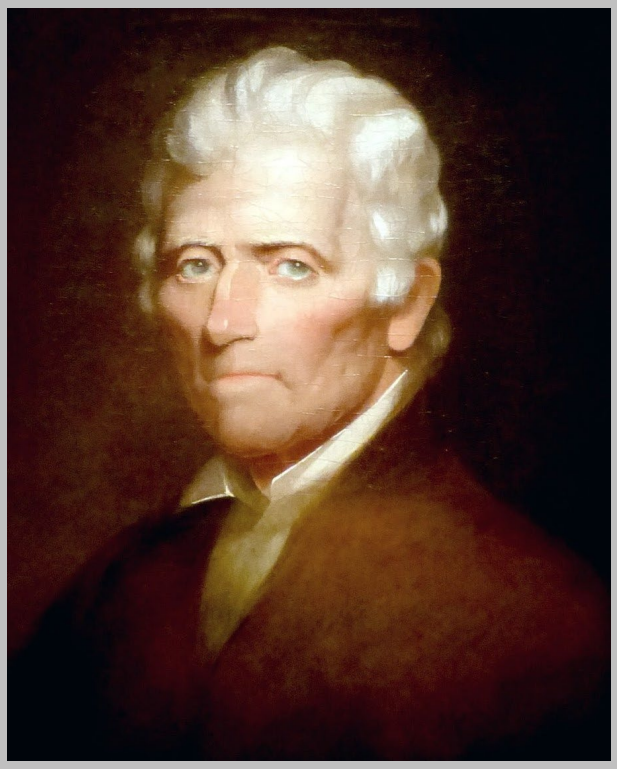


Cook Gap in Daniel Boone Lore

By Kelly Coffey

An overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway in Watauga County close to Bamboo Road near mile marker 286 identifies the site as Boone's Trace. This site is located in Cook Gap, on and just west of the Blue Ridge escarpment. The Parkway traverses the gap between mile markers 285 and 286, or, using landmarks to define it, between the Boone Trace overlook and the Goshen Creek bridge.

Cook Gap has been identified as the passage Daniel Boone took on his hunting trips into the mountains and eventually, on his journey into Kentucky. How do we know?

Michael Cook, an early Watauga County pioneer, settled in the gap; thus was the origin of the name.[1] Such homesteading at the site hints that it was a passage into the area very early on. Written documentation of the Cook Gap tradition dates to the early 1900s with William Lewis Bryan, a Watauga County resident who was a descendant of a brother of Rebecca Bryan. According to John Arthur in his book, *A History of Watauga County*, Bryan, "has all his life preserved all the traditions he has heard concerning Boone, his wife, his trail and hunting experiences in this section. He originated and inspired the idea of marking the trail through this county…"



A landscape view in Cook Gap.

The party responsible for marking the trail, however, was the Daughters of the American Revolution. They relied on Bryan and John Arthur, nevertheless, for advice on where to locate the markers. Where did Bryan and Arthur get their information? According to Randell Jones in *Trailing Daniel Boone*, "These men had traveled about the county, interviewing some of the longtime residents and gathering recollections of facts and stories that had been passed down in their families

[1] Arthur, John Preston. *A History of Watauga County, North Carolina*, 1915, p. 219.

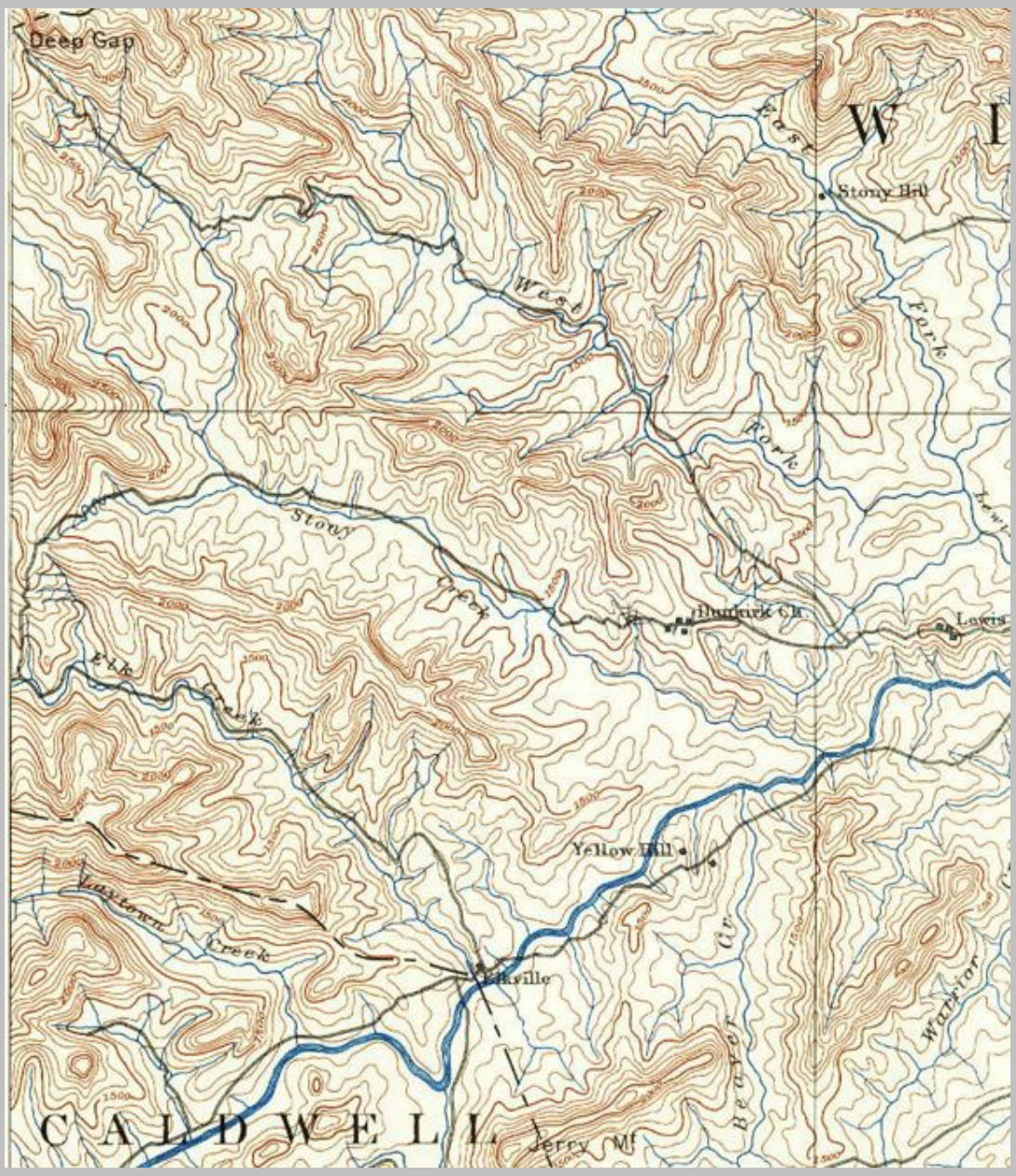
about the old paths through the mountains."[2] Arthur notes, "Boone's trail from Holman's Ford to the Tennessee line was as well known to most of the older people of the country through which it passed as are the State roads."[3] Their contacts were unanimous about the route of the trail through Cook Gap and "the witnesses were numerous and intelligent- the very best men in the community."[4]

Arthur has more information in his book *Western North Carolina: A History,* stating that Boone "went up the ridge between Elk Creek and Stony Fork Creek, following a well-known Indian trail, passed through what is now called Cook's Gap…"[5] Elsewhere he calls the route the "Shawnee trail."[6] Further, he says that the trail was a buffalo trace that could still be discerned in 1914 "as it is knee-deep in many places."[7] Piecing together late 19th century U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps, one can easily visualize Boone's route from his home on Beaver Creek through Cook Gap. The ridge between Stony Fork and Elk Creek rises just west of where Beaver Creek flows into the Yadkin River (see map below). Dropping off the other end of the ridge, one would follow Elk Creek to where the Blue Ridge protrudes east from Cook Gap, an ideal location to climb the escarpment and continue on flatter ground through the gap. Following Elk Creek, one comes to a point where it intersects with Boone Camp Branch (see last map below), the name of which is further evidence that Boone took this route. At this point, one is at the tip of the ridge where Cook Gap extends east.

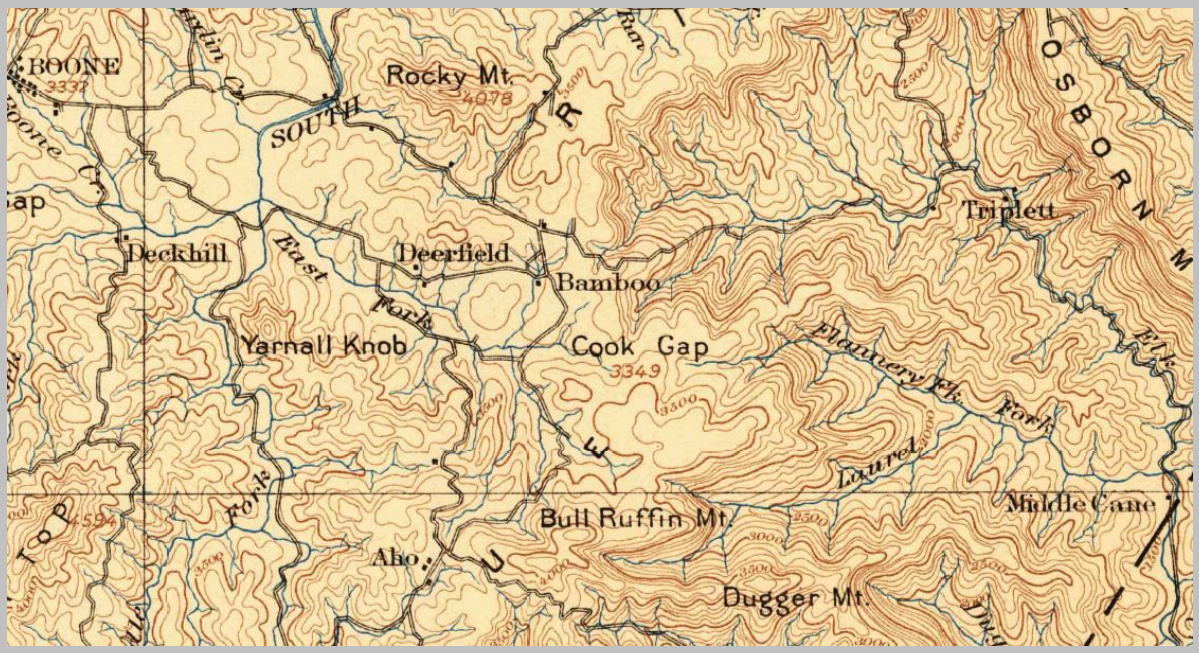


Pasture in Cook Gap west of the Blue Ridge.

[2] Jones, Randell. *Trailing Daniel Boone: Daughters of the American Revolution Marking Daniel Boone's Trail, 1912-1915*. 2012, p. 80.
[3] Arthur, John P. "The Trail of Daniel Boone", *Skyland Magazine*, September 1914, 651.
[4] Ibid, 654.
[5] Arthur, John. *Western North Carolina: A History*. Asheville: EHD Morrison, 1914, p. 82. Older references include the possessive "s"- Cook's Gap- but U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps do not.
[6] Ibid, 80.
[7] Arthur, "The Trail of Daniel Boone", 653.



An 1895 U.S. Geological Survey topographic map (below) shows Cook Gap in the space between the headwaters of Flannery Fork, which flows east off the Blue Ridge escarpment, and the headwaters of East Fork, which flows west into the South Fork New River. It lies on an extended plateau that juts east before dropping precipitously off the escarpment. Cook Gap is sandwiched between Rocky Mountain to the north and Bull Ruffin Mountain to the south; two geographic features that really define the gap and mark its boundaries. The lay of the land is relatively level to the west until one reaches Howard Knob and Rich Mountain. It's easy to imagine early explorers like Boone being drawn from Cook Gap to the present-day site of the town because there is no geological impediment between those two locations. It is a low-lying corridor with uplands on either side. One can drive modern-day Deerfield Road or Bamboo Road from the Blue Ridge Parkway into town to get a feel for the rolling geology Boone experienced.



Cook Gap is significant for modern Daniel Boone admirers because it is a site associated with Boone that is very accessible. It can be appreciated even from inside a vehicle. Although the landscape has surely changed since his time and houses are visible, the gap is still in a mostly natural condition with woodlands interspersed with open meadows and pastures. Cook Gap marks a line where Boone left the settled areas of the Yadkin foothills for the wilderness of the mountains. It is a threshold he crossed to become a true explorer of unsettled territory.

