

North Carolina Society of Historians

Submittal Summary for Nomination of *From New College to Springdale* DVD

Multi-Media Award

2016

A unique educational institution and experience existed in Cruso Community of Haywood County, North Carolina, during the 1930s – unlike any other scholarly endeavor before or since. New College Community Experience of New College Branch of Columbia University's Teachers College was the concept of Dr. Thomas Alexander, a professor at Columbia University, New York City. The history, as well as the educational and social implications of this multi-faceted approach to training teachers, was conveyed in a video discussion by Dr. Alexander's son, Richard Alexander, in 2013. Ted Carr, Bethel Rural Community Organization's (BRCO) Historic Preservation Committee member, and Evelyn Coltman, chair of BRCO's Historic Preservation Committee, directed the layout, process, and filming. Doug Chambers, videographer, filmed and edited the recordings. Prior to filming, BRCO's twelve member Historic Preservation Committee supported the concept of the video. After filming, the committee presented a viewing that included the public and the family of Richard Alexander. The DVD titled *From New College to Springdale* became available for purchase in 2015, and the DVD has been so popular that BRCO has reordered several times.

Attached to this submittal is a chapter from Book 3 of *Legends, Tales & History of Cold Mountain*, a series of six books written by Evelyn Coltman for BRCO's seven-season Cold Mountain Heritage Tour which was conducted by the Historic Preservation Committee from 2005-2011. Members of BRCO's Historic Preservation Committee have assisted with collecting data, putting together books, and selling the publications to benefit BRCO's Historic Preservation Committee's efforts to collect, document, and educate about Bethel history. The six books of the *Legends* series were granted the Barringer Award of Excellence by the NC Society of Historians in 2010. Book 3 included a lengthy section about schools in the Bethel/Cruso Communities. The segment included for the purposes of this application is limited to the section in the book about New College, Springdale School, and High Valley Camp – the same topic as the *From New College to Springdale* DVD.

Richard Alexander was 95 years old at the time of filming. The accuracy of his account, enhanced by accompanying historical photographs, serves to convey a detailed description of a unique educational experiment that has, heretofore, failed to receive the attention it deserves either in historical or educational circles. Appropriate questioning, staging, and writing by the directors produces a quality product that conveys a timely understanding of the significance of this 1930s educational program. Expert videography and editing result in a professional quality production that serves to capture history, educate the viewer, and yield an entertaining addition to Haywood County and North Carolina history.

# *Legends, Tales & History of Cold Mountain*

## *CHAPTER XI*

### *New College Community Experience Of New College Branch Of Columbia University's Teachers College*

Mention of a college, school, and camp in the Bethel/Cruso region is usually omitted from historical accounts of the schools in Haywood County. This omission is difficult to understand since a significant social and educational experiment occurred that deserves recognition for its ingenuity and its impact. New College (1932-1939) was a sub-division of New York City's Columbia University's Teachers College. A segment of New College's complete curriculum was the "New College Community Experience" that operated in Cruso Community from the summer of 1933 through the summer of 1937. This innovative program gave impetus to the formation of Springdale School (1937-1953) and High Valley Camp (1934-1961). The New College Experience occurred in Cruso on a stock farm owned by the Thomas Lenoir Gwyn family on land that currently is the location of Springdale Country Club in Cruso.

The man whose vision led to the development of these three educational institutions, Dr. Thomas Alexander, was an authority on European education. His undergraduate and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Columbia University along with his teaching experiences in Turkey and Germany created a desire in him to build an institution based on the liberal arts infused with a means of addressing the persistent problems of living. After a stint of teaching at George Peabody College in Nashville, he returned to Columbia University as a member of the Teachers College from 1924-1951. He also served as a German education specialist on the staff of the International Institute at Columbia. While there, he initiated the New College branch of Teachers College. After New College and World War II, his Columbia University assignment was to work with the State Department to assist in restructuring the post war German educational system. One of his aims when he came to Columbia University was to develop a teacher's college that would serve to regenerate a failing society. Dr. Alexander desired to alter the manner in which teachers received their educational training, thereby creating a new breed of teacher. His means for accomplishing his purpose was to develop a progressive college that meshed academics with experiences. Fortunately, Teachers College at Columbia University was one of the country's leading institutions in teacher training and, therefore, was receptive to Dr. Alexander's concept.

Prior to the innovative concepts coming out of Columbia University during the first half of the twentieth century, the profession of teaching had relied primarily on training techniques offered at *normal schools*. These *normal schools* had their origin in the 1820's when educational institutions determined that teachers should receive preparation in more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. Teachers, in fact, needed to be able to teach bookkeeping, drawing, geography, history, homemaking, music, physical education, science, and language. This two-year *normal school* method for educating

teachers became typical after the Civil War. Eventually *normal schools* developed into four year teachers' colleges. By the 1930's, some states' requirements for teachers were so lax as to allow teachers to perform even though they had only a high school education. Most states required at least a two year degree for teaching in public schools. Dr. Alexander wished to improve on the accepted training protocols by convincing Columbia University to begin a novel concept in teacher training. New College division of Teachers College was the vehicle for transforming Dr. Alexander's notion into reality.

Faculty at the Cruso location consisted of Columbia's Teachers College instructors. Some were full-time at the New York campus with short tenures in North Carolina. Other instructors were assigned full-time to the Cruso facility. These college teachers, therefore, received valuable preparation in the art of teaching, a program often lacking for many who choose to teach at the college level.

The New College branch of Columbia University's Teachers College served a number of purposes for its participants. The program allowed students just out of high school to begin studying to become teachers rather than requiring those participants to complete two initial years at a normal school. The school served as a laboratory for undergraduate students to observe and participate in hands-on training. The program permitted students to receive training in the art of teaching that would lead to master's degree certification. Students from the New York City metropolitan area, who constituted the bulk of the New College student body, experienced the difficulties inherent in rural life in the remote mountainous region of Western North Carolina. Students were introduced to the extreme physical requirements and sparse conveniences expected of those living on a working farm. Students, therefore, blended academics with real life at New College Community.

Even though instruction at New College was individualized and flexible, the requirements of the curriculum were such that each student had to incorporate five types of training into the curriculum: (1) studying academics and writing a thesis (2) spending at least one summer working and studying on the farm in North Carolina (3) studying abroad and learning at least one foreign language (4) incorporating workplace training (called "a period of industry") into the schedule (5) participating in a year's internship that involved teaching under supervision. The program could be adapted for students from abroad who were fluent in more than one language. Students who already had held a job could forego the work experience portion of the curriculum. Dr. Alexander decided that pupils needed to learn how other people lived, worked, and socialized in order to challenge their own provincial thought patterns.

New College students received most of their academic course work at the New York campus. The New College Community in North Carolina was used for general orientation of students and for the rural community experience. At the Cruso location, some students came for extended stays of a year or

longer, a program necessitated by the college's need to operate the farm year-round. Instructors would come for short periods from the New York City campus in order to supervise independent study projects and to conduct reading courses that were shaped to align with work related activities for these year-round students. For most students, however, the time spent in North Carolina was incorporated into shorter periods. Since the emphasis of New College was to instruct future teachers, the focus of learning was to cover studies such as philosophy, the philosophy of education, and the psychology of teaching. Social sciences, psychology, home economics, public health, institutional cooking, biology, and farm activities were also emphasized. Lectures on a number of general subjects occurred at various times during a busy work schedule.

Dr. Alexander's emphasis on experiencing life on a rural southern farm found a home in Haywood County on land that had once belonged to the Colonel Thomas Lenoir and Captain Thomas Isaac Lenoir families, early settlers of the Pigeon Valley/Cruso section of Haywood County. The houses of two of their descendants, the James Gwyn House and the Thomas Lenoir Gwyn House, were used as buildings on the school grounds. The campus was situated on a one thousand and forty acre farm with an elevation of approximately two thousand nine hundred feet on the East Fork of the Pigeon River. The college rented the land from the Gwyn family. Initially, tents provided living quarters for summer students. Ten or twelve small unheated cabins replaced tents. In addition to the two houses (referred to as the old house and the new house), there was a science lab, studio building, canning house, three large barns, chicken coop, pig pen, spring house, water tank, shed, and an amphitheater where lectures and symposia were held. Wooden fire places and a wood and coal fired hot air furnace provided warmth for the main campus buildings during fall and winter months. A generator provided a sparse amount of electrical lighting for the two main houses. The campus included a vegetable garden, a small apple orchard, tennis courts, and recreation fields. Students swam and participated in boating on the Pigeon River. Surrounding the school to its outer reaches was the forested area prefacing Sugar Top Mountain and Rocky Face Mountain, the Pigeon River, the highway, and a cemetery. The building and grounds supported the hands-on curriculum. The working farm allowed students to learn to cut and saw wood and to perform carpentry skills in order to build campus buildings. The farming life necessitated that the scholars ride horses, plow, tend to the garden, gather vegetables and fruit and learn to prepare and preserve them, feed pigs, chickens, and other livestock, milk cows, and tend to any other typical farming chores.

In addition to experiencing life on a working farm, learning a foreign language was considered mandatory for students at New College. Columbia University is listed in *World Book Encyclopedia* as offering more foreign language courses in its curriculum than any other university in the United States. Not only did the students have to incorporate two years of a foreign language into their curriculum, but also they were required (during the summer and fall of their fourth year) to spend a period of approximately six months to a year in a European country, absorbing information about the customs, universities, institutions, and the people. Students from other countries could count their stint in the

United States as their foreign study experience. According to Dick Alexander, son of Dr. Alexander, the purpose of the foreign experience was to enable future teachers to understand that “it is a big world, and we are not exactly the same.” Dr. Alexander believed that foreign study would allow students the opportunity to understand better their own culture. Mary Daugherty Mix completed her dissertation on New College in 1968. According to Mix’s dissertation, *New College of Teachers College: A History, 1932-39*, the foreign study requirement was unique to New College since most teachers colleges did not have that requirement.

A fourth component of the New College program was the requirement that students have a period of time in which they worked in business or industry. The purpose of this work requirement was to help students, as future teachers, to understand what it means to work for a living. Since New College’s existence paralleled the Great Depression, students faced a grim reality regarding their work experience. Students participated in such employment as waiting on tables, volunteering, and performing office or industrial jobs. New College referred to the job session as the “period of industry.” The experience of looking for a job, earning money, and struggling to exist was an important element in the New College philosophy. According to Dick Alexander, future teachers were expected to work with their hands in a job unrelated to teaching. Work force training challenged the students to work toward a better social order. In addition, since many of the New College student body were not wealthy, some of these students welcomed the period of industry requirement because it enabled them to have funds with which to continue their schooling.

The New College program was a five calendar year course of study that ended with a supervised fifth year internship and an eventual master’s degree. The New College course of study was, after all, an undergraduate program in the Teachers College setting which was a Graduate School of education. An assignment to teach New College classes was an opportunity for more advanced graduate students in Teachers College to gain valuable experience in collegiate teaching.

Although some students at New College came from below the Mason Dixon line, student populations at New College consisted primarily of northern students (mainly from metropolitan New York City) from urban families. Other students were from foreign countries, including refugee students who had fled Germany. Many were older students. Local mountain people were not part of the student body. New College opened in 1933 with sixty to seventy students. At its peak, which usually occurred in the summer months, one hundred and fifty people attended the New College Experience in Cruso Community. Approximately eight hundred students participated in the New College program during its years of operation.

As could be imagined when urban northerners enter a remote southern community, the “outsiders” were not always well received. One connection to the general community that enabled the school to earn respect among the local people was the nursery school program run by the college staff and students. The pre-school program was free to parents in the local community. Many local parents assisted the students with their own children’s pre-school experience, thereby enabling Cruso community to bond with these northern outsiders. Local people were also employed to assist with the farming and other activities, primarily during the summers. Churches in the surrounding community appreciated the musical talent of their New College neighbors. The language barrier proved difficult because the Brooklyn accent was hard for the mountaineers to comprehend and vice versa.

New College of Columbia University was short-lived, lasting only from 1932-1939. The reasons for its demise were several. The program operated during the Great Depression when finances were difficult. While a few of the students may have come from well-to-do backgrounds, quite a few did not. Many students, in fact, had already met their period of industry requirement before enrolling at Columbia because their financial difficulties necessitated their working prior to entering the program. Financial problems and a decline in attendance were two of the problems faced by New College. Worldwide political problems added to the mix. Budget shortfalls led to the eventual closing of the program.

Even though New College lasted only seven years, Dr. Alexander’s focus on “learning by doing” assured that the students tutored in the New College facility would be excellent teachers. They were trained to be knowledgeable not only about academic subjects they would teach, but they also were instilled with practical knowledge obtained from experience. While the members of the faculty of New College generally agreed that the purpose of the institution was to develop a new social order, they realized that such a plan needed to arise from individual communities rather than being dictated by a national plan. New College’s emphasis on foreign language and foreign study, its work-study requirement, its focus on learning about other cultures and other lifestyles had an impact not only on the lives of participating students but also on the focus of educational training in general.

### *New College Nursery School*

The establishment of unique educational programs in Cruso Community in Haywood County, North Carolina, was the result of the efforts of the staff of Columbia University’s New College and Dr. Thomas Alexander, an expert in the field of teacher training. New College (1932-1939) was an extension of Columbia University’s Teachers College’s efforts to create better teachers by immersing students into practical experience situations on a working farm. Students were also required to study abroad, seek

employment, and participate in a teaching internship. Since the focus of the experimental project was to prepare future teachers, a natural sequence of the project became the operation of a nursery school. The nursery school project benefited trainees since they gained work experience with children rather than learning about them from textbooks and seminars. The nursery school program conducted at Cruso School by New College students was important to working parents whose children gained cost-free valuable social and educational benefits from student instructors.

### *Springdale School*

In addition to the nursery program established at Cruso School by New College faculty and students, an elementary and high school developed as a result of the New College Experience agenda. Two years before the demise of New College in 1939, this university extension established a private school to educate children at the junior high and high school levels during the regular school year. Springdale School started in 1937 as a year round laboratory boarding school run by some New College faculty as well as graduate interns from Columbia University's New College. By 1940, a group affiliated with Springdale School had purchased a one thousand forty acre farm from the Gwyn family. The school modernized the heating system for the two main houses by installing a steam heating system. Springdale School conducted classes on the New College campus in what was known as the "big house," even using the ten to twelve foot wide hallways as classrooms. Science, music, drama, German, Latin, as well as standard courses in math and English formed the core of the curriculum. Algebra, trigonometry, physics, chemistry, and biology were advanced courses. Athletic programs were important, and students competed in basketball utilizing an outdoor court for practice. The facility eventually housed children from age six to sixteen, though most of the pupils were twelve to sixteen years old. Tuition was expensive (\$1200 to \$1500 annually) enough to limit its co-ed membership. Approximately thirty students a year attended. Springdale recruited students from around the nation; thus, most of its students were boarding students. One student from Cruso and one from Waynesville were the only local attendees. Dick Alexander characterized the school as a "boarding school for students with special needs." Springdale School's faculty's job was to prepare the students academically as well as in the art of living.

Even though the school continued for fourteen years, ending in 1953, the same financial difficulties experienced by New College began to afflict Springdale School. Eventually, problematic expenses connected with trying to maintain a facility for both sexes resulted in the school catering only to boys. The ongoing recruitment of students eventually failed to attract enough participants to make it financially viable. The faculty became weary attempting to conduct a twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week facility.

## *High Valley Camp*

New College also began a summer camp in 1934 that was open from June through August. It was approximately a mile from the main buildings on the New College Campus and was staffed by New College staff and students. Children were boarded in cabins with approximately eight bunks to a cabin. The campers' primary activities included participating on a working farm for the summer by tending animals, keeping a garden, and hiking.

High Valley Camp helped to cement the relationship between local people and all of the New College programs. Many of the camp activities eventually involved young friends from the community. On Saturday's younger boys and girls played baseball and soccer with local children. In addition, the camp instituted the twenty-five-year-long July 4<sup>th</sup> fireworks festival that became a community event. Campers also participated in musical shows at the local Cruso Elementary School.

The Camp's summer program carried the school financially for several years and lasted beyond both New College and Springdale School, closing in 1961. Like Springdale School, the camp was considered to be a laboratory experience for teacher trainees.

These reports on New College, the nursery program, Springdale School, and High Valley Camp compiled by Evelyn M. Coltman came from the following sources:

"New College: Addressing the Persistent Problems of Living." Published in *Teachers College of Columbia University Newsletter*. Vol.26, No.1, 2001.

Taped interview conducted by Ben Fishback with Dick Alexander, 2007.

Summary of interview by Ben Fishback, April 9, 2007

"Columbia University." *World Book Encyclopedia*. Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, Chicago, Illinois, 1961.

"Teaching." *World Book Encyclopedia*. Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, Chicago, Illinois, 1961.