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Southern Values and Homegrown Culture: History of Gatlinburg

(Gatlinburg, Tenn., 2010) – Boasting an exciting history steeped in tradition, Gatlinburg was originally settled in the early 1800's and was first named White Oak Flats for the abundant native white oak trees covering the landscape. Today, Gatlinburg carries on the traditions of its humble beginnings, and invites visitors to share in its memories, old and new alike.

Many of Gatlinburg's historical attractions have been designated as stops along the **Tennessee Heritage Trail**, showcasing the city's Smoky Mountain history. The Tennessee Heritage Trail has been recently developed by the State in order to highlight the cultural heritage of our people, and numerous Gatlinburg-area locations have been designated as integral stops along the Trail. The trail is divided into three distinct pathways: Arts & Crafts Trail, Gatlinburg History, and Music Trail Pathway highlighting the various points of history and culture of the area.

A Town is Born

More than two hundred years ago, in 1807, Martha Jane Huskey Ogle, her children and several other family members arrived in a remote locale of the Great Smoky Mountains in East Tennessee to honor the wish of her recently deceased husband, William, to settle in the "land of paradise" he had found for them. Just five years before in 1802, William built what is known today as "Ogle's Cabin," Gatlinburg's first home.

An 1854 settler by the name of Radford C. Gatlin opened the village's second general store. After several skirmishes with his neighbors, including the well-known Ogles, Radford Gatlin was eventually banished, although the town still bears his name.

In the early 1800s, education came to the area in the form of subscription schools, where parents paid for each child's education. It was not until 1912 when a public settlement school was formed in Gatlinburg. The Ogle's farm was eventually sold to Pi Beta Phi as the settlement school expanded in 1921, which also was used as a hospital. From 1922 to 1926, it housed a museum of mountain artifacts which helped contribute to the rebirth of Appalachian arts and crafts and the "cottage craft industry" movement.

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Gatlinburg and the Civil War

When the Civil War began in April 1861, Gatlinburg remained a quiet mountain town. Some residents, however, were divided, joining both Union and Confederate forces. In addition to numerous raids upon the area by both the North and South, one major battle was fought in Gatlinburg – the “Battle of Burg Hill.” Confederate commander Colonel Will Thomas occupied the town in an attempt to protect the salt peter mines at Alum Cave, where gunpowder ingredients were being mined near the Tennessee-North Carolina border. Federal forces marched south from Knoxville and Sevierville to dislodge Thomas' forces, which had erected a fort on Burg Hill. Following the fight, Gatlinburg suffered hardship and deprivation, as did much of the South after the war's end.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Affectionately named “schoonage” or “place of the blue smoke” by the Cherokee, the Great Smoky Mountains are best-known for the blue mist that rises above the peaks and valleys. Despite a number of obstacles, the idea to create a National Park in the Smoky Mountains began in 1923. A wealthy couple from Knoxville, Mr. and Mrs. Willis P. Davis, started the movement for the creation of a National Park. Monetary and political disagreements ensued, while others held on to their interest in continuing to hunt and fish the land. Additionally, there were a number of commercial interests and families that lived in the mountains who would be forced to relocate should National Park status be achieved. More than 2,000 deeds, representing lands that were purchased by the states of North Carolina and Tennessee, were transferred to federal ownership.

On June 15, 1934, Congress established the national park and allowed the building of the Park's infrastructure. Over the next 16 years, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) worked to build many of the trails, campgrounds and beautiful stone bridges and buildings that are still enjoyed by visitors in the Park. When President Franklin Roosevelt formally dedicated the Park in 1940, it had become a sanctuary for all the people of the country and the rest of the world to enjoy.

Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg

With breathtaking natural surroundings that inspire creativity, Gatlinburg's arts and crafts culture has long held a deep association with the Southern Appalachian mountains. Nowhere else in the South can one find a richer heritage of fine craftsmanship than in Gatlinburg.

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Among the first to create quality craftsman was Elijah Lawson Reagan, who established a woodworking business in 1910. It is believed to be the oldest, continuously operated business of its kind in the Great Smoky Mountain history. For over a decade, he practiced his craft with simple hand tools, but in the 1920s, he harnessed the power of the Roaring Fork to operate his new electric power tools – he built a water-wheel and installed a turbine and generator which furnished power to his shop.

In 1945, Pi Beta Phi, in conjunction with the University of Tennessee, established a summer program of craft workshops for emerging artists. This program eventually became the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts located on the old Pi Beta Phi Settlement School grounds. Once used for elementary and high school education and vocational training, the classrooms have been transformed into studio space for arts and crafts classes, and other services. Arrowmont offers summer and spring workshops and an array of special conferences for all levels of students in craft-art media. The art galleries at Arrowmont are open for tours of select collections throughout the year.

Nestled along an eight-mile motor loop resplendent with Smoky Mountain beauty and nostalgia are more than 100 quaint shops and restaurants proudly known as Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community. Established in 1937, it is the largest group of independent artisans in North America and proudly preserves the craft heritage of the Great Smoky Mountains year-round. Visitors can explore the best in a wide range of craft shops, including pottery, woodcarving, candlemaking, quilting, weaving, broommaking, and painting and a celebration of Smoky Mountain history and culture. These artisans whittle, paint, sew, cast, weave and carve to create original collectables and works such as candles, baskets, quilts, brooms, chairs, pottery, jewelry, dolls, ceramics, scrimshaw, silversmithing and leather products, stained glass, wearable fashions, fine photography, frameable art, oils and watercolors.

While visiting the Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community, whet your appetite at live demonstrations of candy-making, watch as ordinary pieces of wood are turned into works of art by whittlers and woodcarvers, and marvel at the intricate handiwork of mountain artisans as they handle the delicate tasks of quilting, broom making, and pottery throwing. From there, relax in the candle shop showroom while hot wax dries in beautiful shapes around cotton wicks that were hand-dipped in large vats. Fill the shopping bags with traditional and contemporary crafts, handmade gifts, collectibles, and one-of-a-kind pieces.

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First Baptist Church

Religion was important to the settlers and is a large part of the area's history. Before there were church buildings, services were held outside or in homes. Although Gatlinburg was settled by Presbyterians, its first church was of the Baptist faith. History records show that the White Oak Flats "arm" of the Sevierville Baptist Church convened in the early 1800s on Baskins Creek, probably at the present location of the Ogle cabin. Under the guidance of Reverend Richard Evans, a second church was built on River Road near the mouth of Mill (now Le Conte) Creek, and in 1837, they formed White Oak Flats Baptist church. The congregation met in a log cabin on Baskins Creek, which also served as a school.

The first frame church building was constructed in 1875, at the corner of the Parkway and Baskins Creek Road. The congregation changed its name to Gatlinburg Baptist Church in 1932; then in 1951, they constructed a landmark stone church at the same location. As businesses crowded around them, First Baptist moved to its present location on Highway 321, east of downtown, in 1991.

Ogle Store

Noah Ogle was Gatlinburg's first merchant of record, establishing a store in 1850 on a site that later became the Riverside Hotel. In 1910, he moved the store to the intersection of River Road and the Elkmont Highway. Ephraim E. Ogle took over his father's store around 1916; and until 1925, the E. E. Ogle and Company store housed the Gatlinburg Post Office. Grandson, Charlie A. Ogle, and great grandson, Charles Earl Ogle, continued the family tradition. Through the years, the store expanded as new merchandise was added. You could purchase almost anything in that store, from hairpins to threshing machines "if they could find it." The quaint old general store and adjacent tourist cabins were torn down in the mid-1970s to make way for the Mountain Mall. The Ogles, descended from the area's first settlers, played a major role in the city's development.

Gatlinburg Today

Today, Gatlinburg is a bustling southern town that still holds on to the traditions and values on which it was based. With its Smoky Mountain heritage and southern hospitality, Gatlinburg has grown to become a revered tourist destination, welcoming more than 9 million visitors each year. With more than 12,000 rooms located in a variety of accommodations across the city, along with exciting attractions, events and homegrown culture, Gatlinburg is bursting with small town goodness at every turn. It is truly a place to relax, reconnect, and reach higher ground.

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Nestled in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, Gatlinburg, Tennessee boasts inspiration to all who visit, from the misting mountains, the trickling streams and the exquisite wildlife that call this mountain haven home. Wherever your adventurous spirit guides you, Gatlinburg delivers family fun, unique shops, and an extensive arts and crafts community. Explore the popular Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies, ride the country's longest aerial tram, browse through hundreds of unique shops in search of the perfect treasure, and revel in the splendor of the Great Smoky Mountains as you Reach Higher Ground in Gatlinburg. For more information, visit www.Gatlinburg.com or call 1-800-588-1817. For media information and digital images, visit www.gatlinburgpressroom.com. Visit us on YouTube at www.youtube.com/visitgatlinburg and on Twitter at www.twitter.com/visitgatlinburg.

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