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# Fonta Flora: Once 'magical place' now at bottom of lake

By BRUCE HENDERSON January 1, 2019

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MORGANTON, N.C. (AP) — There once was a vale of peace and beauty in the North Carolina foothills, the story goes, where crops grew tall and neighbors both black and white lived in harmony. Even its name sounded lush: Fonta Flora.

We say there was such a place because, like a red-clay Atlantis, the heart of the farm community was lost to the rising waters of Lake James as it filled a century ago.

But Fonta Flora never left Burke County's folklore. Its name lives on in a popular Morganton brewery and in a state hiking trail that will loop around Lake James and someday extend to Asheville.

Two Charlotte Observer readers wanted to know more about the place. They asked CuriousNC, a special reporting project by The Charlotte Observer and The (Raleigh) News & Observer and The (Durham) Herald Sun that invites readers to ask questions for journalists to answer.

Did Fonta Flora really exist? Absolutely. Was it a rural utopia? Well, that answer gets a little complicated.

The community spread across

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by Taboola



Duke Energy dammed between 1916 and 1923 to form Lake James. A prominent peak, Shortoff Mountain, rose over it all.

Fonta Flora has been briefly depicted in newspaper columns and book references over the years. A large, hand-drawn map of the community is stored in the North Carolina Room of the Burke County Public Library.

But a fuller history, drawn from deeds, government records and written accounts, is the 2012 book "Glimpses of Fonta Flora" by sisters Helen Norman and Patricia Page, who grew up near Lake James.

The source of the community's lyrical name, by which it was known after the Civil War, is unknown. Norman and Page surmise that the name was inspired by the Latin-speaking mother of an early postmaster or, more likely, borrowed from the antebellum Fonti Flora plantation in Fairfield County, S.C.

Nineteenth-century Fonta Flora, the authors write, had general stores, churches and schools, rich orchards, a baseball field and horse racetrack. By the early 1900s, it had a white and African-American population of only 50 to 100 people.

Change came to the community in about 1915, and that's where the handed-down stories blur with official accounts.

Remembered with reverence

Western Carolina Power Co., whose assets were later transferred to what is now Duke



never used condemnation laws to force people off their land for its Catawba River reservoirs, including Lake James. Norman and Page found no contrary evidence at Fonta Flora.

But the ancestors of slaves and, later, freed African-Americans who toiled there tell different stories.

"There was nothing willing about the whole process," the late Nettie McIntosh, a teacher and local historian whose grandfather was born in Fonta Flora, told The Observer in 2000. "It was a matter of economy. The people saw the need for the dam, obviously."

McIntosh's cousin, Valaida Fullwood, is a Charlotte writer and project consultant who grew up in Morganton. Her great-great-grandfather and McIntosh's grandfather, Riley Rufus McGimpsey, born a slave in 1845, and his wife Christian, raised 10 children in Fonta Flora before moving nearby as Lake James filled.

In her family, Fonta Flora "was always spoken of in a very reverent way, with a lot of respect, almost like a magical place," Fullwood said. "It just bestowed a lot of meaning from the time I was a little girl. A place very green and beautiful ... and the sadness of relocation."

"Glimpses of Fonta Flora" says Riley McGimpsey was a farm manager with a level of authority that was unusual for black men of that time. His was one of only four black families to still live in the heart of the community in 1910, the book states, although

many others lived in the greater



reunion five years ago, they piled in a bus and toured their native ground, picnicking at Lake James State Park. The family's history in Fonta Flora is bittersweet, Fullwood said.

"Just the connection to the land and what's under that lake is strong and really powerful for all of us," she said. "There's also the sense of loss, in my mind. After the Civil War, for families that had been enslaved people, even though we didn't have grand plantations like in other parts of the South, people still struggled to make lives for themselves in a new place, and work for decades. And then to be uprooted."

A photo of Riley and Christian McGimpsey and their brood hangs in Burke County's history museum. An old family tradition also survives: her great-great-grandfather's practice of generosity, from loaning farm equipment to his Fonta Flora neighbors to donating land and money to build one of the 5,000 Rosenwald Schools for Southern black children after he left the valley. African American philanthropy is the subject of Fullwood's 2011 book "Giving Back."

"Glimpses of Fonta Flora" confirms some of the warm memories passed down over the years, even as it corrects the loftiest of them.

"There does indeed seem to have been camaraderie, mutual respect and affection among the white and black residents of Fonta Flora and surrounding communities," Norman and Page write, probably owing to family bonds formed during slave days.

But there were also signs that



possible Ku Klux Klan activity, physical assaults and support for voting restrictions on blacks.

Fonta Flora was largely a white settlement, the according to the book, with black people on its outskirts.

By the time the power company's agents came looking for land, it states, an exodus from Fonta Flora was already underway. Flooding had become worse as loggers stripped trees from the mountainsides. Some residents found the living easier in less remote areas.

Nor is a village frozen in time at the bottom of Lake James, they say.

The general store, post office, ball field and racetrack were submerged, but the lake covered only six known homesites and low-lying acreage — about 20 percent of the 5,000-acre farm community. Most of its cemeteries, churches and schools were untouched. Some houses were disassembled and rebuilt on higher ground, where a few survive.

Norman and Page acknowledge that some will prefer to think of Fonta Flora in a more romantic light.

"There is a longing in all our hearts for a time and place when people lived harmoniously and the land was blessed and beautiful, producing abundance for all," they conclude. "The fable, once heard, that such a place existed right here in Burke County but was ruined by modern man's own greed is too poignant to easily dislodge from the heart and mind."