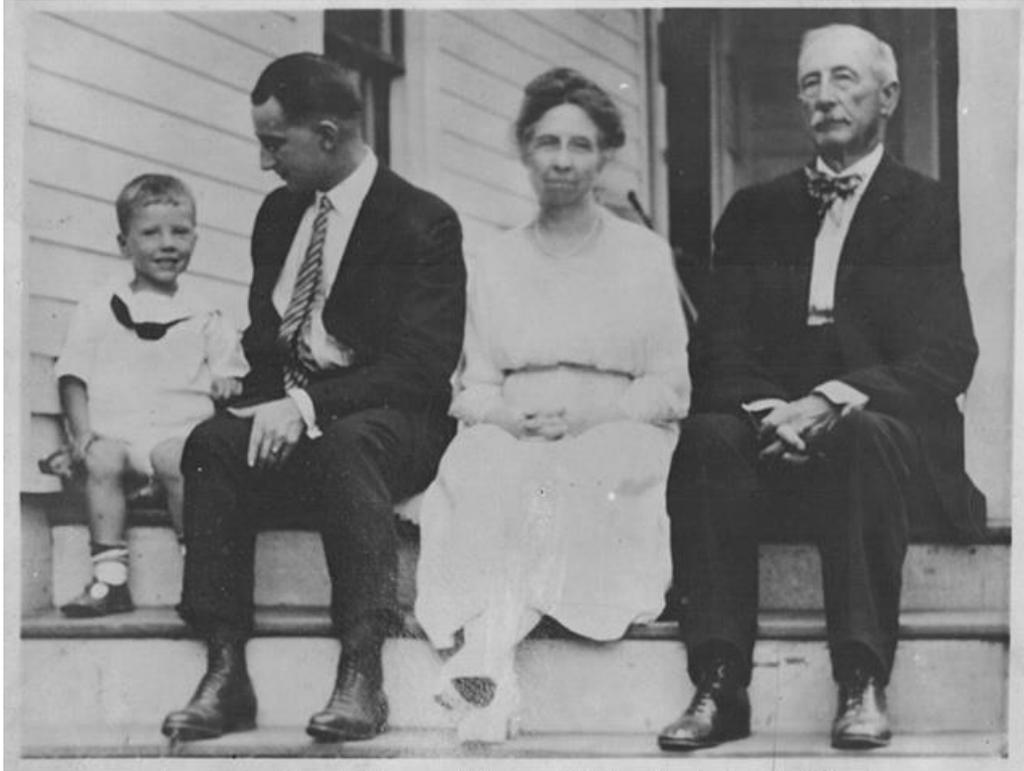


Our Hallowed Hill Heritage: Jeremiah Shank
by: Don Casada for Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery



Four generations: Joe Stearns, IK Stearns, Miss Jess Shank, Jeremiah Shank
Photo courtesy of Theo Stearns (daughter of Joe)

Four generations of the Shank family, circa 1920

Some of our long-term citizens would recognize the phrases “Shank’s whistle” or “Shank’s mill,” but I would venture that at most not more than a few dozen folks in Swain County would be able to give the basis for those names – Jeremiah Shank. Yet, a persuasive case could be made that his decision to put down roots here in 1903, at the age of 56, was the single most positive influence on the economic health of Swain County for over three-quarters of the twentieth century.

Born in Montgomery County, Ohio in 1847, Jeremiah was the second of seven children of Philip and Jemima Shank. He enlisted with the 156th Ohio Infantry (National Guard) at the age of sixteen. Of at least twenty-five Civil War veterans buried in the Bryson City Cemetery, Jeremiah is one of four men who served in the Union cause.

Shank came from a family of modest means; according to multiple census records, his father Philip was a tenant farmer. Following the Civil War, he attended Lebanon College and taught school until at least 1880. It seems reasonable to posit that military experience influenced his educational inclinations. All four of his daughters (Jessie, Alta, Nell and Marie) would attend some level of post-secondary education.

By the early 1880s, Shank had transitioned to industry. He became President of Consolidated Pump Works, with factories in Toledo, Ohio and Millington, Tennessee (just north of Memphis). As the name suggests, one of their products was wood pumps – the hand lever style pumps seen in old western movies. But their product lines went well beyond that – to wood-framed door and window screens, newell posts, table legs, and porch/veranda columns.

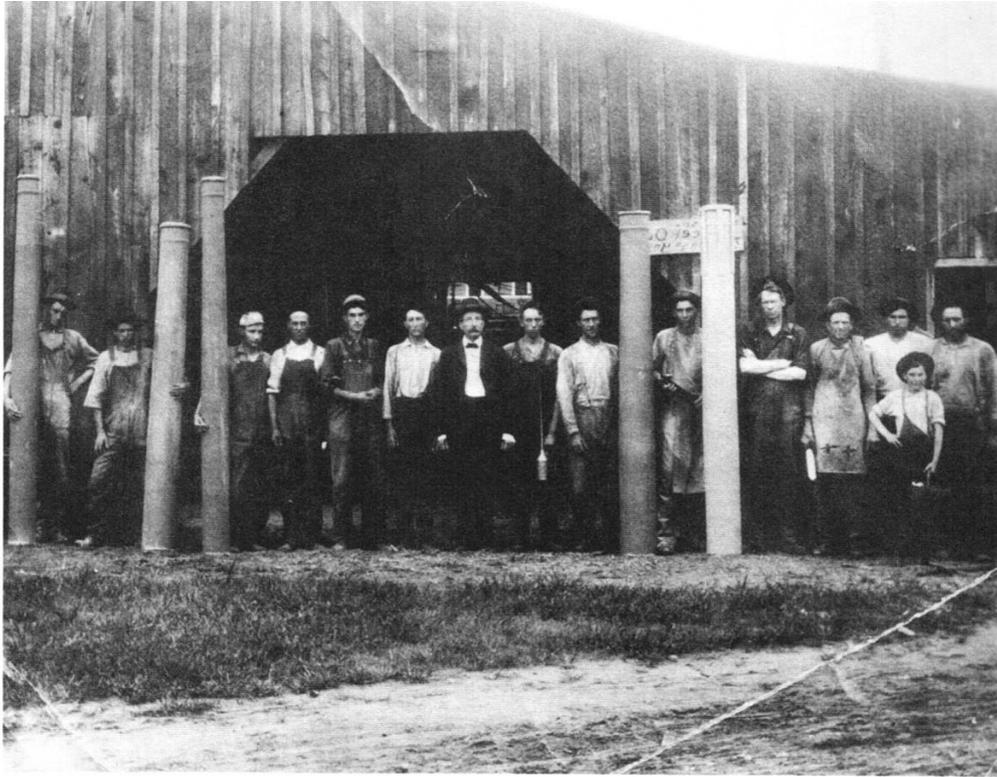
It was the latter – porch columns – which would become the principal product of the Bryson City Pump Works, incorporated in 1903, with Shank, E.J. Wheeler (who came to Bryson City along with Shank), and three other stockholders. By 1910, the company was owned by just Shank and Wheeler. The company originally purchased land on what is now the northeast corner of Richmond and Depot Streets. But the bulk of the plant operation was located just northeast of the depot – in an area which would later be an extension of the Shank family business - Carolina Builders Supply (now the railroad shop and museum area), and extended east to Collins Street.

The business thrived. Asheville Citizen articles from the first couple of decades of operation indicate Bryson City Pump Works “is the only concern in the United States making columns from solid logs” and “is now running day and night...the output being shipped to all portions of the United States. The Citizen noted that the process involved boring poplar logs for lightness and strength. They were then turned on a lathe and seasoned for three months. The process applied technology patented by E.J. Wheeler. While a resident of Bryson City, Wheeler acquire two patents, both related to column boring operations. While others from the area have received patents (including the author), Wheeler is, to the best of my knowledge, the only person to have acquired a patent while living here. If readers are aware of others, I’d love to hear about them (see contact information at the end of this article).

Here are the patents: [Boring machine](#), [Combined auger head and reamer](#)

Wheeler Street, which runs behind the Calhoun House Inn and Suites, was named for his son, Willard, who, with his wife Alma (Fry) managed the Entella Hotel, and was involved in the “Yona Springs Addition” with J.L. Gibson and Dr. Rufus Waldroup (local dentist). The “Yona Springs Addition” was effectively a subdivision, and covered the area from just west of the Presbyterian Church to Bone Yard Branch¹ (today, it’s known as Bryson Branch) and south to the railroad tracks. While dozens of homes in the area feature those turned porch columns, The Calhoun Inn and Suites has them in spades – over forty decorate the historic structure. Built in 1920 by former Hazel Creek residents William and Nora Lee Calhoun, the original columns would have been manufactured at the depot area location.

¹ What is today known as Toot Hollow Branch was then known as Stockade Branch.



Left to Right: Thurman Medford, , Charlie Wall, John Barnes, John Wall, Jeremiah Shank, Louis Cunningham, Lum Medford, Ansel Hall, Bob Abbott, Cloyt Thomas, John Millsaps, Mark Brendle, Estes.

Bryson City Pump Works, circa 1910 (source: Swain County Heritage)



Calhoun Inn and Suites, started in 1920

In 1925, the company, now a family-owned business, moved operations to below town and changed its name to Carolina Wood Turning. In the late 1920s, Shank turned management over to his grandson, I.K. Stearns.



Carolina Power and Light, 1941 (Courtesy of Carl Grueninger, Jr)

The company product lines diversified considerably, turning materials from wooden mallets to candles. During World War II, the company switched to full time war production support, making ammunition containers and approximately thirty-six million float light or flare bodies for the Navy.



**Ralph Woody with flare bodies
(Source: Rick and Christine Colcord)**

Over the succeeding decades, the company merged with other operations and did business as Magnavox, Cherokee Furniture, Consolidated Furniture and Singer, with furniture becoming the principal product.



1971 vintage ad for Consolidated Furniture

Shank's clock-setting whistle, which could be heard blowing lunch and quitting times as far away as Needmore and Ela, has been silent for decades. The mill had a run of four score and three years, providing direct jobs in the hundreds. For over half of that time, it was family-owned. By all accounts, Jeremiah was a genial and generous outsider who, much to our blessing, chose to make this place we call home his own home. He takes his rest in the family plot on Schoolhouse Hill, along with his wife of 58 years, Helen Caughey, and other family members.

Don.Casada@friendsofthebccemetery.org