Toward a Black Appalachian Archaeology

Community and Materiality at the Kingdom of the Happy Land

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ABSTRACT

In the mountains of western North Carolina, formerly enslaved people established a community that became known as the Kingdom of the Happy Land. Its kings and queens secured a place in regional memory; the lives of its residents have proved harder to recover. This article examines those lives through a 2025 archaeological investigation of a fieldstone chimney, hearth, and surrounding deposits on a parcel associated with the settlement in Henderson County. Two excavation units encompassing the full hearth and a possible cellar area, four shovel tests, mapping, surface collection, and exterior investigation around the chimney's other three sides documented construction remains and a small assemblage of architectural and personal objects. Interpreted through materiality, these findings connect the history of emancipation with the knowledge, possessions, and continuing labor through which people sustained an occupied place. The analysis considers the hearth, clothing fasteners, and building materials together, while distinguishing the settlement's remembered history from activities documented at this particular structure. Its occupants and social function remain unidentified. The investigation nevertheless supplies an archaeological setting for examining the practical foundations of community life and advances Black Appalachian archaeology as a proposed research agenda centered on the region's Black residents.

Keywords: Black Appalachia; materiality; emancipation; community formation; Kingdom of the Happy Land

INTRODUCTION

Emancipation had ended their legal enslavement, but it had not secured their safety. In South Carolina, the people who would establish the Kingdom of the Happy Land confronted a world in which racial violence threatened the lives they were trying to rebuild. Research reported by Campbell (2025) places most of the settlers in Cross Anchor, Spartanburg County, before their movement toward the mountains in the 1870s, linking that departure to the violence of the postemancipation years. Their journey into the Appalachians carried the urgency of seeking

refuge and the ambition of determining how they would live. Through negotiated access to land and its eventual purchase, they established a community remembered for collective labor and government under their own leaders (Elliston 2021). The Kingdom's history begins with that undertaking: formerly enslaved people seeking safety, acquiring a place to remain, and organizing a society in which they could exercise greater control over their work and collective life.

Generations later, a fieldstone chimney and hearth remained among the hardwoods and pines on a parcel associated with the Kingdom in Henderson County. The surrounding building had largely disappeared. Nails, pieces of glass, and buttons survived nearby, holding traces of construction and clothing that the standing masonry could not reveal on its own. The 2025 investigation examined these remains through two excavation units, four shovel tests, mapping, and surface collection, with work encompassing the full hearth, a possible cellar area, and exterior areas on the chimney's other three sides. The evidence brought the settlement's history into closer view at one occupied place: stones assembled around a hearth, fire staining its surface, personal belongings among the building debris. The people who used it have not yet been named. What survives nevertheless allows their activities to enter an account of the Kingdom, alongside the leaders and founding stories through which the community is most often remembered.

Following those lives through the archaeological record requires attention to how people worked with the things around them. Materiality provides that approach, examining relationships among people, possessions, buildings, and the resources on which they depended (Hodder 2012; Knappett 2005). Here it connects the knowledge invested in construction with the continuing labor of occupation and the personal belongings recovered near the hearth. The building's possible communal role raises questions about how residents organized shared space. The site grounds the proposal for Black Appalachian archaeology in a question that reaches beyond this parcel: how did Black residents create places that supported their safety, livelihoods, and authority over community life? Studies in the Virginia Blue Ridge and at Junaluska provide important precedents for pursuing such questions through the histories of particular communities (Barnes 2011; Gokee et al. 2022).

THE KINGDOM AND THE PEOPLE WHO SUSTAINED IT

The journey to the Kingdom must be understood within the violence that followed emancipation. Campbell (2025), reporting Suzanne Hale's research, identifies Cross Anchor, South Carolina, as the origin of most settlers and suggests that many arrived in the mountains in the 1870s. That finding revises the familiar account of a migration from Mississippi immediately after the Civil War and places their departure within a period of Klan terror. Their movement toward the mountains thus becomes part of a struggle to make freedom livable where intimidation threatened it. The earlier migration narrative in Sadie Smathers Patton's 1957 booklet, as summarized by Elliston (2021), describes an ascent along the mountain trade route toward Oakland, the property of Serepta Davis, widow of Colonel John Davis. The two accounts preserve different migration histories, but together they direct attention to the circumstances of departure and the effort required to secure a new place of residence.

At Oakland, settlement depended on an agreement with Davis, a white landowner who needed labor on her property. Elliston's (2021) account describes an exchange of work for access to land, followed by purchase from the Davis family. The refugees participated in shaping the terms on which they could remain, bringing their labor into a negotiation that eventually gave them ownership. Accounts of the Kingdom describe residents pooling resources and organizing community affairs under the Montgomerys' leadership (Campbell 2025; Elliston 2021). They established a self-governing, cooperative society whose independence rested on land and collective effort, while employment and trade connected them to surrounding communities. This was a substantial achievement for people emerging from enslavement and fleeing racial persecution: they had created a place in which their work could support a future organized around their own community.

Luella Montgomery, whose name also appears as Louella, is remembered as a queen, a teacher, and a leader of worship and singing; Robert Montgomery appears in accounts as a king (Campbell 2025; Elliston 2021). In Luella's teaching, children become visible within the Kingdom's history. In descriptions of farming, paid work, and textile production, the community takes shape through the livelihoods of its residents (Elliston 2021). Their royal titles drew attention, but the responsibilities attached to education, worship, and support of households give those remembered lives greater substance. These accounts begin to populate the settlement with people engaged in work that extended beyond themselves. They do not locate a classroom or a

place of worship at the investigated chimney. They establish the wider community to which the site is historically associated, where the effort of earning a living and the responsibilities of caring for others accompanied the work of settlement.

Families carried that history beyond the settlement's period of occupation. Elliston (2021) recounts Ernest Mims's participation in a 1985 school oral-history project, including family stories about his great-grandfather Perry Williams, a Kingdom resident. Ronnie Pepper likewise described growing up with stories of the Kingdom and later recognizing questions he wished he had asked older people (Lane 2019). Lane distinguishes his creative retelling from documented historical information, a distinction that matters when using the account as evidence. Pepper's recollections nevertheless make clear that knowledge of the Kingdom continued through African American families and through deliberate efforts to tell its history. Archaeology joins that work with a different kind of record. A family account may preserve a person's name while a hearth preserves evidence of activity without identifying its participants. Bringing the two into conversation can recover relationships that neither supplies alone. At this stage, the named residents give the settlement a human presence; the field evidence documents construction, fire use, and possessions at a particular location. Their connection is a question to investigate with descendants and historians, rather than a biography to supply by inference.

MATERIALITY AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF COMMUNITY

The histories of communities founded after emancipation often turn on the moment people secured land or established a settlement. Such moments gave residence a beginning; the years that followed depended on the ability to stay. At the Kingdom, a usable building, a source of heat, and the possessions carried into that space formed part of the conditions of continued residence. Archaeology can investigate those conditions because people altered the land and worked with materials that have survived unevenly into the present. A chimney locates a substantial investment of skill and effort. A button places clothing, and therefore a wearer, within the same setting. Their association makes it possible to approach community formation through lives conducted in particular places. Materiality develops that connection by asking how people acted through the materials available to them and how those materials shaped what they could do (Knappett 2005).

Knappett's (2005) relational approach is useful here because an object's significance emerges from its place among people and other things. A detached button retains only part of the

relationship that once joined a person to a garment, yet even that fragment expands the history of a ruin beyond its architecture. Hodder (2012) gives particular attention to the dependencies these relationships create. Buildings make activities possible while drawing their users into continuing obligations of maintenance and supply. At the Kingdom, the hearth bears evidence of fire, and its operation necessarily required fuel and attention. The surviving fabric also points toward other components, including wood indicated by the fasteners, that did not endure as the stonework did. Read together, these remains allow the analysis to follow residents beyond the initial act of building into the continuing demands of occupation. The survey did not identify individual episodes of fuel collection or repair; those demands are interpretive questions arising from the facilities people used.

Survival gives some parts of this history greater visibility than others. The chimney rises above the ground while garments have disappeared and wooden components are represented largely by the fasteners left behind. If interpretation followed only the most conspicuous remains, the building would overshadow its occupants. The six buttons make that imbalance especially clear. Their number is small beside the nails, but their presence brings clothing and personal possessions into the account. Examining architecture and belongings together keeps attention on the people whose activities joined them in the first place. Their identification with a Black community rests on the site's historical association with the Kingdom and its archaeological context. Masonry and nail forms do not establish racial identity on their own. The interpretive task is to understand what these particular remains contribute to the history of this community, including the choices and obligations through which residents made occupation possible.

TOWARD A BLACK APPALACHIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

The Kingdom belongs within an Appalachian history whose Black residents established communities, maintained families, and worked under circumstances that varied across the region. Archaeology offers a means of examining those histories where buildings and objects preserve aspects of life that written accounts leave indistinct. Barnes's (2011) study of postemancipation community life in Appalachia places race, racism, and the making of community within a historically specific landscape. At Junaluska, Gokee and colleagues (2022) describe collaboration with the Junaluska Heritage Association to investigate community origins and identify unmarked graves. These projects provide precedents for research attentive to Black lives

and to the people who preserve knowledge of them. They also demonstrate the importance of beginning with the circumstances of a community rather than assuming that one place supplies a model for every other Black settlement in the mountains.

This article proposes Black Appalachian archaeology as a research agenda that gives sustained attention to those circumstances. Its development requires studies of how Black residents obtained land, established households, organized work, and maintained relationships within the region. The Kingdom contributes a place where the history remembered by families and regional writers can be examined alongside evidence of occupation. The scale is modest, but the questions are substantial. How did residents turn access to land into continued residence? Which responsibilities fell within households, and which connected people across them? What became of their buildings and possessions after occupation ended? The present investigation begins with the architecture and finds around one chimney. As evidence accumulates, comparisons among occupied places may clarify how residents organized their lives across the settlement. The proposed agenda grows from that close attention to people and place, with the differences among communities remaining as important as their connections.

THE INVESTIGATED PLACE

The 2025 investigation took place on a privately owned, wooded parcel in Henderson County near the North Carolina and South Carolina border. Fig. 1 places the research in its county setting without disclosing the site. Hardwood and pine covered a south-facing slope, where leaf litter, brush, and roots concealed portions of the ground. The standing masonry marked an earlier occupation within that woodland. A hearthstone remained at the chimney's base, with brick, mortar, and other building debris nearby. Beyond it, stone concentrations suggested that more of the built setting might survive than the chimney alone revealed. The relationship among these remains gave the investigation its direction: to establish what had survived of the building and to examine the evidence left by people who used it.

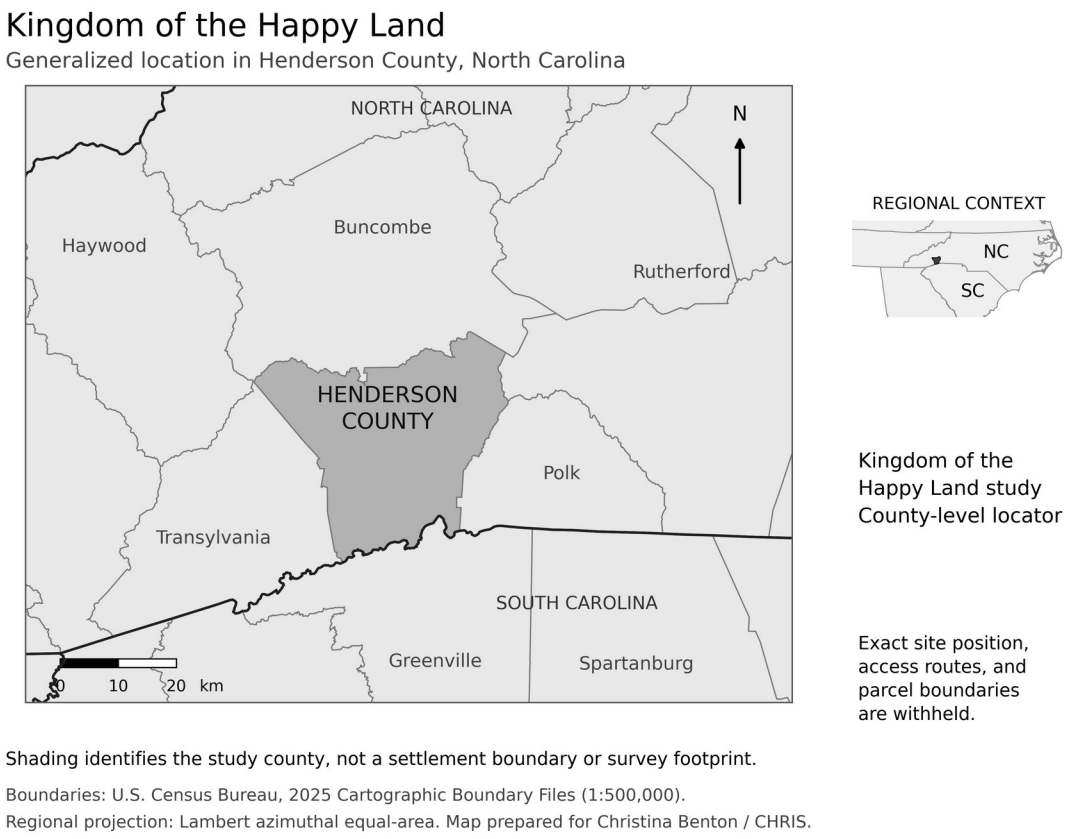


Fig. 1 Regional location of the investigation in Henderson County, North Carolina. Shading identifies the county, not a settlement boundary or survey footprint. Site coordinates, parcel boundaries, and access routes are withheld. Boundary data: U.S. Census Bureau (2025), 1:500,000 scale

The ground also recorded changes that followed occupation. Dense brush limited visibility and movement to the east; a mature tree disturbed soil along the northern boundary, and erosion affected the west. Stones from the damaged chimney had moved downslope. Although the parcel showed no indication of recent grading or utility installation, natural disturbance had altered the setting in which objects were recovered. A nail found on the surface could no longer be assumed to mark the place where someone had used or discarded it. Recording these conditions alongside the architecture allowed the investigation to retain relationships still visible in the masonry while recognizing where roots, erosion, and collapse had changed the evidence. The survey encompassed a small portion of the landscape associated with the Kingdom and did not establish the settlement's boundaries.

FIELD METHODS

Fieldwork combined two excavation units and four shovel test pits with feature mapping, pedestrian survey, controlled surface collection, and exterior investigation around the chimney's other three sides. The excavation units encompassed the full hearth and a possible cellar area within the interpreted building interior. The cellar identification remained provisional. The seven-by-five-meter recording grid, designated Unit 1, provided a reference around the chimney; its dimensions described the investigation area rather than the building. Neither the building's dimensions nor its footprint was established. The project scope called for a minimal investigation concentrated on selected areas, rather than complete exposure of the structure. The team recorded the masonry and nearby stone concentrations using a compass, measuring tape, and stadia rods. Fig. 2 shows the relative areas around the chimney schematically; it does not delineate the excavation units or reconstruct the building's walls.

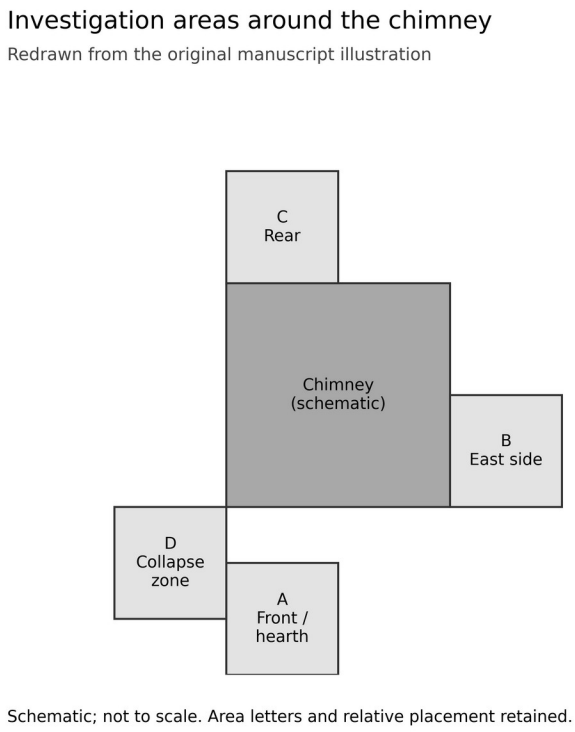


Fig. 2 Schematic arrangement of areas investigated around the chimney, redrawn from the original report illustration. Letters and relative positions follow that illustration. The hearth and possible cellar were investigated inside the former building; work on the chimney's other three sides was exterior. The diagram does not delineate the two excavation units or depict a measured building footprint; not to scale

Within the grid, team members walked parallel transects less than one meter apart. Surface visibility was estimated at approximately sixty percent, with vegetation, leaf litter, and roots obscuring the remainder. Finds were collected by quadrant, bagged with their locations, and entered into a preliminary inventory. Four shovel tests provided additional subsurface sampling within and adjacent to the recording grid. STP numbers 71–74 and the mapped point numbers retained below are field identifiers, not excavation totals; only four shovel tests were excavated. STP 71, to the east, reached approximately twenty-five centimeters below the surface. To the west, STPs 72 through 74 encountered compact subsoil at an average depth of approximately fifteen centimeters. Reported depths across the tested area ranged from twelve to twenty-five centimeters. These tests assessed the survival of deposits beyond the exposed masonry, adding a limited subsurface record to the mapped architecture and surface assemblage.

Interpretation drew on the two excavation units, four shovel tests, mapped relationships, feature descriptions, artifact inventory, and observed disturbance. The hearth and possible cellar area lay within the interpreted building interior, while investigation on the chimney's other three sides took place outside the building. These interior and exterior locations were identified during fieldwork without establishing the building's dimensions or complete footprint. The chimney and hearth retained a visible architectural relationship, while displaced finds required attention to collapse, roots, and erosion. The extent of investigation reflected the parameters of the project scope. It provided a limited sample of the occupied place without establishing its complete plan.

ChatGPT (OpenAI) assisted with manuscript drafting, language revision, and formatting.

FINDINGS

A Building Organized Around Fire

The chimney base measured approximately four by seven feet, or 1.2 by 2.1 meters. Mainly dry-laid fieldstones, with intermittent patches of lime-based mortar, surrounded a large, flat hearthstone. Charcoal staining marked its surface and adjacent soil, placing the use of fire within the surviving construction (Figs. 3–5). The southern face had partially collapsed and stones lay downslope. Brick fragments occurred nearby, particularly to the east and below the feature; some had vitrified, or developed a glassy surface consistent with high-temperature exposure. Their original positions could not be established. Nails and flat glass supplied evidence for components of the surrounding building that were no longer standing. Together, the remains were consistent with a structure used for domestic or related work activities. Its complete

footprint, internal divisions, and entrances remained unresolved, leaving open how people moved around the hearth and how much space the building enclosed.



Fig. 3 North view of the chimney and surrounding woodland within the survey area



Fig. 4 South view of the surviving fieldstone chimney. The field measuring tape is retained



Fig. 5 Hearth stones and adjacent masonry with the field directional marker

Stone Arrangements Beyond the Chimney

Between Points 57 and 65, linear stone arrangements and compact clusters occurred at intervals of approximately one to two meters. Some lay parallel or perpendicular to the chimney; the concentration at Point 59 followed roughly the same axis. These alignments raised the possibility that structural supports, wall remnants, or boundaries survived beyond the standing feature. Displaced masonry and stone clearing could also have produced some of the concentrations. Mapping retained the relationships needed to examine those alternatives. If further testing establishes architectural connections, the arrangements could extend the account from the hearth toward the spaces in which people moved and worked. At present, they mark the unfinished extent of the building's archaeological interpretation.

Architectural and Personal Objects

The preliminary inventory recorded more than forty nails, six buttons, two glass fragments, at least three other metal objects, and two cast-iron fragments (Table 1; Figs. 6–9). Materials recorded as wood and coal also came from the hearth area. The finds brought personal possessions into the same archaeological setting as building debris and possible cooking or heating equipment. Their small number limited some comparisons, but their variety allowed the investigation to move beyond the visible masonry toward several aspects of occupation.

Table 1. Preliminary artifact inventory from the 2025 investigation

Category	Description	Recorded count
Nails	Hand-wrought, machine-cut, and wire forms, including square-headed examples	40+
Buttons	Four-hole porcelain and metal buttons, and decorative covers	6
Glass	Flat window glass and curved bottle glass	2
Other metal	Crown bottle cap, unidentified corroded disc or fitting, and probable cartridge casing	3+
Cast iron	Fragments provisionally identified as cookware or stove components	2

Hand-wrought, machine-cut, and wire nails occurred in the collection, including square-headed examples (Fig. 6). Their variation could reflect acquisition at different times, reuse, or repair; it did not establish a sequence of construction episodes. The glass fragments represented two different uses. Flat glass indicated a possible glazed component of the building, while curved bottle glass placed a container in the investigated area. Neither the bottle's contents nor broader purchasing and consumption patterns could be established from that single fragment. Considered with the fasteners, the glass nevertheless supplied evidence for parts of the occupants' material surroundings that were poorly represented by the ruin as it stood.



Fig. 6 Nails recovered during the investigation. Measurement scales are retained as photographed

Six clothing-related objects were recorded. The selected specimens in Fig. 9 include three white four-hole porcelain buttons, one four-hole metal sew-through button, and a domed metal button or cover. The photograph corrects the preliminary inventory's description of a three-hole metal form; it illustrates five of the six recorded objects. The white buttons are consistent in appearance with Prosser-type ceramic buttons, although their manufacture has not been confirmed. Fig. 7 shows a crimped crown bottle cap at the top, an unidentified corroded metal disc or fitting in the middle, and a short cylindrical object with a flanged end, provisionally identified as a cartridge casing, at the bottom. The crown closure was patented in 1892 (Painter 1892), making the cap evidence of deposition in 1892 or later. Its presence does not date construction or establish that the building remained occupied when it was discarded. The other two metal objects require examination before their specific functions can be assigned. Two cast-iron fragments were tentatively identified as cookware or stove components; neither particular equipment nor a hunting activity can yet be established from these finds.



Fig. 7 Metal objects recovered during the investigation. Top: crimped crown bottle cap, a closure type patented in 1892 (Painter 1892). Middle: unidentified corroded disc or fitting. Bottom: short cylindrical object with a flanged end, provisionally identified as a cartridge casing. The cap does not independently date the building's construction or occupation. Measurement scales are retained as photographed



Fig. 8 Materials recorded as wood and coal from the hearth area. Measurement scales are retained as photographed



Fig. 9 Five of the six clothing-related objects recorded during the investigation: three white four-hole porcelain buttons, a four-hole metal sew-through button, and a domed metal button or cover. The photograph does not establish the manufacture of the white buttons or the garments to which these objects belonged. Measurement scales are retained as photographed

What Survived Beneath the Surface

Below the surface, shallow topsoil covered compact clay, with little differentiation among deposits. STP 71 contained an embedded flat stone and a small lithic fragment. The stone suggested a possible constructed surface but did not establish a floor or path, and the lithic fragment had no demonstrated association with the historic building. Western tests produced sparse nails and fragmented metal in deposits with poorer preservation. Erosion to the west and root disturbance to the north helped account for this uneven record. The two excavation units also examined the full hearth and possible cellar area in the interpreted interior. These targeted excavations and the shovel tests sampled selected contexts without defining the building's extent. Architecture preserved relationships more clearly than the surrounding soils preserved a sequence of occupation. The assemblage is compatible with a broad later nineteenth- to early twentieth-century setting, but it does not establish a closed occupation interval. The crown cap supplies an earliest date of 1892 for its own deposition, which may belong to building use or subsequent activity. No securely separated deposit assigns construction to the Kingdom's founding or demonstrates that every object belonged to the same period.

DISCUSSION

Establishing a Place to Live

Before fire marked the hearthstone, people had selected and fitted the stones around it. The arrangement that survived the building's decline records their judgment in working with materials: choosing shapes, placing weight, and constructing a feature that could accommodate fire. Its builders remain unnamed, and the survey does not establish how they divided the labor. Their knowledge is nevertheless present in the work they left. Within the history of the Kingdom, that investment connects settlement with a place made usable. The residents' ability to remain depended in part on such work, through which the land acquired structures capable of supporting occupation. The hearth's staining carries the sequence further. The feature had been put to use, joining the effort of its builders to the activities of people who occupied the building.

The people who used the building occupied a more complete environment than the surviving chimney suggests. Nails and flat glass point toward components that enclosed space around the fire; the wood held by those fasteners has largely disappeared. Their experience involved an arrangement of materials whose usefulness depended on one another: a hearth required a suitable setting, while an enclosed space made the fire useful in particular ways. Materiality directs analysis toward that arrangement and the human commitments it required (Hodder 2012; Knappett 2005). The surviving relationships offer a starting point for examining the builders' practical knowledge, even where individual components and the complete plan have been lost.

Heat and the Responsibilities of Everyday Life

On the large, flat hearthstone, charcoal staining survived where fire had been used. That mark ties the architecture to an activity in the building's past more directly than the scattered debris around it. Possible cookware or stove fragments raise questions about cooking and heating, although their identification remains preliminary. Whatever equipment was present, people had brought fire into a constructed setting and supplied what it needed to burn. Fuel had to reach the hearth, and combustion required attention. These are the recurring demands of using the facility, rather than separate episodes documented by the survey. They return interpretation to the occupants and the responsibilities that accompanied a usable source of heat. The evidence does not assign those responsibilities to women, men, or children. It makes their organization a question for the history of the people who sustained the Kingdom.

Materials recorded as wood and coal from the hearth area may eventually clarify that history (Fig. 8). Their identification and archaeological context need further study before a change in fuel or sequence of use can be proposed. The hearth nevertheless directs attention to the resources occupation consumed and the labor that brought them into a building. Hodder's (2012) account of dependence helps connect those requirements with residents' lives. Access to heat entailed an ongoing supply of fuel and attention to the structure around it. Accounts of shared labor at the Kingdom make the organization of that work a historical question: how were recurring responsibilities distributed, and how did residents meet them as circumstances changed (Campbell 2025; Elliston 2021)?

People and Their Possessions

Differences among the buttons turn attention toward the clothing residents brought into the building. The photographed porcelain and metal sew-through examples share four-hole attachment, while the domed metal piece represents a different construction or surviving component. That variation suggests more than one kind of fastening or garment finish, but the specimens cannot yet be assigned to shirts, dresses, trousers, or workwear. Similar fasteners could serve different garments, and a detached cover may obscure how a button was attached. The count of six objects cannot establish the number of wearers. Several could have come from one garment, and their arrival in the deposit need not have been simultaneous.

These distinctions matter within the Kingdom's history of collective work and personal life. Residents participated in a cooperative society while possessing things used close to the body, selected, acquired, worn, and eventually lost or discarded under circumstances the present record only partly preserves. The buttons allow questions about access to clothing and the circulation of manufactured goods to enter the analysis without assigning gender, status, or ownership to an unidentified wearer. Their presence alone does not demonstrate sewing or garment repair in this building. Bottle glass and possible cast-iron equipment widen the inquiry to containers and the equipment used around a fire, while the crown cap introduces the possibility that some objects arrived during later visits. The assemblage therefore asks how belongings moved through this place as well as what residents may once have kept there.

Sustaining Occupation through Change

A building's history continued after its construction. Use and exposure altered its components, and residents could respond by replacing, adapting, or reusing what was available.

Varied nail forms and patches of mortar make those possibilities worth investigating at the Kingdom, though the survey could not separate them into dated events. Reused fasteners or materials acquired at different times could produce variation without demonstrating repair. Such alternatives matter to the social interpretation. Reuse should not automatically become a story of poverty, just as alteration should not become proof of prosperity or communal decision-making. Establishing what people changed, and when, would allow their choices to be examined within the circumstances of residence. At present, the remains identify a building whose material history may be more complicated than a single episode of construction and abandonment.

The objects also reached the ground through different possible routes. Manufacture could precede use by many years, and an item could arrive after occupation had ended. The collection cannot therefore be read as the intact belongings of a household left behind at one moment. Collapse subsequently moved southern masonry downslope; erosion and roots affected the surrounding deposits. These changes help explain why the structure survives more clearly than the sequence of events within it. The investigation did not establish when people stopped using the building or why they left. The end of occupation here must be examined alongside, but separately from, accounts of the settlement's decline. Attending to those changes allows the archaeology to distinguish residents' actions from the later processes that altered their traces. It also keeps the ruin in historical perspective: what remains is evidence through which lives may be studied, shaped by loss as well as preservation.

From the Building to the Community

The Kingdom's history gives the possible communal role of this building particular importance. A shared building could have supplied a setting where residents gathered and carried out activities that supported the wider settlement, making its hearth part of the infrastructure of collective life. Historical accounts of pooled resources and shared labor establish why such a place would matter within this community (Campbell 2025; Elliston 2021). Yet a household or related work space could also contain a hearth, clothing fasteners, and building debris. The present evidence cannot distinguish these uses or identify a meeting house, school, place of worship, or royal residence. The unresolved distinction concerns the scale and organization of social relationships: who had access to this space, whose labor maintained it, and whether its activities served a household or a wider group.

Luella Montgomery's remembered teaching and worship, the livelihoods described in regional histories, and accounts of shared resources identify relationships that helped sustain the Kingdom (Campbell 2025; Elliston 2021). They give the communal interpretation historical relevance without locating those activities at this chimney. Materiality connects the surviving setting to questions about access, obligation, and the movement of people and goods among occupied places. For Black Appalachian archaeology, these questions extend beyond identifying a building type. They concern how households, gathering places, and shared facilities supported communities formed under conditions of racial exclusion, and how the pursuit of refuge and self-government took shape in everyday space.

THE KINGDOM AND THE SCOPE OF BLACK APPALACHIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

The Kingdom places migration, landholding, and collective self-determination at the center of the Black Appalachian archaeology proposed here. Its residents entered the mountains with histories of enslavement and postemancipation violence, then established relationships through which access to land became a basis for community life. Archaeological inquiry can follow those relationships across the places where Black people lived and worked, examining how tenure, labor, and access to resources shaped their ability to remain. The region's terrain belongs within that inquiry as a landscape people crossed, occupied, and connected to other places. At the Kingdom, movement from South Carolina and dealings with a white landowning family show that the pursuit of refuge also involved negotiation. A regional archaeology attentive to these processes can examine autonomy as something people worked to establish and sustain within unequal social and economic conditions.

The possible communal building brings another set of questions into that regional inquiry. Where did residents assemble, share resources, teach, worship, or make decisions, and how were those places related to households and work areas? These activities need not have occupied separate buildings, and their material traces may overlap. The Kingdom demonstrates the value of examining architecture, hearths, and personal belongings together when investigating the social organization of a settlement. Comparisons with other Black Appalachian communities should follow the circumstances of each place, including differences in land access, livelihoods, and relationships with neighboring populations. Barnes's (2011) work on postemancipation community life and the collaborative research at Junaluska (Gokee et al. 2022) provide precedents for such historically situated inquiry. The proposed agenda develops through

these connections while allowing communities to differ in how they built and sustained their collective lives.

Black Appalachian archaeology also requires sustained relationships with the people who have kept these histories alive. At the Kingdom, family recollections and the work of local historians preserved names and connections that surviving masonry could not supply. That knowledge helps identify places, interpret their significance, and determine which questions matter to communities in the present. Bringing it into conversation with documents and archaeological evidence can reveal how Black histories have been remembered, obscured, or separated from the landscapes in which they unfolded. Preservation and responsible sharing of location information form part of the same commitment. The regional purpose of this research is to recover the lives and institutions through which Black people made places in Appalachia, and to ensure that their histories remain connected to the people who inherit and interpret them.

CONCLUSION

The people who established the Kingdom of the Happy Land had survived slavery and sought refuge from the brutality that continued after emancipation. Their movement into the mountains, negotiated access to land, and organization of a self-governing community give the surviving archaeology its historical force. The 2025 investigation documented a chimney and used hearth, building materials, and personal belongings on a parcel associated with that settlement. Through materiality, the investigation approaches freedom as a condition people pursued through places and relationships they worked to establish and maintain.

The Kingdom gives the proposed Black Appalachian archaeology a concrete starting point in the history of people who sought safety and greater authority over their lives. Its contribution reaches beyond the interpretation of a single structure to questions about movement into the region, access to land, the organization of shared space, and the endurance of community relationships. Archaeology can investigate these processes through buildings and possessions, while historical records and descendant knowledge keep their interpretation connected to particular lives. The Kingdom's residents brought a community into being under circumstances that made such an achievement consequential. Examining how they sustained it places their labor, knowledge, and collective ambitions within Appalachian history and establishes a wider purpose for the regional archaeology proposed here.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the Black History Research Committee of Henderson, North Carolina, and historian Emily Cadmus for their contributions to and support of this research, and the property owners who granted access to the site.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The preliminary artifact inventory and images supporting the analysis are provided in Table 1 and Figs. 1–9. Exact site coordinates, parcel boundaries, and access routes are withheld to protect the site.

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