Newton Fletcher Chittum: Carpenter of the High Hollows

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Newton Fletcher Chittum was born in the Kerr's Creek district of Rockbridge County, Virginia on July 17, 1863 and died on July 27, 1948 at the age of eighty-five. Mr. Chittum was a carpenter by trade who earned his living building houses and barns, primarily in the area of his home in Waterloo, but also in the towns of Lexington and Goshen, and in Staunton for a single project. Mr. Chittum is studied in this work in order to examine the role of the craftsman, in this case carpenter, in the rural High Hollows site of Rockbridge County. This work will attempt to address the services provided by the carpenter, and the demand for such services during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Born the son of John P. Chittum, a wagon builder and wheelwright, Newton Chittum learned the carpentry trade from his father. It was probably his father who also taught him blacksmithing. Newton Chittum was not a blacksmith by trade, but he did build a blacksmith shop at his house in which he might have made a few simple tools for himself. Newton's brother, Jacob, was the blacksmith of the family and he had his own shop over the hill from the house Newton built for his own family.

According to Newton Chittum's obituary published in the Lexington Gazette, the first house he designed and built was in Collierstown on the old Lexington and Covington turnpike.¹ This house is still standing, and is the first frame house on the left, off of the old turnpike past Lake Robertson.
In 1905 he moved his father's log house over the hill from its original site and built a new two story two bay frame farmhouse for his family, using the kitchen from the log house as a grainery and the main portion of it as a stable. On the sixty-three acres of the farm, Mr. Chittum also built a wood-working shop and a blacksmith shop. All of the original buildings are still standing and maintained by the current owner, Richard E. Whipple. The property is located off of Virginia secondary highway number 629.

In addition to his own house, Newton Chittum is known to have built several other houses, barns and other structures in the Waterloo area. Mrs. Teaford wrote of Mr. Chittum helping to build Preston Hinkle's house: "Two carpenters, Mr. Newton F. Chittum and Mr. George Strawsburg, along with other neighbors built a house in a day, some took the lumber on the wagon and they had a picnic lunch again up there in the mountain side." Chittum also built the house currently owned by Ralph Wilhelm on Virginia secondary highway 627. He built a house for Penick Snider, also on Virginia secondary highway 627, now owned by Blair Snider. Dr. Openchain hired Chittum to construct his Kerrs Creek home, currently owned by Dr. and Mrs. Russel Williamson and located off of U. S. Highway 60 West. Chittum was also said to have built a house for Josiah Hickman, but the location of this house is unknown. He also worked on smaller projects, such as adding a west wing to Clarence Wilhelm's home on Virginia secondary highway 629. And like many High Hollows residents, he worked at the Rockbridge Alum Springs resort, probably doing only maintenance work on the
Map 1

Kerr's Creek houses built by Newton Fletcher Chittum and Kerr's Creek Baptist Church
While it is known that Newton Chittum built barns and other farm buildings as well as houses, the locations of any of these lesser structures are unknown.

The largest and most complex building project undertaken by Chittum was the Kerrs Creek Baptist Church. This church was built in 1911 with donated materials and volunteer labor. The design of this frame Gothic Revival Church is attributed to Newton Chittum. While it is high style, rather than the vernacular style of his other building projects, Chittum was capable of designing such a church with the help of an architect's style book, or some similar publication.

Newton Chittum built his woodworking shop over a spring branch in order to have the water power to run his homemade band saw and lathe. The water wheel was removed by Chittum after electricity reached the area, and a lean-to was added to increase the size of the work space. In addition to building houses, Chittum made simple pieces of furniture, such as a writing desk, kitchen stools, a jelly press, and a cradle for his children. These pieces were all made for his own family, and the small number of items of furniture leads one to believe that this was not one of his favorite tasks. It was not that he didn't have the skill, this is obviously not the case, for he made a violin and an autoharp, both requiring great skill to fashion. He made toys for his children as well as leather shoes fastened to the soles with wooden pegs. Mr. Chittum grew broom corn behind the workshop, and made brooms using a machine that he had purchased. The presence of this machine suggests that Chittum might have
sold these. It is known that Mr. Chittum also built and sold wooden coffins.

The blacksmith shop was located behind the woodworking shop. In it, Mr. Chittum worked on small simple projects. He fashioned a few tools for himself, but he had purchased many of his tools and hardware, including nails, in Lexington. Most of the blacksmithing was done by his brother, Jacob.

Despite the demand for carpentry work in Waterloo and the Kerrs Creek area, Mr. Chittum occasionally had to look for work farther away from home. Mr. and Mrs. Harry German of Paphine recall living in a house at 125 Houston Street in Lexington that Mr. Chittum built. This house is currently owned by Nancy Wilkerson. Chittum and his son, Emmett, are believed to have worked on two houses on Jefferson Street in Lexington, but the locations of these are unknown. During World War I, Chittum assembled several Sears and Roebuck buildings for the iron furnace in Goshen. Chittum was forced to work outside of Rockbridge County only once. During one summer, Dr. Openchain, who had formerly lived in Kerrs Creek, hired Chittum to do some construction in Staunton. The nature of this construction is unknown.

From the available data, it appears that Newton Chittum was able to find sufficient employment in the High Hollows area most of the time, only occasionally finding it necessary to travel short distances to find work. His primary occupation was designing and building houses, barns and other structures. He was skilled enough to make furniture and musical instruments, but the small number of such items indicates that these were for the family and not profit. He was an amateur blacksmith,
1. The Lexington Gazette, 4 August 1948.

2. Interview with Clyde Chittum and Ivy Muterspaw, son and daughter of Newton Chittum, 23 February 1984.


4. Clyde Chittum and Ivy Muterspaw.


6. Clyde Chittum and Ivy Muterspaw.

7. Clyde Chittum and Ivy Muterspaw.


9. Clyde Chittum and Ivy Muterspaw.


11. Clyde Chittum and Ivy Muterspaw.

SOURCES

Chittum, Clyde and Muterspaw, Ivy. Interview, 23 February 1984.
The Lexington Gazette, 4 August 1948.
