarcerated laborers did not spend all of their time on railroad construction but worked on the stockades and supervisors’ houses, chopped wood, cooked, and did laundry. Living and working conditions were harsh; food and clothing was meager. Grading and tunneling was typically completed by hand. Wilson developed techniques for blasting and breaking up larger areas of rock. In some instances, workers built fires of pine logs to heat the stone and then poured buckets of cold water over the rock to form cracks and fissures that could be further broken up with hammers and chisels. In the absence of gunpowder, workers used nitroglycerine for blasting, an early application of the highly volatile explosive in the United States. Wilson mixed the nitroglycerine with sawdust and cornmeal to create a paste that was easier and safer for workers to handle. After packing the substance into narrow holes previously dug with a hammer and spike, workers cleared a path and laid a trail of dried leaves to serve as the fuse. Incarcerated laborers produced approximately 18,000 pounds of the nitroglycerine mash in a shed near Henry Station over the course of the project.¹⁶

To speed completion of the 1,832-foot-long Swannanoa Tunnel, Wilson resolved to bore from both ends and meet in the middle. He determined that a locomotive was needed to support the crew working on the western portal, but having not yet breached the mountains, there were no tracks or rolling stock to access that side of the gap. Wilson charged W. P. Terrell and Capt. L. S. Aldridge with delivering the small locomotive *Salisbury* across the mountain to the western end of the tunnel. Terrell and Aldridge rounded up a crew from the incarcerated workers and, along with ten oxen, began the tedious task of pushing the locomotive over the mountain. Workers cut ties and laid rails along an old stagecoach road for a short distance and then, using brute strength, pushed and pulled the engine forward, removing the rails and ties behind it and repeating the whole process. After several weeks, the crew crested the ridge and slid the locomotive into place at the western portal of the tunnel.¹⁷

On March 11, 1879, WNCRR president Wilson met chief engineer Maj. Troy in the center of the Swannanoa Tunnel. The men sent a telegram to Gov. Zebulon Vance: “Daylight entered

¹⁴ Patrick W. O’Bannon, “Written Historical and Descriptive Data, Swannanoa Tunnel, HAER NC-12,” Historic American Engineering Record, Department of the Interior, Washington, DC, 1977, 7, n. 11.

¹⁵ Fossett, *McDowell County*, 98-99.

¹⁶ Fossett, *McDowell County*, 98-100; O’Bannon, “Swannanoa Tunnel,” 2; Poole, *History of Railroading*, 4-5; “Report of the Committee on Investigation of the W.N.C. Railroad,” *North Carolina Citizen* (Asheville, NC), March 13, 1879, 4-5.

¹⁷ Harshaw, *Trains*, 12; Poole, *History of Railroading*, 4-5; Fossett, *McDowell County*, 101.

Buncombe County today through the Swannanoa Tunnel. Grade and centres met exactly.”¹⁸ Wilson sent a second, even more succinct message to Edward J. Aston, prominent Asheville booster and civic leader, stating simply: “I went through the Swannanoa Tunnel today.”¹⁹ Although there was still work to be done, the announcement circulated quickly. Any celebration among the work crews, however, was short lived. Soon after the tunnel was opened, the *Salisbury* was backing out of the tunnel with a flat car carrying a group of laborers when a cave-in occurred. All 23 workers were killed by falling debris. The incident was only one example of the dangerous conditions that claimed the lives of more than 120 incarcerated laborers, who went unrecognized for their work and sacrifice.²⁰

A year after completing the Swannanoa Tunnel, the state decided to sell the WNCRR, which was purchased by William J. Best and a syndicate of associates from Virginia in the spring of 1880. By this time, the line was opened from Salisbury to Azalea, a point seven miles east of Asheville, and by October 1880 the tracks were complete to Asheville. The Legislature transacted the sale of the WNCRR with requirements that the extension from Asheville to Paint Rock be completed between 1880 and 1881; a western extension to Ducktown, Tennessee, be completed by 1885; and that the convict labor force, numbering around 500, be reimbursed to the state at annual rate of \$125 per convict. In addition to engineering challenges and political difficulties, Best encountered financial problems and was unable to repay his loan. Best’s former associates from the Richmond & Danville Railroad (R&D) acquired the WNCRR, which became known as the Western North Carolina Division, and installed Alexander B. Andrews (1841-1915), former superintendent of the Raleigh & Gaston Railroad, as president of the line in 1881. Andrews provided the necessary leadership to oversee the completion of the railroad to Paint Rock on the Tennessee line and subsequent construction of the western branch line from Asheville to Murphy by 1891.²¹ The whole R&D system, like many railroad companies across the south, was overextended and went into receivership. In 1894, financier J. P. Morgan gained control and reorganized the Richmond and Danville system, including the WNCRR and North Carolina Railroad, into the Southern Railway Company. Col. Andrews became first vice-president of the Southern Railway.²²

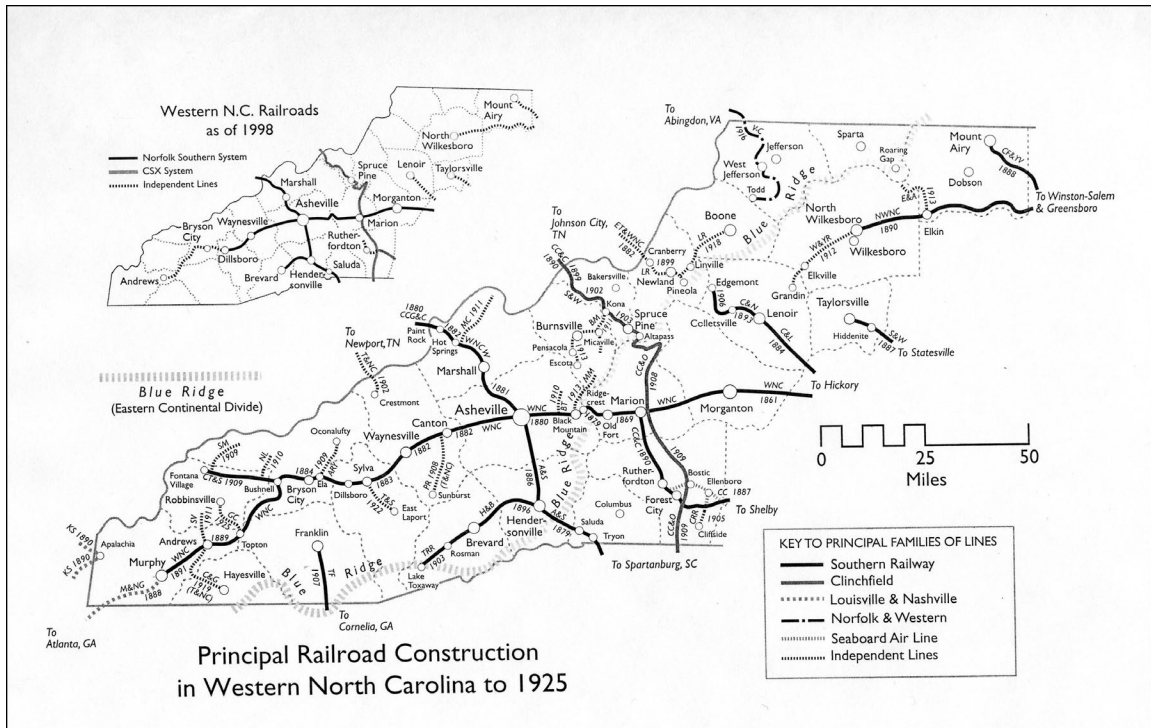
¹⁸ “Mud Cut,” *North Carolina Citizen* (Asheville, NC), March 20, 1879, 1.

¹⁹ “Hail to the Chief!” *North Carolina Citizen* (Asheville, NC), March 13, 1879, 1.

²⁰ The deaths of 120-125 incarcerated laborers are officially recognized by the state, but the actual number of casualties may be as high as 400 or more. Poole, *History of Railroad*, 5-7; “Through the Blue Ridge,” *The Observer* (Raleigh, NC), March 12, 1879, 2.

²¹ Due to significant delays in construction, the WNCRR’s western branch was completed only to Murphy, seat of Cherokee County, and never reached the copper-rich area around Ducktown in southeastern Tennessee. See Michael George, *Southern Railway’s Murphy Branch*, 2nd printing (Collegedale, TN: The College Press, 2000), 15.

²² Fairfax Harrison, *A History of the Legal Development of the Railroad System of Southern Railway Company* (Washington, DC: Southern Railway Company, 1901), 250-253, 272-288; Poole, *History of Railroad*, 2, 9-11.



“Principal Railroad Construction in Western North Carolina to 1925” (Map prepared by Michael Southern for *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Western North Carolina*, 34)

The period during which the WNCRR formed part of the R&D, 1881 to 1894, was one of great progress. Colonel Andrews spearheaded much of the construction west of Asheville and enlisted the assistance of several influential men. Among them was vice-president Frank Coxe of Philadelphia, who built the Battery Park Hotel; superintendent Vardry E. (Bunch) McBee, who became an important developer of railroads in South Carolina; and chief engineer Maj. James Wilson.²³ Asheville became a regional hub where four railroad lines converged and introduced great numbers of tourists to the region, as well as artists and writers and Northern capitalists, many of whom extolled its natural and scenic beauty. As tourism in the region boomed, the railroad offered convenient transport to communities that once seemed difficult to reach.

²³ Davis, *The Southern Railway*, 197; Catherine W. Bishir, Michael T. Southern, and Jennifer F. Martin, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Western North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 33; Poole, *History of Railroad*, 9.



"Round Knob, Railroad at 17 Points" in *Rogers' Asheville*, 1899 (D. H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville)

Round Knob Hotel and Fountain

Beginning around 1881, James Wilson and Col. A. B. Andrews began construction of a resort hotel at Round Knob. The five-story frame structure stood directly adjacent to the railroad tracks in a short straightaway on the south side of Mill Creek. A stone arch bridge approximately 40-feet high carried the tracks over Mill Creek before curving to the northwest to the site of the hotel. Maj. Thomas H. Bomar (1842-1927) designed the hotel and reputedly conceived of the fountain that served as an attraction for hotel guests. Bomar was Maj. Wilson's son-in-law by marriage to Wilson's eldest daughter, Mary (1862-1916). Bomar took up civil engineering after the Civil War and began working as a surveyor on the Atlanta and Charlotte Air Line Railroad. He later helped survey routes for the Spartanburg & Rutherford Railroad and the Statesville & Jefferson Railroad before joining the WNCRR.²⁴

²⁴ "Capt. Kirkland Breaks a Leg," *The Southern* (Charlotte, NC), August 26, 1881, 3; "The W.N.C.R. Road," *Asheville Citizen*, September 1, 1881, 4; "A Gretna Green Affair," *The Landmark* (Statesville, NC), March 9, 1883, 3; "Round Knob," *The State Chronicle* (Raleigh, NC), April 19, 1884, 1; "Pioneer Atlantan Passes in Texas," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1927, 9.

Notices of the hotel under construction began to appear in newspapers in August 1883. Built at a cost of approximately \$8,000, the building contained 30 guest rooms, a modern dining room, bar and billiard room, closets and baths on each floor, and electric bells. Capt. W. D. Sprague, who successfully ran the small hotel at Henry Station, leased the building to operate as a summer resort. Early descriptions of the hotel and grounds discuss plans to construct several fountains surrounded by a lake near the hotel with water supplied from a point near Mud Cut. An article appearing in September 1883 describes the chief attraction of the area as “a fountain which throws water a distance of 60 feet and a large, beautiful lake, the result of Major Wilson’s fine engineering skill.”²⁵

The hotel appears to have been completed in the later months of 1883, and the fountain completed and tested in December 1883. Upon completion, the hotel’s porch formed the railway platform where the building adjoined the tracks. Built against the embankment of the railroad, the hotel overlooked the hollow that forms the site of the present-day park at Andrews Geyser. A stone dam built across Mill Creek formed a 10-acre lake with the fountain at its center. When the fountain was tested, water shot from the opening of a 1-inch vertical pipe and rose more than 200 feet in air before fanning out and falling as a light spray onto the surface of the lake.²⁶

Either Bomar or Wilson conceived of the fountain as a result of engineering work necessitated by the challenges of laying track through Mud Cut a short distance west. The soil in the 450-foot-long cut became unstable as crews began removing approximately 77,000 cubic yards of material from the cut. With all but approximately 8,000 cubic yards remaining for removal, heavy rains caused a slide that deposited 110,000 cubic yards of material in the cut. Wilson remedied the laborious process of removing the soil by hand by diverting a nearby stream through the cut to create a sluice that scoured away the mud. To complement the hotel’s attractiveness and accommodations, Wilson and Bomar arranged for water to be channeled in a similar manner to the hotel from high above Round Knob and the gravity-fed pipeline resulted in the impressive spout.²⁷

The spectacle produced by the jet of water rising more 200 feet in the air beside the hotel as the railroad wound its way up the mountain quickly became a popular vista for passengers of the WNCRR. Reviews claimed that “the play of the fountain is beyond expectation, the water shooting up..., scattering like mist, and descending like dew.”²⁸ Other articles stated that “chief among the attractions [at Round Knob] is the fountain,” the name of which “suggests nothing of the realities of such construction.”²⁹ A chautauqua for North Carolina teachers held in Waynesville in June 1884 was supported by the WNCRR, which offered low fares for the

²⁵ “The ‘Round Knob’ Hotel,” *Carolina Mountaineer* (Morganton, NC), August 25, 1883, 5; “The Richmond & Danville,” *Lenoir News-Topic* (Lenoir, NC), September 26, 1883, 4; “Maj. Wilson’s Answer,” *Asheville Daily Citizen*, September 2, 1897, 1.

²⁶ “A Beautiful Fountain,” *The Alamance Gleaner*, December 27, 1883, 2.

²⁷ “N.C. Has the Highest Fountain in the World,” *The Daily Pilot* (Winston, NC), January 11, 1884, 1; O’Bannon, “Swannanoa Tunnel,” 5; Gilbert and Jeffreys, *Crossties Through Carolina*, 13; “Secretary’s Report of Sunday School Excursion,” *Carolina Watchman* (Salisbury, NC), July 11 1878, 3.

²⁸ “News of the Week,” *The Biblical Recorder* (Raleigh, NC), January 9, 1884, 3.

²⁹ “The Round Knob Fountain,” *Carolina Mountaineer* (Morganton, NC), May 7, 1884, 3.

educators. Two trains transported teachers across western North Carolina with a featured stop at Round Knob Hotel, where the party enjoyed breakfast and views of the fountain.³⁰



"Birds Eye View of Round Knob, W.N.C.R.R.," 1884 (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC)

Capt. Sprague appears to have managed the Round Knob Hotel only for the first year or two of its operation. The lake and dam, too, did not survive beyond the first year or so due to the disgruntlement of farmers downstream, who had the dam condemned and removed.³¹ W. B. Troy assumed management of the hotel in 1885, and promoted it widely. In one advertisement, Troy refuted claims by "certain parties in Asheville" that the fountain "caused a dampness in the hotel" as "false in every sense."³² Water from the springs at Round Knob were found to have high concentrations of lithium salts and Round Knob Lithia Water was sold exclusively through Dr. T. C. Smith's drug store in Asheville.³³

³⁰ Ina W. and John J. Van Noppen, *Western North Carolina Since the Civil War* (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium, 1973), 168-170.

³¹ "Railroad Racket," *The Farmer and Mechanic* (Raleigh, NC), May 20, 1885, 2.

³² "Round Knob Hotel," *The Asheville Citizen*, August 15, 1885, 1.

³³ "Round Knob Lithia Water," *The Asheville Citizen*, April 3, 1889, 3.

Water to the fountain did not always flow as planned. Heavy rains frequently caused disruptions to rail service, as well as the fountain. Storms in 1884 destroyed two trestles and caused five large landslides that left travelers stranded at the Round Knob Hotel.³⁴ The following year heavy rains washed out sections of the water supply line to the fountain, leading to the disappointment of passengers. A newspaper article described how the fountain was “motionless at present owing to the derangement of the conduits by heavy rain” and expressed the hope that “some day iron piping will be laid from the fountain head so as to secure the permanency of the jet.”³⁵ Mrs. R. L. Fitzpatrick lamented the lack of height during an off-season visit “on account of the supply of water being cut off in winter” but remarked on its smaller, yet “beautiful spray...softly falling on the fading emerald turf....”³⁶

The WNCRR touted the popularity of the hotel and fountain, and after Southern Railway acquired the route in 1894, images of the fountain continued to appear in its promotional materials. The fountain appeared alongside scenic vistas and natural features, popular hotels and health resorts, and other regional landmarks in visitor’s guides. A 13-page booklet published in the 1880s and entitled *Western North Carolina R.R. Scenery, “Land of the Sky”* opens with four images of the hotel and fountain by photographer Herbert W. Pelton.³⁷ Similarly, the 1899 guidebook *Rogers’ Asheville* features two views of the hotel, fountain, and railroad at Round Knob as its first images before continuing with depictions of Asheville, the Buncombe County Courthouse, hotels, churches, Biltmore House, the French Broad River, and views of the surrounding mountains.³⁸

The hotel remained successful through the 1890s although it was operated seasonally by a succession of managers, who leased the 30-room inn for \$500 per year from Maj. Wilson. In the late 1890s, Wilson and fellow railroad commissioner, S. Otho Wilson (no relation), became embroiled in charges of corruption and improper business dealings with regards to the hotel. Otho Wilson took over management of the hotel in 1897 and soon faced allegations from Governor Daniel L. Russell of not paying for freight service and preferential treatment from Southern Railway due the Wilsons’ positions as railroad commissioners. The Wilsons were removed from the commission, but following extensive testimony and a mountain of evidence, the Wilsons were absolved of wrongdoing and reinstated to the railroad commission.³⁹

After the turn of the twentieth century, J. M. Robinson took over management of the hotel.

³⁴ “Heavy Work of the Storms Up the Western North Carolina Railroad,” *The Farmer and Mechanic*, July 2, 1884, 3.

³⁵ “Daily Edition,” *The Asheville Citizen*, November 19, 1885, 1.

³⁶ Mrs. R. L. Fitzpatrick, “A Visit to Round Knob,” *The Asheville Citizen*, December 1, 1886, 1.

³⁷ *Western North Carolina R.R. Scenery, “Land of the Sky”* (Portland, ME: Chisolm Bros., 188x) [Digital publisher: D. H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville 28804].

³⁸ H. Taylor Rogers, *Rogers’ Asheville* (Brooklyn, NY: The Abertype Company, 1899) [Digital publisher: D. H. Ramsey Library, Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Asheville 28804].

³⁹ “Maj. Wilson’s Answer,” *Asheville Daily Citizen*, September 2, 1897, 1; “Why the Wilsons Were Removed,” *The News & Observer*, January 18, 1899, 3; “The Wilson Matter—What the Evidence Shows,” *The News & Observer*, February 28, 1899, 4; “Both the Wilsons Are Exonerated,” *Asheville Daily Citizen*, March 3, 1899, 1; James L. Hunt, “Round Knob Hotel Affair,” 2006, NCpedia, <https://www.ncpedia.org/round-knob-hotel-affair>; accessed October 27, 2022.

Robinson spent the previous three years successfully operating the Lenox Hotel in Pinehurst before making the move in 1901.⁴⁰ E. D. Steele of High Point purchased the hotel in August 1903, just a month before tragedy struck. Fire engulfed the Round Knob Hotel in the early morning hours of September 11, 1903 and destroyed the building. The engineer of a helper engine noticed the fire and rescued two workmen he knew to be sleeping in the hotel.⁴¹ The fountain gradually fell into disrepair as the property around the hotel ruins became disused. The death of James W. Wilson in 1910 prompted the first calls for the fountain to be repaired and restored to operation as a tribute to his work on the railroad.⁴²



“Geyser and Monument in Heart of Blue Ridge Mountains,” postcard, 1912 (Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville, NC)

Andrews Geyser

George Fisher Baker (1842-1931), former president of First National Bank of New York, observed the ruined fountain in 1910 from his private rail car as he traveled to Asheville. Saddened by the sight of the fountain’s condition, Baker contacted Southern Railway and outlined his intention to construct a new fountain as a tribute to his friend Col. A. B. Andrews.

⁴⁰ “Round Knob Hotel,” *The Pinehurst Outlook*, March 29, 1901, 2.

⁴¹ “Round Knob Hotel Destroyed by Fire,” *Asheville Daily Citizen*, September 12, 1903, 8.

⁴² “Maj. Jas. W. Wilson Dies at Charlotte,” *The Asheville Citizen*, July 4, 1910, 5; “Monument to Major Wilson,” *Marion Progress*, July 21, 1910, 1.

Baker promised to personally pay for the project, reimbursing Southern Railway for all design, material, land, and labor costs. He also proposed to donate the completed monument to Southern Railway with covenants in the deed to ensure its perpetual maintenance and operation.⁴³

Born in Troy, New York, Baker rose to prominence after modest beginnings as an energetic teenager working in a local bank. At 23, he became an original shareholder in the First National Bank of New York (later Citibank). Through Baker's connections to the federal government, the bank grew into the largest financial institution in the county with Baker later serving as president and chairman of the board. Baker expanded his tremendous wealth by investing in industry and transportation. He bought several railroads that he made profitable and served on the boards of many others, including the WNCRR in the 1870s. Through his involvement with the railroad, Baker met and befriended Col. Andrews, whose leadership in the 1880s was instrumental to the completion of the WNCRR.⁴⁴

Baker began investigating the water source and supply line for the original fountain to determine if it could be put back into service for the new fountain. Baker's agents sought a new site for the geyser due to limited area surrounding the original geyser basin. Southern Railway staff from Knoxville surveyed the area in June 1911 and discovered that a lengthy portion of the line lay buried beneath the railroad tracks. It was decided to abandon the original pipeline and create a new route using Long Branch as the source to a new site on the north side of Mill Creek. Baker acquired a two-acre circular tract from the Round Knob Park Company for the geyser basin.⁴⁵ Crews surveyed two pipeline routes, and the shorter, 7,000-foot-long path was selected.⁴⁶ Baker's agents negotiated with four property owners to secure the right-of-way for the pipeline, including a 1.39-acre tract from Coleman and Bessie Allison for the construction of a dam and impoundment that would supply the geyser.⁴⁷ An earthen dam was built to create the reservoir that became known as Allison Lake. Easements for the pipeline were secured across property owned by the Hudgins, Houck, and Morton families. The circular tract for the new basin stood on the north side of Mill Creek approximately 500 feet northwest of the old hotel site. Provisions in the deed allowed for 10-foot-wide driving path to encircle the site. Baker executed all acquisitions for the land and easements required for the basin, water supply line, dam, and pond by December 1911.⁴⁸

Southern Railway engineers requested an advance of \$7,400 from the company on September 15, 1911 to be cover the costs of materials and labor for the construction of the geyser basin and pipeline. Baker would reimburse Southern Railway for the full cost of the endeavor. The company ordered 6-inch-diameter "extra heavy, cast iron pipe" for the supply line, and by early October, observers noted that "car loads of piping" for the water supply line

⁴³ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 16-18; McDowell County Register of Deeds Book 47, page 388.

⁴⁴ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 17.

⁴⁵ McDowell County Register of Deeds Book 45, page 47.

⁴⁶ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 26-27.

⁴⁷ McDowell County Register of Deeds Book 45, page 574.

⁴⁸ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 27-31.

had been unloaded along the tracks and workers had begun digging out the base.⁴⁹ As it neared the geyser basin, the pipeline reduced to four inches in diameter before the water was compressed through the one-inch-diameter vertical pipe that formed the spout of the geyser. The fountain returned to operation on November 23, 1911, much to the admiration and enjoyment of Southern Railway passengers. The final cost to rebuild the fountain, including land and labor, totaled \$9,317.18.⁵⁰

In addition to rebuilding the geyser basin and re-establishing the flow of water to the fountain, Baker ordered a stone monument for the grounds in honor of Col. Andrews. The hand-carved granite bench standing atop a stone plinth offered visitors a place to sit and enjoy the spray from the geyser playing in the air. Baker requested a bronze plaque for the rear of the bench and personally approved its design and wording. The plaque is no longer affixed to the monument.⁵¹

Work on Andrews Geyser reached its conclusion in spring 1912. Col. Andrews visited the geyser on April 15, 1912, but Baker was unable to see the monument to his friend until some months later. Southern Railway officials reported to Baker after Andrews' visit that his friend "was most pleased" with the tribute paid to him.⁵² On June 10, 1912, Baker transferred the deed for Andrews Geyser to Southern Railway.⁵³ The deed conveyed all of Baker's land titles, easements, and water rights to the railroad company along with the stipulation that the geyser erected to honor Col. Andrews be maintained in perpetuity. Southern Railway accepted Baker's donation and the responsibility of maintaining the geyser.⁵⁴

Construction and dedication of Andrews Geyser clearly resulted from the efforts of a single individual connected with the railroads and not as part of a widespread movement on the part of railroad companies to build, maintain, and operate attractions for their passengers. Development closely associated or affiliated with the railroads, such as the original Round Knob Hotel, would occasionally be built along the rail lines for company executives, employees, or other visitors. The Brotherhood of Railway Clerks of the Southern Railway System erected a two-story Craftsman-style inn near Saluda for its members and their families to use in one- or two-week intervals. The Railway Clerks' Mountain Home opened in 1926 and allowed railroad employees to vacation in a popular resort area on a clerk's income.⁵⁵ The Clinchfield Railroad, through a subsidiary land development company, established a resort at Altapass in 1916 along the Eastern Continental Divide in McDowell County. Here, too, the railroad engineered a series of loops and tunnels to negotiate the steep grade of the Blue Ridge escarpment. The resort,

⁴⁹ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 74; "Round Knob Fountain Being Rapidly Rebuilt," *The Evening Chronicle* (Charlotte, NC), October 4, 1911, 4.

⁵⁰ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 31; "Fountain at Round Knob," *The Western Sentinel* (Winston-Salem, NC), December 1, 1911, 3.

⁵¹ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 31-33.

⁵² Steve Little, "Andrews Geyser: Symbol of New Life," (May 16, 1976), 3.

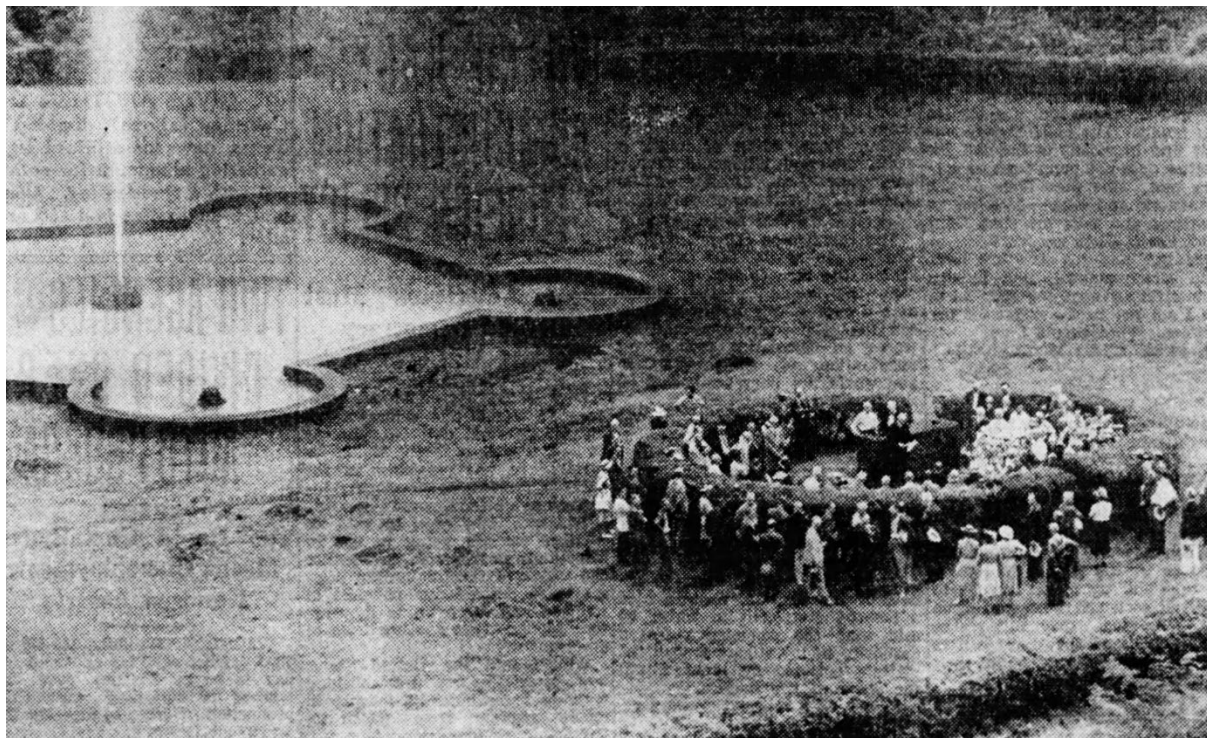
⁵³ McDowell County Register of Deeds Book 47, page 388.

⁵⁴ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 34-36.

⁵⁵ Langdon Oppermann, "Railway Clerks' Mountain Home" National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Winston-Salem, NC, 1999, 5-11.

which included a three-story seasonal hotel, boarding house for railroad employees, nine-hole golf course, regular entertainment, and extensive orchards, thrived for more than a decade before fire destroyed the hotel in 1926. The state built a highway over the mountains in the late 1920s three miles to the southwest at Gillespie Gap, bypassing Altapass and furthering its decline.⁵⁶

Andrews Geyser, while unique in many respects, was at the time of its construction the second monument dedicated to a prominent individual in the region. In 1896, George W. Pack funded a stone obelisk to be erected in honor of Zebulon B. Vance in Asheville. Vance, a Buncombe County native who died in 1894, served three terms as governor of North Carolina and later as U.S. senator. The Vance Monument became a central landmark and symbol for the city due, in part, to its non-figural representation and strong visual form. Designed by prominent local architect Richard Sharp Smith, the Vance Monument came early in the memorialization campaign that swept the state in the early twentieth century and resulted in numerous monuments placed on courthouse squares and in other public spaces.⁵⁷



"Honor Col. Andrews' Memory," *The Asheville Citizen*, July 24, 1941, 5

The newly fashioned Andrews Geyser continued to be popular sight for Southern Railway passengers in the twentieth century, although the novelty of the fountain appears to have diminished in its second incarnation. Southern Railway promoted the restoration of the fountain through its published brochures, and newspaper articles appeared regularly describing

⁵⁶ Judy Carson and Terry McKinney, *Altapass* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 7-8, 50-52.

⁵⁷ Bishir, et al, *A Guide*, 265.

the beauty of the site while recounting its connection to the construction of the railroad.⁵⁸ The loss of the hotel meant that the geyser became primarily a visual landmark, viewed in passing, although the site attracted visitors.⁵⁹ The road to the geyser remained unpaved until the 1970s, but descriptions of the site noted “there is parking space for a car or two.”⁶⁰ Ten months after the geyser resumed operation, C. C. Hodges, superintendent of the Southern Railway, had trees cut and cleared away so that passengers could have uninterrupted views of the fountain.⁶¹ A hedge was planted to encircle the two-acre tract purchased by George Baker for the new geyser basin, and a smaller hedge encircled the stone bench monument to Col. Andrews. The promise of perpetual maintenance, however, appears to have been flexible. In 1931, Alexander Sprunt Jr. of Charleston, South Carolina, wrote the *Asheville Citizen* to express dismay about the unkempt and neglected condition of the grounds around the geyser. He indicated that the appearance of the site had been declining for several years, but at the time of his letter the area had reached a “disgusting state.”⁶²

Andrews Geyser remained a notable landmark through the twentieth century even as passenger rail service began to decline. A ceremony at the site in 1941 celebrated the 100th anniversary of Col. Andrews’ birth and drew a crowd of 125 people. R. B. Pegram of Atlanta, who had worked for Southern Railway under Col. Andrews and now served as vice-president of the company, spoke at length at the ceremony about Andrews’ life and work. Special excursion trains ran through the 1950s and 1960s, touring passengers through the region to enjoy the scenic vistas and natural beauty of the mountains. As passenger service dwindled due to increasing reliance on buses, air travel, and personal automobiles, Southern Railway’s freight service rose. In 1963, the Swannanoa Tunnel was retrofitted accommodate diesel locomotives and larger freight cars.⁶³

By the early 1970s, Andrews Geyser had been largely abandoned by the Southern Railway and left to deteriorate. Locally, efforts began among Old Fort’s leaders and residents to reclaim the site and resurrect the geyser. The site was wildly overgrown, the water no longer flowing, and the basin full of mud and debris. The Southern Railway essentially abdicated its

⁵⁸ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 77-80; “Beautiful Andrews Geyser Is Tribute to Railroad Pioneer,” *The Asheville Citizen*, January 9, 1922, 5.

⁵⁹ In the 1930s, a rustic lodge was built on Round Knob, perched above the geyser approximately 650 feet to the northwest. Southern Railway executives reportedly built the lodge a mountain retreat. The lodge, which was subsequently operated as an inn, stands on a separate privately owned parcel and is currently used as a private residence. “Round Knob Lodge and Railroad History,” Swannanoa Valley Museum and History Center, September 20, 2016, <https://www.history.swannanoavalleymuseum.org/tour-round-knob-lodges-historic-haunted-railroad-history/>, accessed May 27, 2022.

⁶⁰ Hoyt McAfee, “Andrews’ Geyser Near Old Fort Is Popular W.N.C. Show Place,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, December 19, 1937, D4.

⁶¹ “Old Fort Matters,” *Marion Progress*, October 10, 1912, 3.

⁶² “The People’s Forum,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, September 27, 1931, 5D; “Andrews Geyser,” *Asheville Citizen*, September 28, 1931, 4A.

⁶³ “Col. Andrews Eulogized at Impressive Ceremony,” *Asheville Citizen*, July 24, 1941, 1; “The Geyser in Royal Gorge,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, August 15, 1948, 8B; Old Trudge, “An ‘Old 78’ Color Party,” *The State*, vol. 24, no. 8 (September 8, 1956), 13; “Special Train to Bring 650 Visitors Sunday,” *The Asheville Citizen*, May 24, 1968, 15; Sloan Coleman, “Railroad Overcame War, Poverty, Scalawags,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, January 26, 1969, 14-15.

responsibility to honor the terms of Baker's deed, which led to the Town of Old Fort requesting, and receiving, the deed to Andrews Geyser on July 3, 1975.⁶⁴

A community-wide campaign to reclaim the property and repair the geyser basin continued in earnest through the late summer and early fall of 1975. Heavy equipment dredged mud and silt from the small lake that fed the geyser. The iron drainage gate, inoperable for many years, had to be removed from the dam with dynamite. The pieces were repaired and reassembled, and the gate reinstalled. The basin was cleaned, the overgrown site cleared, and grass seed planted. A small amount of water flowed through the winter to keep the pipes from freezing. Picnic tables were placed in the newly created park. Governor James Holshouser interceded to ensure that Mill Creek Road was paved. In May 1976, the Town of Old Fort celebrated the restored Andrews Geyser and dedicated the site as a municipal park.⁶⁵



"Round Knob Celebration," *The Asheville Citizen*, May 17, 1976, 1.

In 2011, as the geyser's 100th anniversary approached, the Town once again needed to address the maintenance of the fountain. The five umbrella fountains in the lobes of the geyser basin had been removed in the late 1970s or early 1980s soon after the rededication, leaving only the central spout. The reservoir, now smaller, required dredging to revive the flow of

⁶⁴ McDowell County Register of Deeds Book 247, page 635; Steve Little, "Symbol of New Life," 4-5; "Andrew's Geyser To Be Restored As It Was," *Black Mountain News*, August 14, 1975, 1.

⁶⁵ Rosalind Grier, "Thar' She Blows!" *The State*, vol. 43, no. 7 (December 1975): 20-23; Little, "Symbol of New Life," 4-5; Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 50-51.

water to the geyser. Southern Railway's blueprints of the pipeline were located by Steve Little in 2012 at a railroading museum in Georgia, which confirmed that the pipe typically had been laid closely adjacent to the railroad tracks. The proximity of the pipe to the tracks meant that repair or replacement of the line within the railroad right-of-way was unlikely due to expense and potential disruption of service. Town officials proposed digging a well and installing a pump within the two-acre tract surrounding the basin so that a dependable supply of water could be provided, but the plan was never realized. The exposed sections of the water supply line continue to be maintained and repaired as best as possible although the rugged conditions of the water line right-of-way present a constant challenge.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Little, *Andrews Geyser*, 52-54.

Evaluation

For purposes of compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, Andrews Geyser (MC0088) is **eligible** for the National Register of Historic Places. Andrews Geyser is the second iteration of the Round Knob fountain built in 1883 as an attraction and visual landmark for passengers of the Western North Carolina Railroad (WNCRR) and guests of the Round Knob Hotel. After the hotel burned in 1903, the fountain fell into disrepair before wealthy New York banker George F. Baker funded the construction of a new fountain on a new site in 1911, which he dedicated to his friend and influential railroad officer Col. Alexander B. Andrews of North Carolina. Andrews Geyser remained a well-known sight along the Southern Railway even as passenger service between Old Fort and Asheville declined through the twentieth century. The geyser again fell into disuse in the early 1970s until advocates in Old Fort secured rights to the property and restored the fountain site as a municipal park. Andrews Geyser is considered eligible along with the water supply system that impounds and delivers water to the geyser basin. The dam, reservoir, and pipeline make up the other original components of Andrews Geyser. The dam and reservoir are located further up the mountain approximately one mile to the southwest and feed the water supply line that generally follows the course of Long Branch and Mill Creek to the geyser basin.

Andrews Geyser generally retains integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association although aspects of the property's overall integrity have been diminished by gradual alterations and material changes over the years. The tall hedge defining the two-acre tract donated by George F. Baker for the geyser site has been removed. The smaller umbrella fountains in the five lobes of the geyser basin were removed in the 1970s during the renovation of the geyser. Additional memorials, monuments, and amenities have been added to the property since becoming a municipal park in the late 1970s, though they do not affect the function or purpose of the geyser. Damage to the water supply line, which is subject of the proposed project, has been an ongoing issue necessitating multiple repairs and replacement sections of the pipeline.

Andrews Geyser is **eligible** for the National Register under Criterion A (event). *To be eligible under Criterion A, a property must retain integrity and must be associated with a specific event marking an important moment in American pre-history or history or a pattern of events or historic trend that made a significant contribution to the development of a community, a state, or the nation. Furthermore, a property must have existed at the time and be documented to be associated with the events. Finally, a property's specific association must be important as well.* Andrews Geyser was a popular attraction and visual landmark for railroad passengers through McDowell County from the 1880s until the end of passenger rail service in 1975. Originally built in conjunction with the Round Knob Hotel, the fountain made use of the area's topography to create the gravity-fed water system responsible for the geyser effect that delighted passengers and visitors. Billed as the highest fountain in the world, having achieved a plume measured at 268 feet in height, the fountain was promoted heavily in tourism brochures for both the railroad and the western North Carolina region. The railroad connection through Old Fort to Asheville helped establish the region as a renowned tourist destination and health resort and cemented tourism as a key component of the local economy. Following the demise of the hotel

in 1903, the fountain was rebuilt in 1911 and dedicated in honor of Col. A. B. Andrews, who had been instrumental in completing the railroad. Although Andrews' tenure as president of the WNCRR bore no connection to the construction of the railroad through McDowell County, his influence on the completion of the rail system in western North Carolina, and the importance of the railroad to the economic growth and development of the region, is undeniable. The geyser dedicated to Col. Andrews is significant for its associations with the monumental feat of railroad construction across the Blue Ridge Mountains and the importance of tourism to the regional economy. Andrews Geyser is a rare man-made attraction built to delight and inspire visitors to the area. The property appears eligible for the National Register under Criterion A in the area of entertainment/recreation.

Andrews Geyser is **not eligible** for the National Register under Criterion B (person). *For a property to be eligible for significance under Criterion B, it must retain integrity and 1) be associated with the lives of persons significant in our past, i.e. individuals whose activities are demonstrably important within a local, state or national historic context; 2) be normally associated with a person's productive life, reflecting the time period when he/she achieved significance, and 3) should be compared to other associated properties to identify those that best represent the person's historic contributions. Furthermore, a property is not eligible if its only justification for significance is that it was owned or used by a person who is or was a member of an identifiable profession, class, or social or ethnic group.* Nationally prominent banker George F. Baker revived the original Round Knob fountain in 1911 by having the fountain rebuilt on a new location and dedicating the geyser to his friend and fellow railroad executive Col. Alexander B. Andrews, who oversaw the completion of the WNCRR in the 1880s and early 1890s. The commemorative structure is neither the best nor only representative property associated with the significant contributions of either man. As such, it does not appear that Andrews Geyser is eligible under Criterion B.

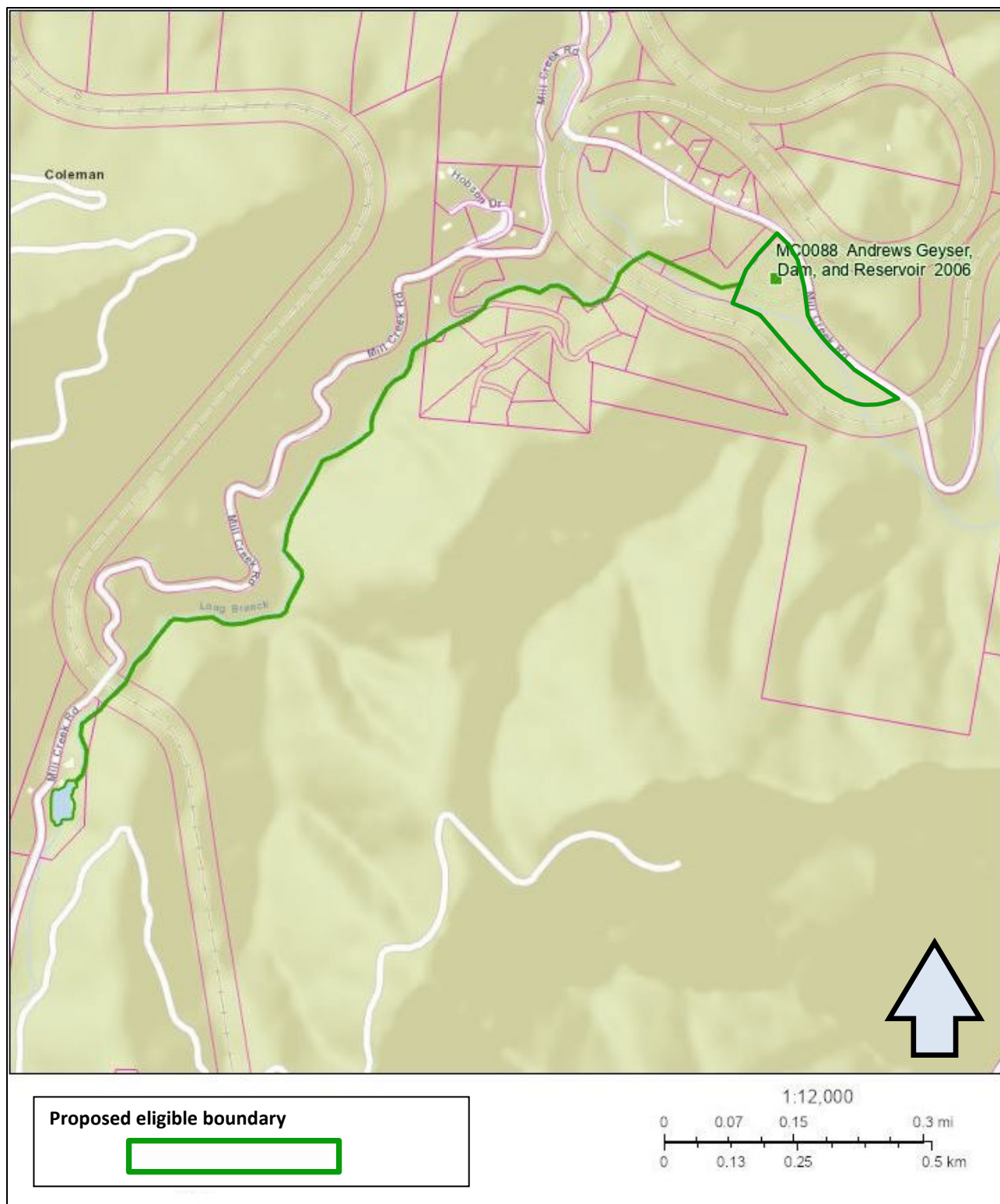
Andrews Geyser is **not eligible** for the National Register under Criterion C (design/construction). *For a property to be eligible under this criterion, it must retain integrity and either 1) embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; 2) represent the work of a master; 3) possess high artistic value; or 4) represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.* Andrews Geyser is a man-made attraction and commemorative property built in 1911 along the Southern Railway to recreate the Round Knob fountain built by the WNCRR in the 1880s. The original fountain and subsequent geyser, which was built and dedicated to railroad executive Col. A. B. Andrews, served to delight rail passengers on the arduous ascent of the Blue Ridge Mountains separating McDowell and Buncombe counties, where the looping configuration of tracks provided multiple views of the spout. Andrews Geyser consists of a five-sided concrete basin and water supply system designed to propel a jet of water more than 200 feet in the air. In addition to its central spout, the geyser basin was originally built with smaller umbrella fountains located in each of the round lobes at the corners of the basin. The geyser fell into disuse during the second half of the twentieth century and spurred an extensive rehabilitation effort by the local community in the 1970s that ultimately removed the smaller umbrella fountains. The reservoir, dam, and water supply line have undergone a number of repairs over the years, including the replacement of original cast iron pipe in multiple locations with modern PVC pipe. Despite the

novelty of its application, the hydraulic and engineering principles governing the design of the geyser were common practice and found on water-powered mills and hydroelectric stations across the region. Due to the cumulative alterations to the basin design and water supply, material changes to the system, and application of common hydraulic principles, Andrews Geyser does not appear to possess any special architectural or engineering significance to be eligible for the National Register under Criterion C.

Andrews Geyser is **not eligible** for the National Register under Criterion D (potential to yield information). *For a property to be eligible under Criterion D, it must meet two requirements: 1) the property must have, or have had, information to contribute to our understanding of human history or pre-history, and 2) the information must be considered important.* Built in 1911, it is unlikely that the surviving Andrews Geyser basin and associated resources could contribute significant information pertaining to building technology or historical documentation not otherwise accessible from other extant resources and written records. However, a separate archaeological investigation of the site has been prepared as part of the subject project and contains a full evaluation of the property's archaeological potential.

Boundary Description and Justification

The proposed boundary of Andrews Geyser encompasses the full extent of the tax parcel containing the geyser basin and covering approximately 10 acres [PIN 0730-77-0565], as well as the water supply line, dam, and reservoir that complete the system. The property boundary for around the geyser basin follows the parcel lines that adjoin highway right-of-way to the east and northeast on Mill Creek Road (SR 1407) and railroad right-of-way to the south and southwest. The western and northwestern boundary follows an unnamed tributary of Mill Creek along its course from SR 1407 to where it empties into Mill Creek. The boundary includes all of the property forming the park around the geyser basin owned by the Town of Old Fort. In addition to the geyser basin, the boundary includes additional monuments, memorials, and park structures located on the property. Beyond the 10-acre parcel owned by the Town of Old Fort, the boundary follows the water supply line and its easements to its source approximately one mile to the southwest. The concrete dam and reservoir that feed the water line are located on private property [PIN 0730-24-6645] at 3895 Mill Creek Road and encompass less than an acre. The route of the water supply line generally follows the course of Long Branch to its confluence with Mill Creek, which it crosses and then continues in a fairly direct course to the geyser basin.



Boundary Map – Andrews Geyser, Mill Creek Road (SR 1407), Old Fort, NC
(Source: McDowell County GIS)

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