

“Send for the Smith Brothers!”

By 1738, the colonial government had seen enough, and took decisive action. It was decreed that *“any person who within ten years shall settle upon the Roanoke River, on the south branch (Dan) above the fork; and on the north branch above the mouth of Little Roanoke and all lands lying between shall be exempt from all levies (taxes) for ten years . . . and that letters of naturalization be granted to any alien settling there, upon taking the oath of parliament.”*

These “aliens” included Quakers from Pennsylvania, who had fled persecution in England to settle in the New World. Among these intrepid souls were Daniel and Gideon Smith, brothers for whom the Mountain, and eventually by extension, the Lake were named. Just like many of us, they were from ‘out of state’, and they came here to escape high taxes. In 1740, the Smith brothers laid claim to thousands of acres, and made their homes here.

Other early settlers were Scotch-Irish and German, again coming by way of Pennsylvania, and many of those family names are still common here. But many who came for the tax break were from Eastern Virginia. One name that stands out is that of John Pigg, of Amelia County, who, in 1741, settled on the south fork of the Staunton river, opposite Snow Creek. Since this south fork had yet to be named, we now know it as the Pigg River.

Although the 10-year tax-free period is long-since expired, newcomers to Smith Mountain Lake still enjoy the benefit of relatively low taxes, even when compared to places as close as Roanoke and Lynchburg.

Pittsylvania County, which includes lands originally settled by the Smith brothers, owns the dubious distinction of being the area’s real estate tax rate leader, with a stated 2016 rate of \$0.59 per \$100 of assessed value. This rate is announced on June 30 of each year, and recent trends show the rate skewing upward.

Where the moon shines brightly

Franklin County, formed in 1785 from parts of Bedford and Henry Counties, was named after Benjamin Franklin, one of the few Counties in Virginia named for someone other than a figure prominent in Virginian or British history.

During Prohibition, Franklin County earned the dubious distinction of “Moonshine Capital of the World”, and rumors persist as to when or if that particular mantle of leadership was ever truly shed. Suffice it to say that the County’s Chamber of Commerce still proudly broadcasts the title as part of its PR campaigns.

Up From Slavery

You may have noticed that in Franklin County, Rte 122 carries the more prosaic moniker of “Booker T. Washington Highway”, a mouthful to say, and possible contributor to carpal tunnel syndrome for those who address envelopes. Just a stone’s throw from the Westlake Business District on Rte 122, you’ll find Booker T. Washington National Monument. It is the birthplace of one of the most dominant figures in the history of race relations. Washington was the son of a white slave owner father and a black slave mother, who was freed at the age of 9 following President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

Visitors may tour preserved portions of the 224 acre tobacco farm where Booker T. Washington was born, just minutes by car from Hales Ford Bridge.

To Kill A Chicken-bird

Franklin County is also home to a somewhat less-distinguished, albeit popular character: The Smith Mountain Lake Chicken. To be more precise, an 8-foot tall fiberglass statue of a rooster that was originally installed in the parking lot of Lake Plaza shopping center as an advertising gimmick. The center’s owner, Joe Altadonna, had placed The Chicken there as a means of promoting his “Safari Mini-Golf” course, which features similar statues of beasts of various descriptions.

Altadonna’s use of The Chicken was declared a violation of local sign ordinances, and a veritable brouhaha ensued; The Chicken’s supporters rallied, and its opponents were left with egg on their faces.

Franklin County ranks second of the three counties in terms of real estate taxes, with a 2016 rate of \$0.55 per \$100 of assessed value.

Their finest hour

While rich in history dating back to colonial days, Bedford County is especially remembered for contributions it made during the D-Day invasion. In all, 23 Bedford soldiers lost their lives in the Normandy campaign. The total Bedford County population in 1944 was around 3200; thus, proportionally, Bedford suffered the greatest D-Day losses of any county in the United States. This led to the act of Congress that established the location of the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford County, Less than a half hour’s drive on 122 from Hales Ford Bridge.

A bit further away, but well worth the trip, is Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest. This site was a favorite retreat of Mr. Jefferson, with its octagonal house and bountiful, roaming lands. Visitors today can see what life was like in Jefferson’s time, thanks to painstaking restorations that are still on-going. Events of note include scheduled visits from a Colonial Williamsburg Foundation actor in the guise of Thomas Jefferson on a given date in history. Performances conclude with audience participation question-and-answer sessions that are quite memorable.

Of auspicious note is Bedford County’s tax rate, which is the lowest of the three counties, weighing in at \$0.52 per \$100 of assessed value. It is worth mentioning here that all three counties assess at 100% of actual value, and that even at 59 cents, Pittsylvania’s tax rate is a lot more attractive than those of the nearest surrounding cities.

Announcements of property tax reassessment usually cause a bit of confusion. Generally, counties in Virginia are required by law to reassess real property values every four years. As property values increase, this normally results in a corresponding drop in the rate, and vice versa. Therefore, your actual property taxes due will not necessarily increase proportionally.

For example, in most cases, a reassessment must include an adjustment of the tax rate so that the projected revenues will not exceed 101% of the previous year’s budget. This is to ensure that the county cannot reassess real property for the purpose of producing a windfall at taxpayer’s expense.

On that happy note, we conclude this tour of our historic region, and encourage you to enrich yourselves by exploring, reading, and visiting the many points of interest that surround Smith Mountain Lake, the Jewel of the Blue Ridge.