

THE JONES ACADEMY, BUFFALO ACADEMY, AND BUFFALO SCHOOL

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Buffalo Gap is the old name for the tight passage of State 610 between the eastern end of the Lonesome Pine Country Club and the Country Club Estates subdivision, at the watershed between Beaver Dam Creek and Butcher's Fork. The community around it was called 'Buffalo', and it contained a school and a church.

The first school in what is now Wise County, Virginia was located within the Buffalo Community, even though it was in Lee County at the time. Through the years it was located in three buildings. The first was called the Jones Academy or School, and the last was the Buffalo Academy or School. In between times the school was located within the Buffalo Primitive Baptist Church building, and it is not known today what the school was actually called at this point. The terms 'Jones Academy' and 'Buffalo Academy' are both used today to refer to the school when it was in its location in the church.

The land at the head of Powell Valley, and which contained all the above-mentioned schools, was within the grant LO 41-280 owned at the time by Patrick Hagan. This grant contained roughly 61,000 acres, but was flawed by an unspecified amount of land occupied by squatters. In addition, within its confines were 8,657 acres of "prior claims", whose locations were not completely identified in the larger grant. (A)

To the west of the Hagan grant lay the grant LO 27-56 of 1792 to Robert and William Preston, which overlay the Hagan grant by about a mile and a half, ending at Buffalo Gap. (B)

The date Isaiah Jones' settlement at the head of Powell Valley is undocumented. No one of this name ever got a land grant from the Commonwealth of Virginia. (C) No record of transfer of this property from some of the "prior claims" to him has been located. This would suggest that Jones was a squatter, a likelihood supported by an affidavit of Ray W. Robinette dated 1967 and a title analysis done in 1971 by attorney Don R. Pippin stating that Isaiah Jones' grandson, John H. Jones, had no title of record to the land, and possessed it by the law of 'adverse possession'.

However, Isaiah Jones resided here in 1846, the year he founded his "Jones Academy" on his land. (D) By tradition it was either a private subscription school, or was supported by the Three Forks Primitive Baptist Church, or its satellite, the Buffalo Gap Primitive Baptist Church. However, starting in 1810 the

Commonwealth of Virginia used the funds generated from the sale of tax delinquent real estate to support the schooling of indigent children. (E)

The head of Powell Valley was included into Wise County when it was formed in 1856. Isaiah Jones was appointed school commissioner of the Richmond District of Wise County (the Powell River watershed). (F) He no longer taught at the Jones School.

In 1858 perhaps 90% of the students in Wise County were deemed to have been indigent, and the Commonwealth paid tuition to the county of \$0.04 a day per indigent student. This included the former Jones Academy. (G)

Indeed, Isaiah had become a prominent citizen in Wise County. At the formation of the county he was appointed to the first grand jury. (H) During the Civil War he was sworn in as a member of the police force of the Richmond District, an office that made him immune to the Confederate draft. (I) He was described as having been the largest farmer in the county. (J)

The mets and bounds of Jones' farm are unknown, as there is no deed on record. By inference it included much of the head of Powell Valley east of Buffalo Gap. He changed his residence from his farm to the area near the mouth of the present High Knob Road in West Norton by 1857, next to his son Benjamin. (K)(L)

He owned a wool carding machine on Carding Machine Branch in Hoot Owl Hollow on State 610. (M) He and William (Flitter Bill) Richmond supervised the first route of the present 610 from Hoot Owl Hollow into the head of Powell Valley. (N)

The 1870 census has him living again on his land in Powell Valley, but he died in 1892 in Big Stone Gap, Va. He had been born in 1806 at Mouth-of-Wilson. (N) Most of the people there had migrated from the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina. (A)

The exact location of the Jones School remains disputed among interested folks. There are three locations that are believed by local historians to have been its site. The most commonly offered location is the site of the Buffalo School itself, which is a known location. (O)

The small flat north of State 610 from the mausoleum at Powell Valley Cemetery contained a small log building within it in living memory. (P) Bud Absher, a descendent of Jones, and former owner of the land where the cemetery is located, about 1980 told the author that this was the site of the Jones School. At the recent reunion of the students of the Buffalo School Nellie Poole Gilly, born 1907, told the assembly that she had attended all three versions of the school. She stated that the Jones Academy was "across the road from the mausoleum"(Q) This would have meant that the original school building was still in use about 1913.

There are a couple of problems with this location north of the mausoleum. The first problem is that it is located on land belonging to "Uncle" Billy Robinette, and not to any of the known fragments sold off of the Jones farm. However, at this point in time it is not known whether the Robinette farm was once owned by Isaiah Jones or not. Deeds before about 1900 either have not been located, or never existed.

Addison Stallard believes that the Jones School was located just north of the statues within Powell Valley Memorial Gardens cemetery. This was land known to have been owned by Jones. Mr. Stallard, however, never attended the Jones School. It is suggested that Mrs. Gilly, when she said that the school had been "across the road from the mausoleum" was referring to the road internal to the cemetery, and to the east of the mausoleum, thus making her statement compatible in a general way with Mr. Stallard's belief. (P)

It is unknown when the school moved to the Buffalo Church. The Buffalo School was opened in 1920, so the church had been in use before that. This leaves the window of opportunity for the school using the church building roughly 1908-1919. Another unconfirmed theory is that the Jones Academy housed the first three primary grades, and the Buffalo Church housed grades four through six, simultaneously. All six grades joined when the last school was opened sometime prior to 1918. An existing class photo dated in 1918 shows Mrs. Gilly as an eleven year old along with other recognizable children from the community.

The location of the church is well known. Bruce Robinette and his brother B. F. bought the land where it had been located, and Bruce remembers its foundation and steps being on a plateau within the northern side of Buffalo Gap. An entranceway to Country Club Estates, which was developed by Bruce and B. F., was cut into the plateau and the church site was destroyed in the process. (Q) This location places the church at the theoretical western boundary of the Jones land as it adjoined the tract of the Preston Brothers. (B)

Uncle Billy Robinette preached at the Buffalo Church. He lived to the north of the church in the valley of Butcher's Fork half way between State 610 and 612. He was a legendary evangelist, who travelled far and wide. He is remembered as having preached at all day meetings, with dinner on the ground. He kept a quart jar of clear liquid on his pulpit. As he wore down from the exertions of his preaching, he would reach for the jar and take a drink. It seemed to revive him, and his sermons stretched out further and further, even to the point where his speech was slurred. (Q) The Buffalo Church burned about 1939. (P)

The Buffalo School was a two roomed affair separated by a common hallway. It supported six grades, and was a feeder school for the East Stone Gap School. This school consolidated into the East Stone School in 1955, which consolidated into Powell Valley High School in 1959. The kindergarden through the seventh grades remained in the East Stone School until it burned in 1969. At this point it relocated

to the former county segregated Black school, Bland Combined School, in Big Stone Gap. This school was renamed the Carnes Middle School, and later became the Big Stone Gap Town Hall. Powell Valley consolidated into Union High School in 2011.

Bibliography:

- A) Black Mountain, Mother of Today – Fleenor, Lawrence J., page 33
- B) Ibid pg. 38-39
- C) Virginia Land Grants, Library of Virginia
- D) The Bear Grass, a History- Fleenor, Lawrence J., pg. 81
- E) Wise County Virginia – Johnson, Charles pg. 61
- F) Ibid pg. 17
- G) Ibid pgs. 62-65
- H) Ibid pg. 23
- I) Ibid pg. 262
- J) Ibid pg. 322
- K) Ibid pg. 55
- L) <http://vagenweb.org/wise/sketches/EarlySettlersES.html>
- M) <http://vagenweb.org/wise/sketches/IsaiahJonesES.html>
- N) Jones genealogy supplied by Deb Clarkston
- O) Ted Moore and Chester Hill to the author – Hill's family had once owned the site of the Buffalo Academy, and he himself was raised within sight of it.
- P) Addison Stallard to Bruce Robinette – Mr. Stallard is currently 91 years old, was born about the time the Buffalo School was opened, was raised in West Virginia, and has no personal connection to the Jones School.
- Q) Bruce Robinette, who was at the reunion and heard Mrs. Gilly speak – to the author