The public’s understanding of Scots-Irish backcountry settlement has been shaped more by family tradition and folklore than by scholarship. As a result, those of us who work in public history, often find ourselves face to face with visitors who’s heads are filled with hundreds of facts that are more “truthy” than true. What this particular sub-genre of history has needed and really still needs is a closer examination of each geographic pocket of settlers, before we can redraw the popular syntheses that have so often been based on wishful thinking rather than documentation and analysis. Peter Moore’s *World of Toil and Strife* offers us a glance at what that re-rendered depiction of the Scots-Irish backcountry might look like.

Moore examines the upcountry South Carolina area known as the Waxhaws, just south of Charlotte. He contends this Scots-Irish settlement was a completely yeoman community that transformed into a slave-holding staple producing community during the 1790’s. “It is the purpose of this book,” he says, “to chart and make sense of this important transformation.” (p. 3) To do so, Moore first lays the foundation for understanding the settlement and early growth of the Waxhaws --- a movement that began in the early 1750’s and continued unchanged until the mid years of the American Revolution. Living near kin and friends were as important to Scots-Irish settlers as the quality of the land they purchased. Family and friends improved settlers’ chances of survival and success by offering “shared resources, companionship, trust, and protection.” (p. 2) Protection was certainly needed in the Waxhaws during the 1750’s. The community lived among the remnants of the Catawba and in the shadows of the Cherokee, who had by this time had all they could take of European westward expansion. But as Moore points out, the pressures that transformed the Waxhaws were internal not external.

From the beginning Scots-Irish settlers purchased slaves to help them with farm labor. But during that early period of settlement slaves were not isolated. In fact, as Moore points, ministers “baptized 150 slaves” between 1755-1757, “handed out bibles” and included “at least 60 slaves” in communion. (p. 40) The steep wooded hills and silicate laden red clay limited the proliferation of the institution of slavery in the Waxhaws, much as it did throughout the foothills of the Carolinas. In both areas slavery hovered around the 10 % mark until after the American Revolution. Approximately two-thirds of the enslaved population lived on yeoman farms in groups of two or three. This was not the world of the southern plantation, but that was about to change.

What were the causative agents that incited change? “Subtle changes in the local land market, growing population pressure, an expanding wheat market, and a deeper …dependence on slave labor … transformed the Waxhaws in the last decades of the nineteenth century.” (p.76) Of these factors, overpopulation from “enthusiastic reproduction”, and the explosion of wheat production due to “state of the art mills” in Camden, South Carolina and spiraling wheat prices, were perhaps the most significant. Population growth resulted in out-migration and the selling of inherited lands and went far to undermine the kin based neighborhood. The demand for wheat and the prices fetched for its successful milling promulgated larger farms and increased the demand for slave labor. Moore points out that by the turn of the century, “the Waxhaws were … a slaveholding, staple-producing … self-consciously southern community.” (p.76) Were the Waxhaws unique?
The other pockets of Scots-Irish settlement throughout the South could bear comparison to Moore’s efforts. How do the Waxhaws compare to the Shenandoah Valley or North Carolina Piedmont for example? The regional differences that result from that comparison will help us create a new and more nuanced understanding of Scots-Irish settlement, which will bridge the gap between the worlds of popular and scholarly history, and in the process provide public historians with case studies on which to base a new and more dynamic interpretation of this much misunderstood subject.

*Tannenbaum Historic Park*

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