

MOUNTAIN HERITAGE

The Gilmer County Genealogical Society, Inc.

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The Appalachian Tradition of “Old Christmas”

Catherine Seiberling Pond

*Catherine Seiberling Pond has written about home, place, and rural life for national magazines and other publications and is a regular contributor to www.RethinkRural.com. She has lived on her family's Kentucky ridge farm since moving south from New England in 2008—and where she learned the correct pronunciation of "Appalachia"! In 2007, she wrote *The Pantry: Its History and Modern Uses* [Gibbs Smith], an illustrated design history of the American pantry that is still available on her website. As a marketing specialist (both remote and onsite) for the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska, she finds the combination of vocation and locales to be the best of all rural worlds and enjoys driving across the United States several times a year. Find more at www.CatherinePond.com.*

Published with permission from Rethink:Rural—an online blog dedicated to rural life published by Rayonier Places + Properties. The blog celebrates the virtues of country living and helps those who are searching for a rural lifestyle to find the answers they need and practical information on how to buy land and shape it to suit your dreams.





The Appalachian Tradition of “Old Christmas” *-continued-*

The expression “Old Christmas” perhaps conjures a sense of Christmases past or something out of Victorian England. In reality, it is a term for a tradition which is now, indeed, of Christmas past: that is, the southern Appalachian custom of celebrating “Old Christmas” on January 6, the Feast of Epiphany.

This was entirely for calendar reasons but soon became its own custom after December 25 was considered “New Christmas.”



In 1752 the British Parliament voted to change the Julian calendar, from Julius Caesar’s reign in 45 BC, to the Gregorian calendar used in certain Catholic countries. This is the calendar we still use today. However, the Julian calendar added too many leap days which, by the 1700s, was eleven days behind the sun. Thus, in Britain and the American colonies, September 2 became September 14 overnight with the time adjustment.

By the 1800s, because the Julian calendar kept falling behind the Gregorian calendar, “Old Christmas” actually fell on January 6 — which is coincidentally, on the church calendar, the Feast of Epiphany when the three wisemen visited Jesus. As often happens with governmental policy, some were unhappy that Christmas could just be arbitrarily moved.



The Appalachian Tradition of “Old Christmas”

-continued-

As related to Appalachia, when the Scots-Irish immigrated here, they were either too isolated after bringing the custom with them, to know of the change or just didn't want to adapt.

Thus, “Old Christmas” was widely celebrated in deepest Appalachia by the 1800s and in some parts even into this century.



Yet, the new Christmas, on December 25, began twelve days of celebration, still practiced in Great Britain today and known as the “Twelve Days of Christmas” lasting through Epiphany.

Some of the Appalachian traditions included “serenading” from house to house, which consisted of visiting, singing, storytelling, and even dancing. Guns were often fired and bonfires set, too — all to ward off evil spirits.



The Appalachian Tradition of “Old Christmas”

-continued-

Folklore claimed that the animals spoke at midnight on January 5, Old Christmas Eve, after the Holy Spirit came to earth and the elder bushes bloomed granting them that power.

Old Christmas day itself, January 6, became a non-work day for many, like a Sunday, with church-going and family time. Like many mountain traditions in the modern age, most people have not heard about, or celebrate, Old Christmas.

Lawton Brooks, who was born in the early 1900s and interviewed in *A Foxfire Christmas: Appalachian Memories and Traditions* recounted this:

"A lot of people celebrated both Christmas and Old Christmas — you know, the 12 days after December 25th. Some of the old people took all those days off for Christmas. Generally, everybody would get out and go places and stay with their friends and have a big time for 3 or 4 days."



There seems to have been a solemnity to Old Christmas with church, quieter family meals, Bible readings and stockings filled with nuts and fruit. The emphasis of the season was on family and friends and sharing food and fellowship together.

Fresh game, preserved fruits, and baked goods were prepared in advance and shared. Mincemeat, made with fruit and game, was also popular and another custom brought from Great Britain. The custom of fruit cake, prepared with whiskey, was also brought by Scots-Irish settlers to America.

Decoration was simple and relied upon natural plants that grew in the mountains: holly, berries, evergreens, and pinecones — even accounts of sycamore seeds wrapped in foil liners, and surely mistletoe shot down from high branches. Christmas trees were generally cedar and strewn with cut-out paper decorations, yarn dolls, or cookie ornaments.



The Appalachian Tradition of “Old Christmas”
-continued-



Gifts were handmade toys, warm knitted garments for winter, or other useful and home-made things.

Several accounts speak of an Irish tradition that placed a lighted candle in a window on Christmas Eve to welcome Mary and Joseph as they searched for a place to have their baby and take shelter. This welcoming spirit, and custom, lingers today in homes across the South and around the country during the holiday season.

Reflections of a quieter and traditional holiday season seem a wonderful balm to the materialism of our modern times and a cozy anecdote to the reality that so many of us are isolated by circumstance this year.

May our days be merry and blessed and our new year bright!



*All photos courtesy of
Catherine S. Pond.*

catherinepond.com



The President's Post

John Davis

It has been my pleasure to serve as your President of the Gilmer County Genealogical Society. The job was made much easier by the support of a dedicated board who has brought the membership such a fine quality program.

We are currently involved in a search for new board members to replace the ones who are leaving their positions. Please consider joining the board for 2025. At this writing, we still need a President and Vice President/Program Chairperson.

We will have our annual Holiday Gathering next month on Saturday, December 14, and will also be installing our 2025 Officers. Start choosing your favorite recipes to prepare and bring to our table.

Looking forward to 2025, we have scheduled an exciting program for January 18 about some of our earliest Gilmer County families. We will continue to develop programs of wide interest to our group and, as always, request your input for topics.

This is the time of the year that we renew our membership and our pledge to continue to honor our ancestors and learn more about their remarkable achievements. Please consider encouraging your friends and family to become members, whatever the age. It's never too early to learn about your origin.

As I say goodbye as your President, it is comforting to know that I will be leaving our organization with capable and dedicated leaders. Stay safe...



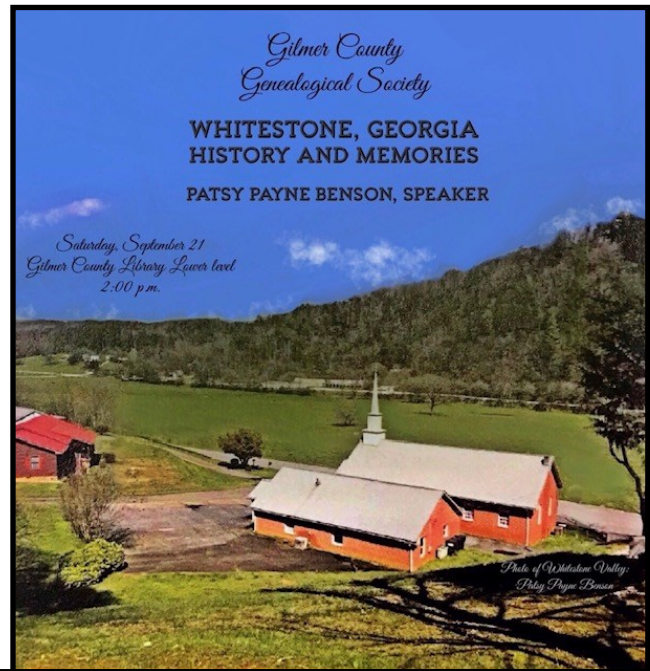
Blue Christmas (2017)
Original Painting by Ellijay artist Jan Kornegay Dappen (1951)
(from the Art Collection of Barbara J. Dover)



Fourth Quarter Highlights 2024



Patsy Payne Benson



The Gilmer County Genealogical Society held its September meeting on Saturday, September 21, 2024, at the Gilmer County Library. Patsy Payne Benson, emeritus professor and author, was the speaker for the monthly program, and she shared photos and highlights based on the title of her book, *Whitestone, Georgia: History and Memories*.

Her talk for GCGSI included Whitestone's early history with the Cherokee nation as well as the development of the community through the completion of the railroad and Whitestone Post Office. The naming of Whitestone; building of the first post office and Whitestone Baptist Church; and the job opportunities created by the various mining companies and supporting businesses were shared. The tragedy of the Whitestone Flood of 1938, one of the top ten national news events of that year, was discussed and photos of the flood were shown.



See Fourth Quarter Highlights 2024, page 8.



Fourth Quarter Highlights 2024
-continued-

Gilmer County Genealogical Society

Unlock the Power of Full-Text Searching for Historical Records

A FamilySearch Learning Resource

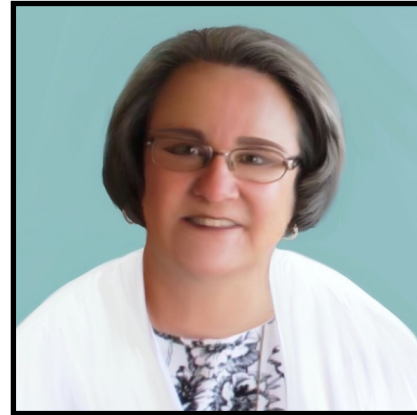
FamilySearch

Unleashing the Power of AI for Family History, a Hands-on Workshop

Rebecca Holt Amerson, facilitator

Saturday, September 28, 2024
Gilmer County Library Upstairs Meeting Room
10:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon

Please bring your laptop, but if you do not have a laptop, bring your library card to check out a Chromebook, and bring a thumb drive to save your work.



Rebecca Holt Amerson

GCGSI sponsored a hands-on workshop, *Unleashing the Power of AI for Family History*, on Saturday, September 28, 2024. Rebecca Amerson facilitated the workshop and guided attendees in the use of FamilySearch's full-text search.

FamilySearch.org announced at their RootsWeb in March of 2024 that they were partnering with Ancestry.com to test the power of AI to allow full-text searching of old records. These records that were originally written in long-hand would use AI to transcribe them to a more legible print and they are then available for keyword searching "on demand."

The workshop provided an opportunity for attendees to experiment with FamilySearch's full-text searching feature and its use of AI in real time.



See Fourth Quarter Highlights 2024, page 9.



Fourth Quarter Highlights 2024

-continued-



On Tuesday, November 12, 2024, GCGSI members Brenda Cochran, Neva Kelaher, Susan Noles, and Anita Summers gathered at the Gilmer County Library and got a head start on Christmas tree decorating as by participating in the annual Festival of Trees. The tree reflected times gone by with the greeting of "Merry Christmas, One and All!"

The Gilmer County Library will celebrate the season with its Holiday Open House that features a stroll through the Festival of Trees on Monday, December 2, 2024 from 5:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m.



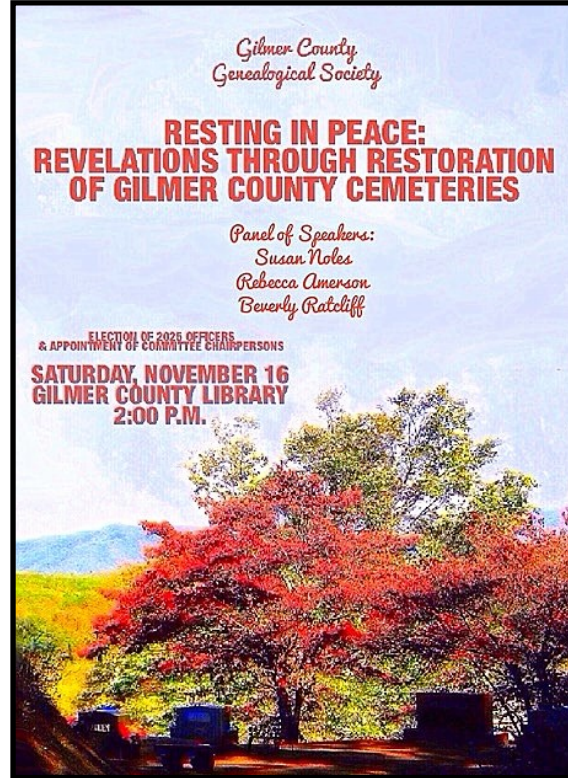
GCGSI Tree Designers (from Left to Right:)
Neva Kelaher, Susan Noles,
Anita Summers, and Brenda Cochran



Fourth Quarter Highlights 2024 -continued-



Cemetery Preservationists (From Left to Right:)
Beverly Ratcliff, Susan Noles, Rebecca Amerson



The Gilmer County Genealogical Society held its November meeting on Saturday, November 16, 2024, and its program, *Resting in Peace: Revelations through Restoration of Gilmer County Cemeteries*, featured a panel of speakers that shared a variety of information about restoration projects, cleaning and repairing grave markers, researching details about those interred in Gilmer County cemeteries, and acts of respect for those who are now resting in peace. The panel consisted of GCGSI members Susan Noles, Rebecca Amerson, and Beverly Ratcliff.

Susan Noles shared the process of the restoration of The Rose Cemetery, an African-American cemetery on the east side of Gilmer County. Rebecca Amerson shared how she researches the individuals and families interred in the local cemeteries. Beverly Ratcliff shared different cleaning and preservation projects that she has undertaken. These ladies' work gives the honor and respect much deserved of those that came before us.



Photos for Fourth Quarter Highlights
submitted by Barbara J. Dover, Susan Noles,
Rebecca Burrell, and Rebecca Amerson.



Mayflower and More Books for Research



The Gilmer County Genealogical Society donated several books to the Gilmer County Library in September, 2024 in order to provide more sources for patrons to research their family history. Shown to the left with the donated books are Barbara J. Dover, GCGSI Vice President and Publications Committee Chairperson and Alex Thomerson, Manager of the Gilmer County Library. The donated books were *The Mayflower Families Series Index in 3 Parts: Part 1 (A-F, Part 2 (G-P,) and Part 3 (Q-Z); The Descendants of James Cole of Plymouth, 1633; and Tracing Your Ancestors Using the UK Historical Timeline, A Guide for Family Historians.*

The Gilmer County Genealogical Society made another donation of books in October, 2024 to the Gilmer County Library to be used as resources for researching family history. Shown to the right with the donated books are (L to R:) Barbara J. Dover, GCGS Vice President and Publications, Publicity, and Program Committees' Chairperson; Alex Thomerson, Manager of the Gilmer County Library; and Susan Noles, GCGS Treasurer and Membership Committee Chairperson. The books donated were: *Mayflower Families through Five Generations (Silver Books:)* Volume Six~Stephen Hopkins; Volume Seventeen~Isaac Allentown; Volume 22~William Bradford; and Volume 23, Parts 1,2,3~John Howland; *Settlement of the Pendleton District, South Carolina;* and *Permanent Roll of Registered Voters of Haywood County, North Carolina 1902.*



GCGSI plans to purchase more volumes of the Mayflower Families through Five Generations Series (Silver Books) for donation to the Gilmer County Library. Please email us with requests of volumes published in the Mayflower Families' Silver Books.



Fourth Quarter Bulletin Board



*The Magpie (1868-1869)
Claude Monet (1840-1896)*

December 2024

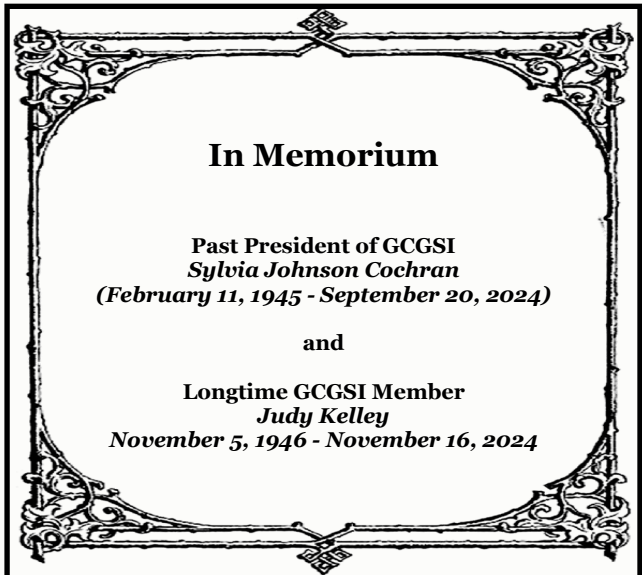
- **Monday, December 2**
Holiday Open House and Festival of Trees
Gilmer County Library
5: 00 - 7:00 p.m.
- **Saturday, December 14** - GCGSI Monthly Meeting
Merry Christmas to One and All: GCGSI Holiday Luncheon & Installation of 2025 Board
Gilmer County Library - 12:00 noon
Protein, beverages, and paper products provided by GCGSI; bring your favorite side dish and/or dessert to share.
- **Saturday, December 21** - Winter Solstice
- **Wednesday, December 25** - Christmas

January 2025

- **Wednesday, January 1** - Happy New Year
- **Monday, January 20** - Martin Luther King Day
- **Saturday, January 18** - GCGSI Monthly Meeting
One Family's Journey from Charist, France to Ellijay, Georgia
Speaker: Ellen Canup Hale
Gilmer County Library Lower Level—2:00 p.m.

February 2025

- **Sunday, February 2** - Groundhog Day
- **Friday, February 14** - Happy Valentine's Day
- **Saturday, February 15** - GCGSI Monthly Meeting
Program and Speaker T. B. A.
Gilmer County Library Lower Level - 2:00
- **Monday, February 17** - Random Acts of Kindness Day



In Memoriam

Past President of GCGSI
Sylvia Johnson Cochran
(February 11, 1945 - September 20, 2024)

and

Longtime GCGSI Member
Judy Kelley
November 5, 1946 - November 16, 2024

2024 GCGSI Officers and Committee Chairpersons

President - John Davis
 Vice President and Program, Publication, & Publicity Committees' Chairperson - Barbara J. Dover
 Corresponding Secretary & Historian - Rebecca Burrell
 Recording Secretary - Anita Summers
 Treasurer & Membership Committee Chairperson - Susan Noles
 First Families of Gilmer County Committee Co-Chairpersons - Eurilla Hyatt and Patricia Henson
 Events Committee Chairperson - Brenda Cochran



Mountain Heritage Newsletter
 Published by Barbara J. Dover
 Gilmer County Genealogical Society, Inc.
 Vice President and Program, Publications, and
 Publicity Committees' Chairperson



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Website: www.gcgsi.org

Remember the days of old,
consider the years of many generations;
ask thy Father, and he will shew thee;
thy elders, and they will tell you.
Deuteronomy 32:7

Gilmer County Genealogical Society, Inc. Membership Form

We are a non-profit all volunteer organization whose aim is to promote and preserve family history. Our goal is to have all necessary tools available in the Gilmer County Library's Family Research Center to aide you in your search. Please mail your membership form and dues to **Gilmer County Genealogical Society, Inc.; P O. Box 919; Ellijay, GA 30540; ATTN: GCGSI Treasurer.**

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES:

- Single: **\$10.00**
- Family (including unmarried children in home:) **\$15.00**
- Student (ages 13-17:) **\$5.00**

PATRON: \$50 CORPORATE: \$100 SPONSOR: \$250 BENEFACTOR: \$500

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY

Name(s) _____

Mailing Address: _____

Home Telephone: # _____ Mobile Telephone: # _____

Primary Email Address: _____

Family Surnames for Research _____

Date: _____

Amount: _____


The Gilmer County Genealogical Society, Inc.
P. O. Box 919
Ellijay, GA 30540



The Gilmer County Genealogical Society, Inc.

Page 14

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We're online! 
www.gcgisi.org
Contact email: gilmergenealogy@gmail.com

What Is Available Online?

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- Officers and Chairpersons
- Book Order Forms
- 1834 and 1840 Census
- Contact Information
- GCGSI Newsletters

