Chapter Four
The Nottingham Settlement as a Community

In the mid-eighteenth century, a group of families settled in the northeast portion of what was once Rowan County, North Carolina. Today local and family historians recognize these families as members of the Nottingham Settlement (also known as the Nottingham Colony).\(^1\) No document survives to tell historians whether or not Settlement families intended to create a community based on some written or verbal pact made before or after migrating south. Regardless of whether such arrangements existed, a number of the pioneering generation left southeastern Pennsylvania and northern Maryland during the early 1750s and purchased land grants in central North Carolina from Lord Granville’s leasing agents.

The Nottingham Settlement community stems not from corporate structure or formal boundaries, but rather from shared characteristics identified in previously studied eighteenth-century backcountry communities. Some traits were held by few members. Other characteristics were shared widely and remained constant throughout the community. Known traits of men of the pioneering generation include kinship ties, similar ethnic background and social customs, landownership in the same locale, and Presbyterian Church membership.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) For the purpose of this study, any reference to the families associated with the Nottingham Settlement refers to those families who fit within the perimeters of the majority: i.e., Scots-Irish and Presbyterian. Because of the community’s rural setting and unrestricted boundaries, families with dissimilar characteristics and traits also lived in the community. For example, at least two practicing Quakers (Thomas Beals and James Brittain) purchased one of the original thirty tracts of land designated as part of the “Nottingham Settlement.” These dissimilar families have been excluded.

\(^2\) See biographical information in appendix A.
With few exceptions, local and family historians identified the Settlement’s members as having Scots-Irish backgrounds, showing parallel migration patterns from Scotland to Ulster, Northern Ireland (mostly in County Derry). This Scots-Irish heritage was defined by a century of religious, economic and political strife that occurred after the planting of predominantly Presbyterian, Lowland Scots in Northern Ireland, following King James I’s succession to the English throne. Intended both as a means of subduing one defiant people (the Roman Catholic Irish) and alleviating the poverty and religious bickering of another (the Presbyterian Scots), the Irish Plantation scheme suited the transplanted Scots’ desire for religious and economic independence.

Based on the location of Settlement families in southeastern Pennsylvania (and north central Maryland) prior to their move to North Carolina, Settlement members or their immediate ancestors probably entered the colonies at New Castle, in what is now Delaware. Family history accounts of nuclear and extended families emigrating together from Ulster and the community’s access to cash afterward (in North Carolina) suggests that members paid their ship passage before leaving Ireland rather than having to resort to indenturing themselves in order to finance their passage to America as many young single immigrants had to do. Settlement families were acquainted with one another prior to their arrival in North Carolina, and family members intermarried (sometimes within the same families). The social and family connections shared by the pioneering generation before their arrival in North Carolina stemmed from their geographical proximity while residing in

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3 At least two men emigrated to America directly from Scotland.
4 Because information regarding the emigration of the Settlement’s members (their fathers or grandfathers) is insufficient to determine the circumstances of their arrival in America, one must speculate on the members’ immigration experience.
southern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and northwestern Cecil County, Maryland.

Presbyterian residents of these areas were familiar with each other through the Presbyterian clergy who ministered to and traveled among them.

The heads of Settlement families owned adjoining tracts of land in the part of Rowan County now known as Guilford County. Those tracts lay along a stretch of land approximately sixteen miles wide and nine miles long on or near Buffalo and Reedy Fork Creeks, tributaries of the Haw River. Members of the pioneering generation leased thirty 640-acre tracts from the agents of John Carteret, Lord Granville, which had been reserved by six men from Pennsylvania’s Lancaster County and Maryland’s Cecil County in 1750. Eleven men claimed sixteen of the thirty tracts in December 1753 after their arrival in North Carolina. This generation also purchased nearby tracts to augment their landholdings.

Social norms established throughout eighteenth-century America held also for the Nottingham Settlement’s pioneering generation. Upon his death, the head of the household provided for the care of his wife, supplying her with shelter and a livelihood until either she remarried or died. Both sons and daughters received bequests in land, “moveables” or money upon their father’s death.

The Settlement’s pioneering generation valued literacy. With few exceptions, household heads could sign their names legibly. Providing subsequent generations (particularly their sons) educational opportunities was a priority in the community as

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5 Earlier settlers to this area also knew the Haw River as the Saxapahaw River.
6 “Moveables” refers to any personal, household or farm item not permanently attached to the land or buildings, for example clothing, furniture, farm tools, and crops already harvested.
reflected by the success of Reverend David Caldwell’s academy which offered its students a classical education.⁷

Nottingham Settlement members were religious people associated with the Presbyterian Church. This adherence to Presbyterianism had led prior generations from Scotland to Ireland and then to Pennsylvania, and later to North Carolina. Although a schism produced by the Great Awakening in the mid-1740s had divided Presbyterian congregations in Pennsylvania and may have led to their relocation, the Settlement formed a congregation (now known as the Buffalo Presbyterian Church) within five years of migrating to North Carolina and in 1768 built a meeting house on land once owned by a Settlement member.⁸ Their official status in the colony as dissenters led them to petition the King and Lord Granville for exemption from the vestry tax that supported the established Church of England.

Although each family’s wealth prior to their migration to North Carolina is unknown, it is clear that household heads had the means to purchase Granville land grants and also additional land for which they paid cash. At a time when specie was scarce in North Carolina, the presence of local and foreign coins indicates that the Settlement’s pioneering generation was relatively wealthy and successful in increasing

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⁷ E. W. Caruthers, A Sketch of the Life and Character of the Rev. David Caldwell, D.D.: Near Sixty Years Pastor of the Churches of Buffalo and Alamance (Greensborough, N.C.: Swaim & Sherwood, 1842), 29. While he does not mention specifically children of the Nottingham Settlement attending Caldwell’s school, Caruthers provides a veiled reference to this probability as its operation was “necessary . . . for the improvement of the community at large.” (29) Caruthers also states that Caldwell school “continued, with two or three short interruptions, until he was disqualified by the infirmities of age.” (29)

⁸ Ibid., 24; and Samuel M. Rankin, A History of Buffalo Presbyterian Church and Her People, Greensboro, N.C. (Greensboro, N.C.: Jos. J. Stone & Co, [1934?]), 19, 113. Presbyterian congregations divided between those who remained true to the more traditional viewpoints of the church (“Old Side”) and those who embraced a conversion-oriented Christianity (“New Side”). From all accounts, the congregation created by the Nottingham Settlement’s families (which became the Buffalo Presbyterian Church) supported the Old Side. Although several of the families must have come from Samuel Finley’s New Side church (Nottingham Presbyterian Church) in Cecil County, Maryland, the Old Side families apparently outnumbered the New Side supporters within the Settlement’s membership.
their wealth. Land transactions support the members’ use of the several forms of legal tender found within the Colonies. The wills of the pioneering generation provide insight as well. The listing of “book debts” suggests that surplus goods sold to others were paid for in cash or that surplus money was available to loan. Some household heads maintained libraries, presumably purchased during their time in the South.

Several of the Settlement’s pioneering generation owned slaves. Unlike colonial North Carolina’s coastal landowners, those living in the Piedmont utilized limited slave forces. Where Settlement households initially included one or two enslaved persons of African descent, a few among the pioneering generation later increased the number of enslaved persons in their possession. The existence of more than one enslaved person in a household denotes the family’s financial ability to acquire and maintain such labor.

Motives for Migrating to North Carolina

The Nottingham Settlement migrated south to the backcountry for several reasons. Any combination of these reasons may have persuaded the families to leave Pennsylvania and Maryland. The most important factor was the opportunity to purchase farm land and increase their income. The prospect of owning productive land in Pennsylvania and Maryland dwindled during the eighteenth century. By mid-century, much of the good land had already been purchased and improved by earlier immigrants.

10 Many times these transactions would state the colony from which the currency required or used came (e.g., Pennsylvania, Virginia or North Carolina).
The land that was for sale was either too expensive or of poor quality. The continual influx of immigrants from Europe only added to the already strained real estate market.

The southern backcountry, and North Carolina in particular, provided prospective landowners with greater opportunity. Under Granville’s land grant program, purchasers could obtain virgin farm and timber land for a moderate price. Although Granville restricted the number of acres a man could purchase, the average size of a tract in Rowan County measured about 640 acres.

In the eighteenth century, landownership was often equated with economic independence and sometimes wealth. Owning large amounts of farm acreage allowed the Settlement’s pioneering generation to shift from subsistence farming to growing cash crops, such as wheat, and raising livestock that could be sold at market. The acceptance of slave labor in the southern backcountry supported this move to commercialization.

Several minor events affecting the inhabitants of Pennsylvania also may have influenced the Settlement families’ decisions to migrate to North Carolina. As early as 1716, Pennsylvania’s government encouraged immigrants to settle on land originally allocated to the Maryland colony. Lancaster County then asserted control over the settlers residing in this region. The demarcation of the Mason-Dixon Line in 1768 ended the decades-old dispute over the boundary between the two colonies, thereby placing a small section of then southern Lancaster County within the jurisdiction of Cecil County (Maryland). Some of the Settlement’s families lived in this section of Lancaster County and may have realized that the impending resolution of the boundary dispute, regardless of when it occurred, might not support their desire to remain under the auspices of the
Pennsylvania government. As well, insecurity of land titles and increasing demand of taxes in this disputed region urged Settlement families to consider migrating.

The reasons for founding the Nottingham Settlement remain elusive and intriguing. The limitations of the extant documentation regarding the Nottingham Settlement and its participants restrict historians from discerning which factors most affected the pioneering generation’s decisions to migrate. Until the discovery of further evidence, historians must rely on the currently available documentation and supplement it innovatively with substantiated family histories.

In the past, local and family historians have had to rely on limited histories to explain the actions of early Guilford County residents. Samuel M. Rankin’s Buffalo Presbyterian Church history attempted to fill in gaps left by family genealogies generated before the 1930s.\textsuperscript{12} Although Rankin’s efforts provided family researchers with a foundation for understanding these settlers’ actions, his interpretation of the available historical records only scratched the surface. Since the publication of Rankin’s quintessential work, little has been published investigating further the Settlement’s existence.

My community study supports much of what Rankin presented seventy years before as well as expounds further on areas Rankin ignored. Now family historians can expand their current views of Nottingham Settlement members beyond that of just birth and death facts. By presenting information on practices regarding land ownership, society, religion and wealth, this study encourages historians to broaden their

\textsuperscript{12} See Samuel M. Rankin, \textit{A History of Buffalo Presbyterian Church and Her People, Greensboro, N.C.} (Greensboro, N.C.: Jos. J. Stone & Co, [1934?]).
interpretations of how Settlement members may have lived as well as how they interacted with each other and the larger communities in which they existed, whether in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Maryland or Ireland.

Without comprehensive and systematic documentation, historians gain from the application of other methods to reveal the nature of a community and the possible motives of its members. From a survey of scholarly works on the backcountry it is possible to recognize that the Nottingham Settlement’s pioneering generation exhibited traits and practices similar to those found in other communities located in the colonial South. Knowledge of events which affected the Scots-Irish immigrant’s life in colonial Pennsylvania and North Carolina affords insight into the pioneering generation’s behavior and mindset. Most importantly, the analysis of gathered biographical information from a sampling of the pioneering generation provides a catalog of common experiences and actions from which the nature and experience of the Settlement’s community comes to light and becomes alive. The combination of all methods of research enables the creation of a community identity similar to other backcountry communities and yet unique to the Nottingham Settlement.