

Application for North Carolina Highway Historical Marker

Applications must be complete, clear, and organized. All facts and statements must be documented with primary sources that were written at the time of the event. These include tax records, deeds, newspaper articles, and meeting minutes that substantiate the historical information in the application. In addition, the applicant can provide photocopies of secondary sources, such as published scholarly articles or books. The photocopies must include citations: the title, author, and date of publication. Photocopies of all documentation must be submitted with the application.

A. Subject of proposed marker:

Ginseng Trade Between Watauga County, NC, and China

B. Site to be marked:

Wilcox Drug Emporium Warehouse

C. Proposed location of marker on numbered, state-maintained highway: *(Be specific. Please provide street address or closest intersection. Note whether the site lies within the corporate limits of a city or town. An attached map of the location would be useful.)*

Northwest corner of the intersection of West King St. (Highway 421) and Water St. in Boone, N.C.

D. Distance and direction from the proposed location to the site to be marked: *(for example, 100 yards S.E.)*

175 yards S.E.

E. Historical essay: (400 to 2,000 words)

The Appalachian Mountains are one of the most biodiverse regions in the country. The massive variation of microenvironments has created many species of both animals and plants with very specialized niches. American ginseng, or *Panax quinquefolius*, is one of these species that has found an uncommon microhabitat in which to survive and thrive. People looking for this plant know the signs of this microenvironment, such as the presence of sarsaparilla, bloodroot, and may apple, along with steep, rocky terrain.¹ The area also needs to be a mixed mesophytic forest, with hickories and oaks in the valleys and maples, hemlocks, and mountain laurels on the slopes.² People who harvest and profit from the ginseng root are called “sang hunters.” The tradition of hunting ‘sang is often passed down through the generations of Appalachian families.³

The root of the American ginseng plant is valuable because of its medicinal value globally, particularly in China. The root often resembles a human shape, with torso and limbs. The Chinese term *jen-shen*, which is the origin for the English word ginseng, literally means “image of man.” Based on the Doctrine of Signature from botany, it is seen as a cure-all for the whole body.⁴ The root has multiple bioactive components. The main one is ginsenosides, which is a group of steroidal saponins.⁵ China also has a variation of ginseng called Chinese ginseng, or *Panax ginseng*, found primarily in the Manchurian region of the country. It was so highly sought after in China for its healing properties that it was harvested to near extinction.⁶

Prior to the American Revolution, China traded with French fur traders, who often acquired the root from Canadian Mohawks, and with British trade ships coming from the American colonies.⁷ Following American independence, shipping merchants quickly outfitted a fast copper-bottomed trade vessel to carry on the trade of ginseng and other products with China in 1783. The ship, called the *Empress of China*, arrived in China on February 22, 1784, and was the first trade connection between China and the fledgling United States. Prized among its goods were 3,300 pounds of American ginseng from the Appalachian Mountains.⁸ During the nineteenth century, over 95% of the wild

¹ David A. Taylor, *Ginseng, the divine root* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006) 101.

² Taylor, *Ginseng*, 107.

³ Jackie Greenfield and Jeanine M. Davis, *Collection to Commerce: Western North Carolina Non-Timber Forest Products and Their Markets* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University, 2003) 55.

⁴ Alvar W. Carlson, “Ginseng: America’s Botanical Drug Connection to the Orient,” *Economic Botany* 40, no. 2 (1986): 235.

⁵ Greenfield, *Collection to Commerce*, 47.

⁶ Taylor, *Ginseng*, 102.

⁷ Carlson, “Ginseng,” 234-235.

⁸ Taylor, *Ginseng*, 119. This one shipment was the beginning of a flourishing ginseng trade between the two nations.

ginseng that was harvested in the United States was exported to China and Hong Kong. Over 1.8 million pounds of wild ginseng were exported to China between 1821-1899.⁹

Western North Carolina was a part of this global ginseng trade. Watauga County had multiple locals who were 'sang hunters in the nineteenth century. Most well known was Bacchus Smith, who harvested ginseng from the local mountains and dried out the root in a barn near modern Vilas, NC. Smith then sold his dried ginseng to a Dr. Hailen, a Philadelphian who had relocated to Haywood County, NC. Ginseng roots were dried out to allow them to be transported over long distances.¹⁰ Less well known was a female 'sang hunter named Betsy Calloway from Foscoe, NC, during the mid to late nineteenth century. She is said to have "dug many a pound of 'sang with a child strapped to her back."¹¹ She would harvest the ginseng and sell it to regional dealers in Abingdon, VA, and Blountville, TN, for ten cents a pound. Like many 'sang hunters, this was only part of her personal economic contribution to her family and the region. She was also a master sugar maker and cooked and cleaned for some of the wealthier families in the area.¹²

There is even evidence of wild-stimulated ginseng agriculture in early Watauga County. Wild-stimulated ginseng is produced when a farmer plants ginseng in an area that matches the microenvironment of wild ginseng and takes a relatively laissez-faire approach to the root once it is planted. It often takes years before the grower can expect to see a return on the ginseng.¹³ The largest historic example of wild-stimulated ginseng agriculture in Watauga County can be found near Sugar Grove, where one of Newton Banner's sons cultivated a quarter acre of ginseng. Many other residents would have a small patch of ginseng in a shady corner of their property.¹⁴

When hard-paved roads came to Boone, NC, in the 1920s and 1930s, the town was connected to the global marketplace like never before.¹⁵ Local export companies like Appalachian Evergreen Co. and, in particular, Wilcox Drug Co. traded local botanical products, including dried ginseng root, with the global marketplace.¹⁶ The market for ginseng did not decrease in the twentieth century. Over 14.5 million pounds

⁹ U.S. Treasury Dept., Statistics Bureau. "Annual Reports." *Foreign Commerce and Navigation*. (Washington DC, 1821-1899) 1.

¹⁰ John Preston Arthur, *A History of Watauga History, North Carolina with Sketches of Prominent Families* (Richmond, VA: Everett Waddey Co., 1915) 221-222.

Doris Cline Ward and Charles D. Biddix, *The Heritage of Old Buncombe County*, Volume 1 (Buncombe County, NC: Old Buncombe County Genealogical Society, 1981), 331.

¹¹ Arthur, *Watauga County*, 190.

¹² Arthur, *Watauga County*, 190-191.

¹³ Taylor, *Ginseng*, 124.

¹⁴ Arthur, *Watauga County*, 222.

¹⁵ Daniel Jay Whitener, *History of Watauga County: A souvenir of Watauga Centennial* (Boone, NC: 1949) 50.

¹⁶ J. Daniel Pezzoni and Tony N. VanWinkle, *The Architectural History of Watauga County, North Carolina* (Durham, NC: BW&A Books, 2009) 76.

of ginseng were exported to Hong Kong and China from 1900-1983, although this represented only 91% of the ginseng exported from the United States.¹⁷

Wilcox Drug Co. started in 1900 when General Grant Wilcox moved to Watauga County from Ashe County after selling his mercantile store. Prior to this, Grant Wilcox sold botanical goods to his father-in-law, Felix McGuire, who operated a botanical drug business in Ashe County. Grant Wilcox took the idea of selling local botanical goods and made it the focus of his new drug company in Boone.¹⁸ By 1976, Wilcox Drug Co. was the largest purchaser of botanical goods in the United States. The Appalachian Evergreen Co. and Wilcox Drug Co. would eventually merge to become Wilcox Natural Products in 1982 when Zuellig Group North America, a Swiss firm, bought out the companies. Wilcox Natural Products closed in 2000.¹⁹ They were at the forefront of the Southern Appalachian ginseng trade with China during the twentieth century.

The original location of the Grant Wilcox store on the south side of Howard Street no longer stands. In 1944, Charles Wilcox moved his company to a warehouse across Howard Street, and then expanded into adjacent warehouses that became collectively known as the Wilcox Emporium Warehouse. His successor, Kenneth Wilcox, in 1971 bought the warehouse to the east of the original warehouse, which at the time was a furniture store. The warehouse complex today is home to several restaurants and student housing.²⁰

People in Watauga County still participate in the ginseng trade, selling sometimes hundreds of pounds of ginseng to registered dealers in the county. Between 1996 and 2013, Watauga County ginseng dealers recorded 3,812 pounds of wild dried ginseng harvested and sold to them by locals. The most ginseng harvested in recent memory was in 2007 when 367 pounds of wild dried ginseng were harvested and sold to dealers.²¹ In 2014, Watauga County sold 254.26 pounds of wild dried ginseng to registered dealers. The same year, traders sold 16.68 pounds of wild-stimulated ginseng. The county and surrounding area is also home to a flourishing trade in illegal and poached ginseng. America still exports 90% of its harvested wild ginseng to China.²²

¹⁷ U.S. Treasury Dept., Statistics Bureau, "Annual Reports," *Foreign Commerce and Navigation* (Washington DC, 1900-1983) 1.

¹⁸ Roger D Wright, *A Brief History of Wilcox Drug Co.* (1997) 1-2.

¹⁹ Wright, *Wilcox Drug Co.*, 1.

²⁰ Wright, *Wilcox Drug Co.*, 1-2.

Pezzoni, *Watauga County*, 313-314.

²¹ North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, *Historic NC Ginseng Harvest Information*, (Raleigh, NC: 2014) 1.

²² North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, *Current NC Ginseng Harvest Information*, (Raleigh, NC: 2014) 1.

Suggested inscriptions:

1st Choice

Ginseng Trade
with China

Native root prized
for its medicinal uses
in China. Harvested by
locals since the 1800s.
Traded by Wilcox Drug
in Boone 1900-2000.

2nd Choice

Ginseng Trade
with China

Prized medicinal root
reaped by locals Betsy
Calloway and Bacchus
Smith for China trade
in 1800s, sold 1900s by
Wilcox Drug, nearby.

F. Bibliography: (*primary and secondary sources*)

Arthur, John Preston. *A History of Watauga History, North Carolina with Sketches of Prominent Families*. Richmond, VA: Everett Waddey Co., 1915.

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Wright, Roger D. *A Brief History of Wilcox Drug Co.* 1997.

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