



tar heel history

Fort Defiance

The well-preserved Caldwell County homestead of Revolutionary War Gen. William Lenoir provides a vivid picture of 18th-century frontier life. But don't expect to find a fort.

BY R. KELLY COFFEY

Lenoir is a familiar name in North Carolina, with a city in the west and a county in the east named in honor of Revolutionary War Gen. William Lenoir. But it's at the secluded home this prosperous plantation owner built in Caldwell County that you get the measure of the man who grew to prominence in education and politics as well as war. Named Fort Defiance after the stockade that

formerly stood in the vicinity, the homestead provides a vivid picture of 18th-century life on the fading Carolina frontier.

The drive to Fort Defiance takes you through scenic Happy Valley — another name for the upper Yadkin River Valley. There are broad pastures and cornfields shadowed by spurs of the Blue Ridge Mountains. What you won't find is a fort.

Guides at the William Lenoir home site explain that a fort did exist in the area in the 1700s, built by the local militia as a defense against the threat of invading Cherokee Indians. The invasion never materialized, however, and eventually the old fort deteriorated and disappeared. When Lenoir built his house and began developing a plantation in 1792, he named it Fort Defiance.

The Lenoir estate grew into a substantial plantation with as many as 80 slaves raising the traditional crops of tobacco and corn. A distillery on the property transformed some of the corn into whisky, a profitable undertaking in the early 19th century. In addition to cash crops, the plantation also produced livestock, grains, fruit trees, and vegetables for food.

Lenoir was a land speculator who owned thousands of acres in northwestern North Carolina. In the summer, he grazed his livestock across the Blue Ridge in present-day Watauga and Ashe counties. He also rented land to tenants, requiring them to improve the property by fencing,



Nancy Lippe

Costumed guides interpret Fort Defiance for visitors and provide historical insights about life on the fading western Carolina frontier of the 18th century.



Nancy Lippe

clearing timber, and planting fruit trees. Because Lenoir's activities covered such a large area, Fort Defiance is an important historic site for the northwestern corner of the state.

Holding down the fort

The plantation house is not elaborate by today's standards, but it was extravagant for those times along the Carolina frontier. The Georgian-style dwelling probably drew a great deal of attention in an area characterized by log cabins at the end of the 1700s. The furnishings were generally modest and locally made, but the family occasionally indulged in grander articles, such as the pair of Chippendale mirrors ordered from Europe. It took several



Courtesy of Fort Defiance

Extravagant for its time, the Georgian-style homestead met the needs of a Happy Valley planter and his family.

years for the fragile mirrors to be transported across the Atlantic and then overland to the far side of the Carolina backcountry. They remain in the house to this day.

Fort Defiance remained in the Lenoir

family until the mid-1960s when it was purchased and restored as a historic site. A private, nonprofit group, Fort Defiance Inc., owns and operates the house and grounds.

Because the Lenoirs rarely discarded

The Life of Lenoir

William Lenoir was an influential backcountry planter, well known throughout North Carolina. He made a living not only from his plantation, but also from surveying and land speculation.

Lenoir was fortunate to be on the leading edge of historical events and geographical developments. He moved to western North Carolina and acquired a significant amount of property just as the westward migration began. This enabled him to profit from both the sale of his lands and his surveying skills. Almost as soon as he arrived on the frontier, military action against the Cherokee Indians and the British afforded him opportunities to demonstrate his leadership abilities, talents that later translated into political office.

Lenoir's ancestors were French Huguenots who settled in Tidewater Virginia. His branch of the family moved to eastern North Carolina when he was a

child. Lenoir and his bride, Ann, migrated to the foot of the Blue Ridge in 1775, moved into their first home there, a log cabin, and started a family, which would grow to nine children.

In 1776, Lenoir served as a military ranger along the headwaters of the New River, on the lookout for Cherokees who were attacking settlements in western North Carolina. When the threat seemed to dissipate in the northern mountains, Lenoir was ordered to join Griffith Rutherford in his invasion and destruction of Cherokee towns to the southwest. After that action, the Revolutionary War soon drew the attention of the frontier settlements. Lenoir committed himself to the patriot cause, served as a soldier in the war, and won fame at the Battle of Kings Mountain.

Lenoir's military activities brought him honor and recognition locally, opening doors to a political career.

Following the war, he was chosen as a delegate to North Carolina's constitutional ratifying conventions. Although Lenoir opposed the federal constitution, he supported the new national government after it was established. He also served in both houses of the state legislature and held the highest leadership position in the state senate for a time. Though he had little formal education, the self-taught Lenoir began his adult life as a teacher and became the first president of the University of North Carolina's board of trustees.

Lenoir did an admirable job representing his area of North Carolina in government and education, especially considering that Fort Defiance was far from the power centers in the east. He accomplished all this while managing a family, a plantation, large land holdings, and a surveying enterprise.

— R. Kelly Coffey

household articles, most of the furnishings you see there — more than 300 articles, ranging from books to furniture — are original to the house. William Lenoir also left behind excellent records and journals in which he described the background and significance of numerous household items. His writings provide a firsthand account of life in those early days and have proved to be a valuable resource for fully and accurately interpreting

Fort Defiance, according to Becky Phillips, executive director of Fort Defiance Inc. The documents are now part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Southern Historical Collection.

Fort Defiance was modified and modernized a number of times over the years. Lenoir began the process in 1823 with a three-room expansion. Today, the house has been restored to its original 1792 appearance with the 1823 addition.

Costumed guides at Fort Defiance provide historical insights into the Lenoir family, and the spacious grounds encourage visitors to explore on their own. Although not a part of the historic site, the cornfields surrounding the estate echo the original plantation landscape. Remnants of a formal garden can be seen in the large boxwoods scattered throughout the lawn. A reconstructed smokehouse is located close to the house. The Lenoir family cemetery, including the grave of William Lenoir, is a short stroll from the visitor's center.

Fort Defiance, true to its name, defies the deterioration that erased many frontier structures. Backcountry log cabins, prevalent in the 1700s, were abandoned and left to decay. Frame houses were not widespread in this part of the state until well into the 1800s. An 18th-century home is an unusual sight in western North Carolina today, and Lenoir's history-filled plantation is a rare gem in the shadow of the Blue Ridge.



R. Kelly Coffey lives in Boone.

if you're going

From Lenoir, take U.S. Highway 321 north for about three miles, then turn right onto N.C. Highway 268 for another five miles. Fort Defiance is on the right, at the end of a long, gravel drive. From Wilkesboro, take N.C. Highway 268 west about 15 miles. The entrance to Fort Defiance will be on the left.

The site is open April through October. Hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sunday, 1 p.m.-5 p.m. Admission is \$4 adults; \$2 children; under 5 free. Special group tours can be arranged.

For more information, contact:
Becky Phillips
Fort Defiance Inc.
P.O. Box 686
Lenoir, N.C. 28645
(828) 758-1671

CITY TRANSFER AND STORAGE

We Can Take You There!

RECORD STORAGE **HOMEPAK**

Specializing in Home Office,
Individual Moving and Storage since 1908

High Point
1100 Redding Drive
High Point, NC 27260
800-334-2648

Atlas Van Lines *Interstate Agent*
World-Class MovingSM
ICC NO. MC79658

Winston-Salem
2895 Ridgewood Park Dr.
Winston-Salem, NC 27107
800-476-9844

www.citytransfer.com