

Coldass Creek, Long Hope Mountain, & Elkwallow Knob

Colorful Place Names Tell the Story of the Blue Ridge Region

By Kelly Coffey

Imagine being given an assignment to write a history on an unfamiliar region, but the only source material you could use in your research would be the geographics names of various features on the landscape; every ridge, stream, gap, community, hollow, cove, etc. You might be surprised at how much information that would convey. It would tell the names of the earliest hunters, explorers, and settlers; give clues about the early economy, reveal what crops were grown, and inventory native plants and animals that were living there when white people arrived.

United States Geological Survey topographic maps, which have been around for well over a century, record the names of most geographic features on the landscape. These names date to the earliest white exploration and settlement, and in the case of features with Indian names, possibly centuries before that. The original mapmakers were instructed to record the names according to "local usage," so the maps are, in fact, a record of local folklore. The maps are comprehensive, but a few place names didn't make it on the government maps but are still used according to oral tradition.

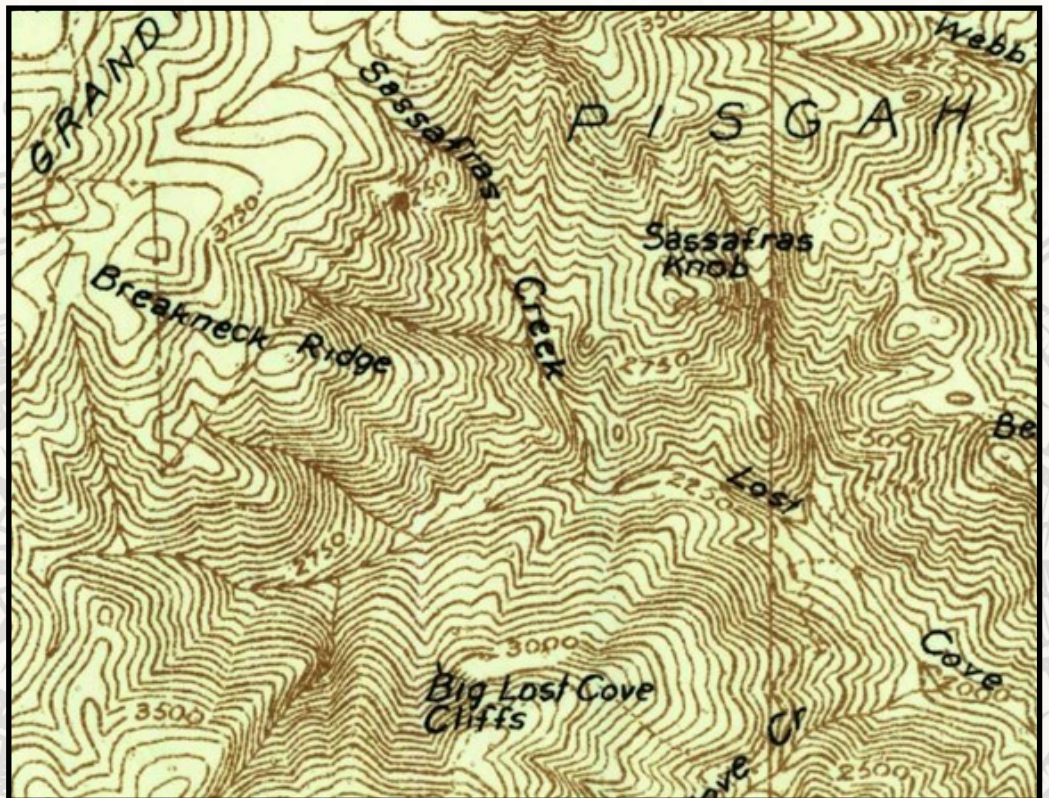


The Deep Gap, view from Wilkes County

Following is a description and analysis of notable geographic names in nine northwestern North Carolina counties- Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, Yancey, Wilkes, Caldwell, and Burke.

Animals & Vegetation

Many names are ordinary descriptions of features on the landscape- *Laurel Creek*. *Big Hill*. *Deep Gap*. - while other names are colorful, earthy, and even poetic. Some give tantalizing hints of an exciting incident at that location two or three hundred years ago.



Several names are unimaginative and merely descriptive of the feature: *Flattop Mountain, Long Branch, Peak Mountain, Round Knob, Three Top Mountain, Rock Creek*. Other features have been given human names, likely the first settler at that location: *Miller Gap, Woodard Branch, Hughes Ridge, Gragg Prong, Sally Creek, Joshua Ridge*.

One can describe the common native vegetation of the region from the place names- *Laurel Ridge, Cherry Gap, Hickorynut Gap, Buckeye Gap, Sassafras Knob, Spanish Oak Mountain, Beech Mountain, White Oak Creek, White Pine Creek, Dogwood Gap, Sarvis Gap, Poplar Cove, Seng [ginseng] Branch*.

Similarly, an inventory of common native animals can be gleaned from the maps – *Bear Branch, Raven Rocks, Otter Knob, Turkey Branch, Wildcat Creek, Raccoon Cove, Polecat Knob, Hootowl Hollow, Groundhog Branch, Possumtrot Creek, Beartown Mountain, Bearwallow Gap*.

Crop names were transferred to the landscape where they were grown: *Pumpkin Patch Gap, Potato Hill, Soup Bean Branch, Cabbage Creek, Wheat Patch Mountain, Buckwheat Branch, Hay Meadow Creek, Orchard Branch*. So were livestock names: *Bull Mountain, Cow Branch, Big Horse Creek, Pigpen Knob*.

Extinct & Extirpated Species

Evidence that these names come from the earliest days of settlement is the fact that so many features are named after animals that died out long ago, specifically elk, wolf, buffalo, panther, and pigeon. *Elk Creek, Elk Ridge, Elk Knob, Elkwallow Knob, Elk Horn Gap, Wolf Rock, Wolf Branch, Wolfpen Creek, Wolfden Ridge, Buffalo Cove, Buffalo Creek, Panther Gap, Painter Knob, Pigeonroost Creek*. It's heartening to know these names are still used. A vestige of the creatures remains if their names are yet uttered on the landscape they once inhabited.

Similarly, features are named after plants and trees that no longer exist. *Cranberry Creek, Chestnut Ridge, Cane Branch*. River cane, or native bamboo, is still found in patches, but not in the vast acreage common 200 years ago. "Watauga" is an Indian name meaning "river of cane."

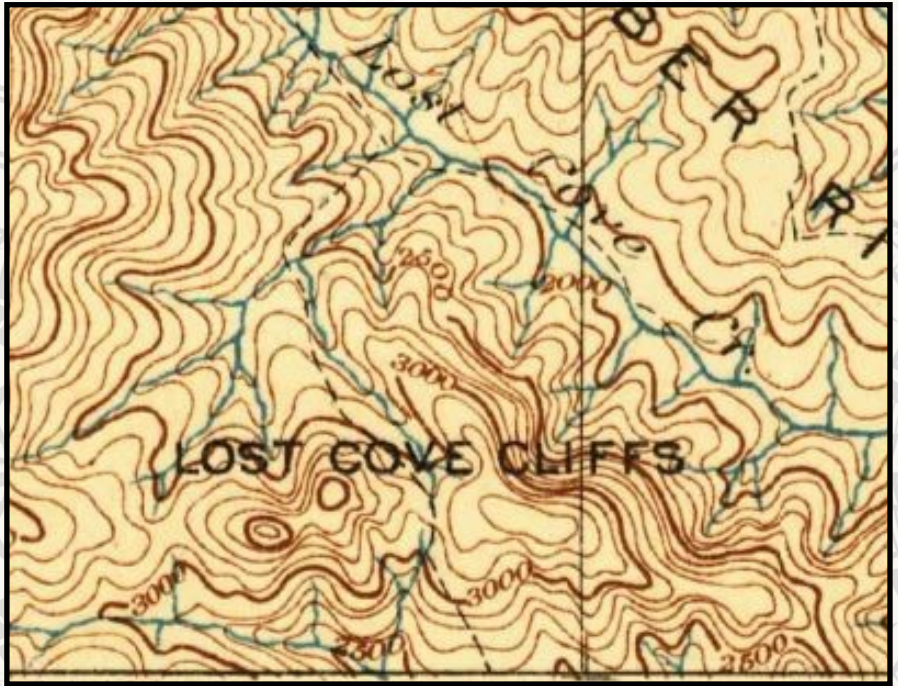
Given the ubiquity of deer nowadays, one would expect numerous places with "deer" in the name. But actually there are few, one being *Deerplay Gap*. This is because the market for deerskin was hot in the 1700s, and Indians hunted them for trade, almost to extinction. Consequently, when white hunters and settlers arrived in the late 1700s, they found few deer but numerous (now extirpated) elk, wolves, and buffalo whose names they gave to various features. A search of USGS' geographic name database for North Carolina reveals 48 features named elk, 59 with buffalo in the name, 84 wolf place names, but only 22 features named deer.



Buffalo once inhabited the region and gave their name to several features.

Lost Places

I've always been intrigued by places with "lost" in the name- *Lost Cove*. *Lost Branch*. *Lost Ridge*. I remember 40 years ago a neighbor telling me that he had been coon hunting one night in Blackberry (Caldwell County) and stumbled upon a rock shelter cave that he didn't know existed. He went back the next day to inspect it by daylight, and couldn't find it no matter how much he searched. Did someone have a similar experience with *Lost Cove* (but eventually found it again)? Lost places have a mystery about them that I wish could still be experienced today, but with GPS, roads, and development, nothing is lost anymore.

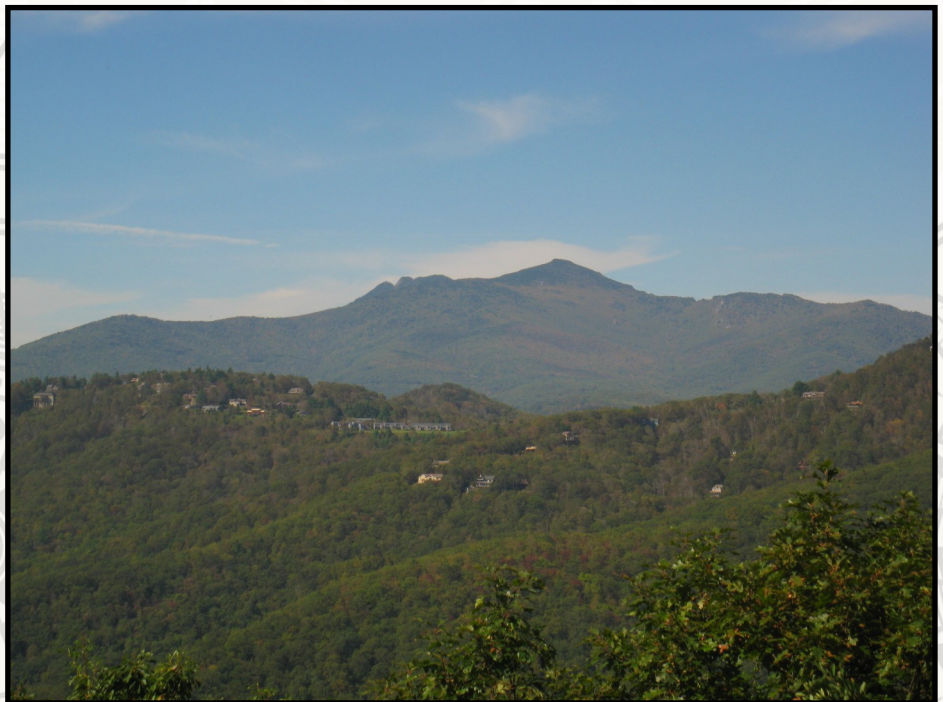


One of the most poetic names is *Long Hope Mountain* and *Long Hope Creek*. One wonders the circumstances that led to this name. What were they hoping for? Surely there is an interesting story behind *Haunted Cove*, though likely now forgotten. Also alluding to the paranormal is *Big Bugaboo Creek*.

In the early days, maple sugar production took place at numerous locations. Settlers would camp wherever there was a concentration of maple trees and spend several weeks collecting sap and boiling it down- in the field- to sugar. A wide variety of names reflects this practice. *Sugar Gap*. *Sugartree Ridge*. *Sugarcamp Ridge*. *Sugar Grove*.

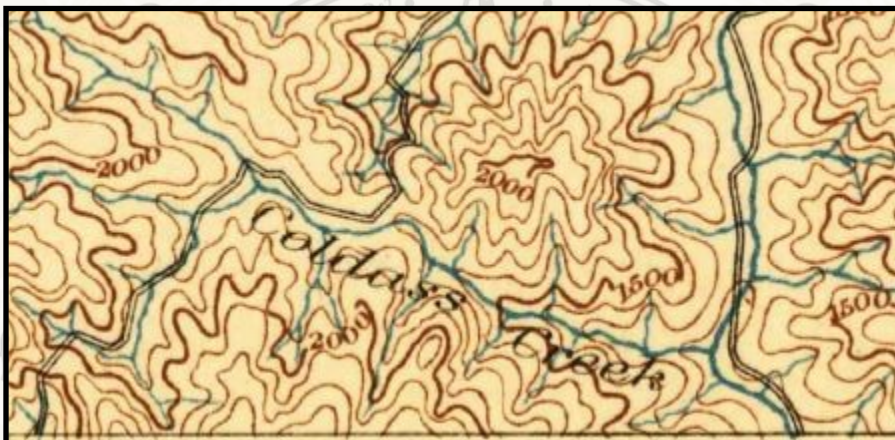
Indian Names

A few Indian names exist. *Nolichucky River*. *Watauga River*. *Yadkin River*. There's a community in Mitchell County called *Estatoe*, also the name of the nearby river, but was eventually shortened to *Toe River*. The Cherokee name for Grandfather Mountain was *Tanawha*, which means a great hawk, and their name for the Linville River was *Eseeolah*, river of many cliffs. The Blue Ridge Mountains were called *Pallasee*. The community of *Warrior* was named after Catawba and Cherokee Indian warriors who fought a battle there. *Indian Grave Gap* is witness to a native presence, as well as *Moccasin Creek*, *Canoe Branch*, and *Indian Creek*.



The Cherokee called Grandfather Mountain *Tanawha*, or great mythic hawk

Navigating the rugged mountain topography and dense vegetation can be a painful experience, as expressed in names such as *Ripshin Branch*, *Headache Hollow*, *Breakneck Ridge*, *Point Misery*, *Coldass Creek*, *Tough Hill*, *Drowning Creek*, *Hardscrabble Branch*, and *Bloody Fork*. I can imagine an early settler making his way along a stream lined so thick with laurel bushes that he is bent double. From then on he refers to it as *Pinchgut Creek*, and the name sticks in the community. One can visualize the lay of the land on *Staircase Mountain* and *Winding Stairs Mountain*. Not sure what *Loose Mountain* implies; maybe a terrain covered with loose rocks?



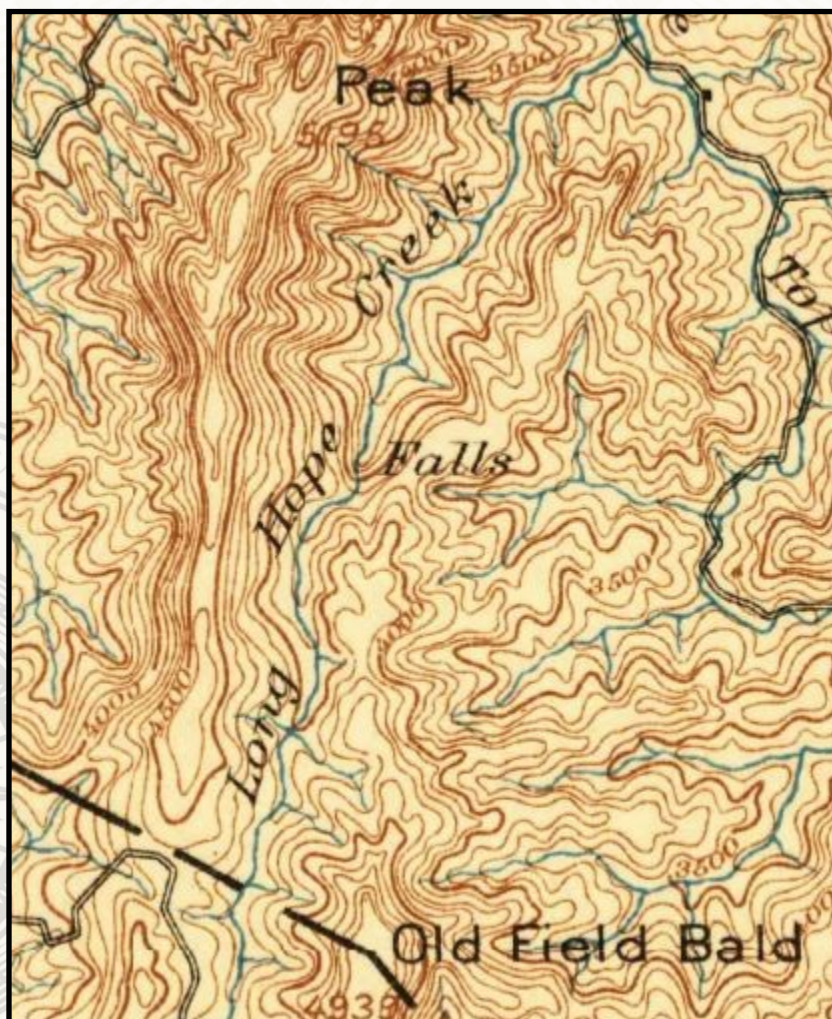
Camps, Mills, Balds, & Banjos

“Camps” are numerous- *Bailey Camp Creek*, *Hoot Camp Branch*, *Jackson Camp Creek*, *Boone Camp Branch*, *Blood Camp Ridge*. These are likely layover spots for the earliest hunters and explorers. *Raider Camp Creek* hints at a violent story for that location.

One of the first structures built in a community, after cabins, was a grain mill; essential for a food supply and built on a stream for a power source. The significance of a mill is evident in the numerous *Mill Creeks* scattered across the region. Other stream names are more specific, giving the name of the miller- *Estes Mill Creek*. *Hayes Mill Creek*. *Lowder Mill Branch*.

You know you are in a mountain landscape when level places are rare enough to be named- *Sandy Flat*, *Whiteoak Flats*, *Dogwood Flats*, *Hickory Flats*, *Cary’s Flat*. Likewise, *Carpenter Bottom* and *Laurel Bottoms* refer to a relatively expansive, level topography.

When the first settlers arrived, they found plenty of treeless areas, particularly on mountaintops that they named balds- *Grassy Ridge Bald*, *Higgins Bald*, *The Bald*. But open places were also found off the mountaintops as *Grassy Creek* testifies.



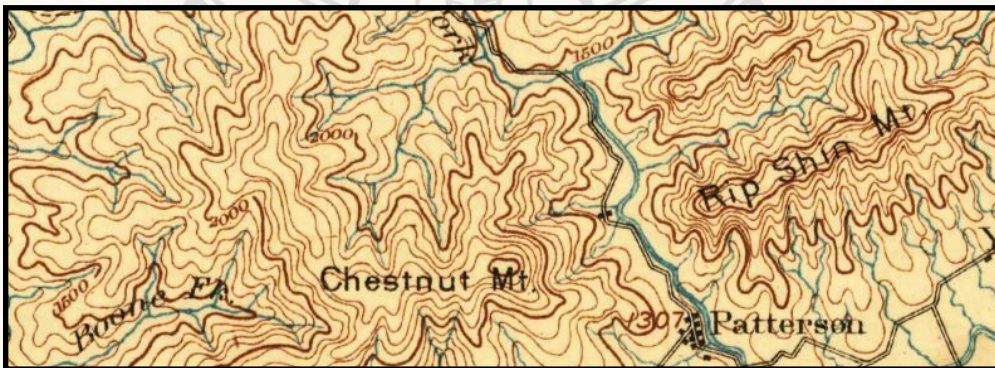
Fiddlers Run and *Banjo Branch* reflect the musical heritage as the two most popular mountain music instruments.

A violent incident probably occurred at *Deadman Gap*. Not sure if *Frozenhead Ridge* and *Skull Knob* refer to figures seen in the landforms or if a frozen head and a skull were really found in the vicinity.

Cattle were grazed in the mountains by farmers in the foothills even before settlers moved into the area. Livestock were kept tame and rounded-up using salt, which is likely the origin of *Lick Log Gap* and *Salt Rock Gap*.



Some features were named after a nearby log cabin.



on that day? What led to the naming of *Kentucky Creek* here in North Carolina? Maybe the early settlers there moved on to the bluegrass state?

Branch or Run

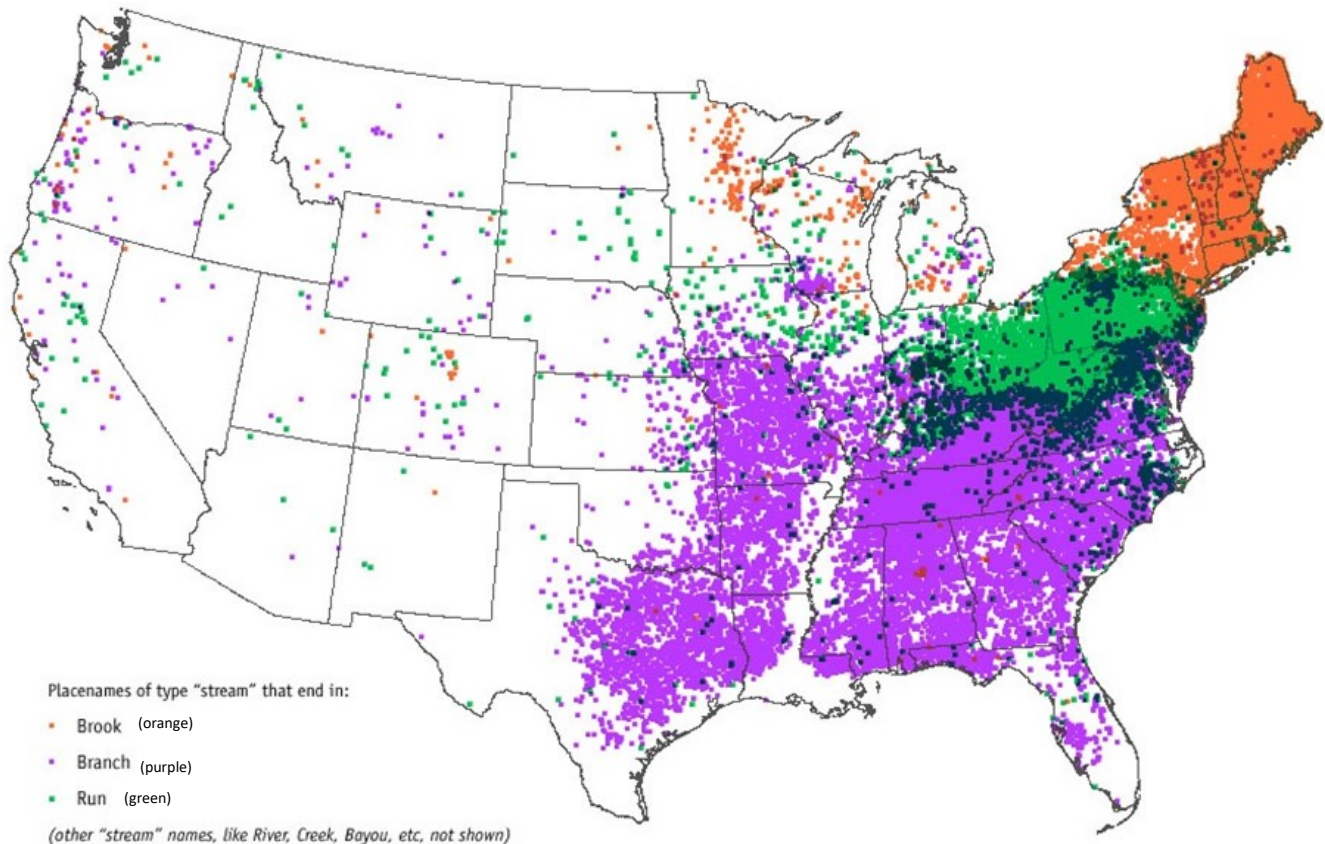
Goldmine Branch probably had an interesting history. *Hewed Log Gap* reflects the region's log cabin heritage, as well as *Sump-ter Cabin Creek* and *Bailey Cabin Knob*. The circumstances leading to the naming of *New Years Creek* might be interesting. Maybe it was discovered



The generic names for streams create a geographic pattern, as shown on the map below. "Branch" dominates in this part of the country, with "run" common in the mid-Atlantic states and the Shenandoah Valley. The most famous run is *Bull Run* in northern Virginia, the site of the Civil War battle of the same name. A few "runs" are found in our area, probably evidence of settlers originating in the Shenandoah Valley or farther north- *Mountain Run*. *Pumpkin Run*. *Pine Run*. *Fiddlers Run*.

Glen Burney Falls on New Years Creek

Mapping US Toponymy: Branch, Run, Brook



Map by: Paul Fly, <http://www.pfly.net>
Data Source: Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), <http://geonames.usgs.gov>

Some features have weather names – *Windy Gap*. *Rainbow Gap*. *Hurricane Gap*. *Thunderhole Creek*. *Thunder Hill*. *Thunderstruck Knob*. The devil is given his due in names such as *Devil's Nest* (a summit), *Devil's Garden* (a cliff), and *Devil's Gate* (a rock outcrop). The origin of *Nubbinscuffle Creek* is likely an interesting tale (a nubbin is an immature corn seed). *High Eagle* is a poetic name for a mountain summit. A mysterious stream is known as *Secrets Creek*. *Loafers Glory* is a community where apparently little gets done. *Lickskillet Branch* was likely named after finishing a meal.



Thunder Hill